

Grief Notes

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The Things That Were Theirs by Linda Hopkins, Bereavement Coordinator

Of the many problems we face when a loved one dies, one of the most difficult is deciding what to do with their things. Thinking about this is often more than we can face in the early weeks and months of grief. A few years ago, I saw Elizabeth Peavey perform her one-woman play *My Mother's Clothes Are Not My Mother*. The title has stayed with me because so often a major challenge in going through and deciding what to do with things is that discarding them feels like being okay with letting the person go. Intellectually we know their things are not our loved one. Our heart knowing that is another matter.

Clothes are often one of the easier items to sort through. Some people can give away things like clothes as soon as possible. Knowing someone can use them is practical and they may know their loved one would have liked helping someone in need. More often, however, touching the clothes and remembering the loved one wearing them is emotionally too painful. Packing up the clothes will be something that waits a long time for many people. As time passes, as with so many parts of grief, this task becomes easier. Finding a few items to wear or give to family members is helpful. Keeping just a few items to touch or hold can be enough.

What do we do with a lifetime's accumulation of everyday things? Some of you will have the time and space to do nothing for a while and either be comfortable with that or feel the weight of it. The sheer volume of things is often overwhelming. Some of you will tackle this alone and others will have family or friends to help. Some of you will hire help to take things away and others will gradually remove things to donate, sell, and discard.

What do we do with the things they treasured? Some of you will struggle with this because you know if your loved one valued them, it will be uncomfortable to let them go even if they make no sense in your life. Your loved one may have left directions for disposition of special things and that can help. If not, you and your family will be facing the difficulty of deciding what to do. Often one person will be ready to face this challenge soon. Often another family member will not and will want to wait many months. Family disagreement about what to do with the things and when to do it is often one of the harder parts in grieving. Someone is likely in charge and has tasks they need to take care of. Someone else may feel it is too hard to think about tasks now. It helps to be patient with yourself and with one another.

“Holding some things close can help. So can letting some things go. Memories are a connection to keep.”

For anyone in your grieving family, it can take time to be emotionally ready deal with the things left behind. You may inherit something that is a comfort. You may inherit something that is a burden. Holding some things close can help. So can letting some things go. Memories are a connection to keep.

