



*“You can’t
take it with you
when you
go.”*

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Possessed

BY THE **THINGS** WE POSSESS

by Laura Leist

There is freedom in letting go,
once you give yourself permission to begin.

“You can’t take it with you when you go.”

My mom lived by those nine words and repeated them often; I didn’t understand their full meaning until September 23, 1984.

My parents divorced when I was five, and my brother Scott and I lived with my mother until I was 14 and she could no longer care for us. Mom had always taught piano lessons from our home, and no matter where she was in the house, her purse was always by her side: at the piano, by her bed, next to the stool she sat on in the kitchen, or next to the recliner in the living room.

On the morning of her passing, my dad drove Scott and me to her home to meet with our grandparents. As I wandered aimlessly through my childhood home, my Grandma said to me, “Take anything you want ... it’s all yours.” Walking past the recliner where my mom last laid, I saw her purse and suddenly understood the meaning of her favorite saying. At that moment, there wasn’t any “thing” I wanted; what I wanted, and could never have again, was my mom.

So it was, at the tender age of 16, I got a crash course in downsizing a home as we held an estate sale. There were so many questions to be answered and even more decisions to be made. How do you decide what to keep? How do you let go of the rest without feeling guilty? Simple questions but, as I found out, very hard to an-

swer. Making decisions about the “stuff” in your life is mentally and emotionally exhausting. I was grateful I didn’t have to do it alone. Little did I know that this process (and it is a process) would lead me later in life to start a company to help people downsize their treasures, and do so with compassion and understanding.

My clients don’t necessarily know my story when our work begins, but many come to know it as we begin to peel back the layers of years and memories that surround their own possessions.

Take, for example, the spouse who lost her husband unexpectedly while raising young children. Or the mother, whose child was taken in her teens, entering the daughter’s bedroom for the first time, with me, three years later. Consider the husband who was married for more than 60 years and, with the loss of his wife, has to deal with decades of loving memories that are an integral part of the cargo they’d collected on their life voyage together. Each family has endured a loss, but how they choose to deal with the “stuff” can be drastically different.

However, I find that the same fundamental questions are asked by most of my clients:

1. How do I know what to part with, and when the time is right? Losing a loved one could happen at any age; how long should I keep their belongings?

2. How do I decide which items have the most meaning to other family members? And, how do I ensure that the “stuff” I give away doesn’t become an unwanted gift? Am I burdening my children by unburdening myself?
3. How do I let go of items that may stir up feelings of guilt in the giving away; for example, a gift from my mother-in-law that never suited my style, but I’ve kept out of a sense of duty.

I help by guiding them through the process, a critical piece of which is giving yourself permission to part with some of your belongings.

What to Part With and When

As with most life events, there is no one right answer, as each person deals with loss, grief and change differently. What I do know from years of client experience is that you must be emotionally ready to make these decisions before you can gracefully let go. Some people are able to decide immediately, because they believe it’s just “stuff.” Others may take years before they have reached a point where they feel OK about parting with particular things.

If you or a loved one is not yet able to make the needed decisions, I suggest packing up similar items into boxes, labeling them clearly, and setting a date to go through them.

You will likely find that decisions come more easily about items like clothing versus things that carry more emotion, such as photos, letters, keepsakes, etc. Being able to easily access a group of similar items will make subsequent decisions easier.

Bear in mind that sometimes your family or friends will not want the articles that you consider irreplaceable treasures. I remember when my Grandpa passed; each of us grandchildren was given the opportunity by my aunt to select an item of Grandpa’s. The problem for me was that his “stuff” had no meaning to me because I had never seen it displayed or used. They’d remained packed away in boxes for all of the years I visited their home.

My aunt was surprised when I told her I already had everything I needed; my photos of many fun times with Grandpa and the memories they evoked. Thinking of my best interests, she advised me that some of the items were worth a lot of money; but again, that wasn’t important to me (especially given my line of work!). If you feel similarly, it’s perfectly OK to decline these gifts. If you do want to accept these treasures, I would suggest they don’t belong in a box in the garage, but in a location in your home where they can be used and cherished.

“Wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants.”

— Greek philosopher Epictetus

Downsizing and Right-Sizing

If you or a family member have recently downsized to a smaller living space, you may be facing an overwhelming amount of “stuff” — things you need, love and can’t live without, and probably many more that no longer serve a purpose in this chapter of your life. The suggestions below may help eliminate the stress you feel and help you regain control over your environment to create a beautifully functional home.

- Identify the vision and goals for your new living space. What will you do in that space, and how will you use it? What do you need to do that? What is in your way now?
- Communicate your household vision and goals to your family and friends, and ask for their buy-in and help; don’t try to take this on alone.
- Set a realistic time frame to accomplish your project. The decision-making process always takes longer than you think. Each item will evoke memories, and stories to go with those memories, and you may find it takes a long time for your decisions to stick.
- Ensure that the items you donate are in good, usable condition. If you wouldn’t give them to a friend, think twice before donating to a charity.
- As you decide what to donate, consider all the people you could potentially be helping when the donations are made; this can make the “right-sizing” process much easier to bear.
- Remember, you can’t fit 2,500 square feet of stuff into 600 square feet, no matter how organized you are. Be realistic.

Maybe you know someone who lives in the same community. See if you can visit their home to see how they made the best use of their space. Sometimes it’s nice to see actual living environments, instead of looking at floor plans or a furnished model.

- Furniture may need to be downsized in terms of size and serve dual purposes — for example, an ottoman that doubles as a coffee table and storage.
- Recognize that this is a difficult and stressful time. Get help if necessary to put less strain on relationships during these times. Adult children tend to pressure parents to downsize, but then don’t plan enough time for the process and the stress it causes.
- If at all possible, make the decision to right-size your belongings now, before an injury or illness forces an immediate decision.
- If items are being given to family members or friends, don’t urge them to take stuff you suspect they won’t use or treasure. Make sure items taken will be appreciated.
- Give each family member different colored stickers and have them walk through the house and mark what they’d like to take.

Enlist in the services of outside help if the work is too much for you. Professional organizers, senior move managers and estate sales professionals specialize in this line of work and can help you speed up the process and reduce the stress. They also know what will be realistic to sell, consign, donate, recycle or toss.

The process of downsizing decades of treasures doesn’t need to be stressful if you follow some of these recommendations. Be sure to allow yourself enough time so you can enjoy sharing stories with loved ones one last time before you make a decision to part with these items.

Finally, remember this important advice from me and my mom: The meaning is the memory, not the memorabilia, and you truly can’t take it with you when you go. ♦

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