

Our Treasured Belongings: Ties That Bind

Most of us are so busy living our lives that we cannot imagine making time to gather a family history. Yet, we are building family history through our everyday living, and most households have items that are considered family treasures. These precious items carry special meaning, and this meaning grows with time and the passing of these items from one generation to another. This is an important part of the process known as “kin keeping.” It is up to each of us to evaluate those things that are most important and provide proper care and recognition for them. Family celebrations, for instance, provide a wonderful opportunity to display and use these family keepsakes and to share stories about where they came from, who had them and how they were used. Giving thought to this now will help ensure that these treasured possessions survive as documentation of family history and provide a sense of belonging and roots for present and future family members.

Kin Keeping and Cherished Possessions

Nearly everyone agrees that families and family life are important. Most believe that “the family” is one of society’s most basic institutions and that we cannot have a strong, healthy society without strong, healthy families.

These beliefs are well founded. Families perform important tasks. They are responsible for rearing children. They teach them survival skills and, most important, the values and morals that guide their lives. Families provide care and comfort for dependent members of all ages. Families also provide the love and emotional support that is needed to simply carry on in today’s world. When families are strong and the members work well together, no other group or institution can perform these tasks better.

Today’s families come in many different forms. We have single-parent, blended, extended, and dual-income families as well as “traditional” families. As a result, we sometimes don’t know what the term “family” really means. We don’t know how to define it in a way that captures the reality of family life today.

Establishing Traditions. The more you know about your family, the more interesting they become. We can choose our friends, but not our relatives. Traditions are important to both children and adults because the world is constantly changing. Everyone needs something in life that is predictable and consistent. Every family member has to make a concerted effort to practice the art of kin keeping.

Rituals and traditions are (or should be) a part of every family. Observing them and making sure they meet the current needs of family members are important parts of kin keeping.

Research shows that family traditions have a powerful and far-reaching effect. They educate the young and place value on significant events. They provide children with a strong sense of belonging and self-worth and an understanding of those before and around them. Feelings of gratitude are the result of emphasis placed on rituals and traditions.

The process of establishing traditions can be a challenge for today’s on-the-go families. These traditions may not look like those of our grandmothers – or even our mothers – but

we can make them special and they can become an important part of our family's everyday life. Traditionally, American women were keepers of our domestic history. Their theory was "when you see this, remember me."

As we practice the art of kin keeping, we must remember that maintaining family traditions does not mean that our traditions will never change. As family members and circumstances change, rituals and traditions may need to be modified, dropped, or added to so that they are appropriate for meeting our family's current needs.

Holding on to family treasures. One way to "kin keep" is to have and hold on to possessions which belonged to our ancestors. Doing so serves as a connection to the past. Some of the objects we possess are significant to us. These objects are cared for, cherished, and passed on to future generations with the hope that they will continue to be treasured. These objects are our "family keepsakes."

Why are some possessions more meaningful to us than others? Keepsakes help to reinforce and stabilize our sense of who we are. Scrapbooks, photos, and other memorabilia serve as visual evidence of our past. Keepsakes help us retain memories of people or experiences that have meaning, and they provide emotional support.

Possessions and memories can help us keep our feet on the ground. Keepsakes remind us of our ancestors and serve as a link to the past. People find some types of items more meaningful than others. Children generally like action objects like stereos, TVs, musical instruments. Adults cherish objects like photos, furniture or books. Family treasures, whether financially valuable or emotionally relevant, grow in meaning and help to bring generations together.

The years of caring for our treasures, wearing them, airing them, dusting them, moving them from one drawer to another or from one member's home to another only make them more priceless.

Types of Keepsakes. Heirlooms, collectibles, and antiques each have identifiable characteristics, but can also be classified as keepsakes.

Keepsake – something kept as a memento, reminder or for sentimental value. A keepsake

may also be an heirloom, collectible, antique, reproduction, or other object.

Heirloom – a piece of personal property owned by a family for several generations. It may have special monetary or sentimental value. Heirlooms allow family traditions and stories to be passed from one generation to the next.

Collectible – any object that is collected other than traditionally collectible items, such as art, coins, stamps, toys, tools, and antiques. Collectibles are usually the product of the Machine Age and curiosities of the past. Normally the object can no longer be purchased new. These are the more recent "old things" and may be "future antiques."

Antique – an object which is old, generally something 100 years old or older, that has a handcrafted or distinctive design, and represents some historical or cultural value. However, even the experts disagree on the "true" definition of an antique. Some use the year 1830 (prior to the Industrial Revolution and mass production) for defining antiques as this was the year determined by the government to levy a tax on imported antiques.

Protecting family keepsakes involves:

- 1) Understanding the value of the items.
- 2) Safeguarding them as best as possible against natural disasters or theft.
- 3) Keeping adequate records and inventories of the items in the event of insurance claims and legal actions.
- 4) Using appropriate storage, display and cleaning technique.

Making Decisions on What to Keep

How do you decide what is important to you and what you want to preserve? Sometimes these decisions must be made after the death of a parent, but just as often it occurs when parents downsize and move to a smaller home after retirement. Sometimes it happens when two people combine households and both need to downsize to accommodate limited space or when a family moves from one house to another for whatever reason. Perhaps you simply have boxes of items that haven't been sorted through for years due to time constraints or a feeling of being overwhelmed by the job. Where do you start? What do you save? What do you give away? How

do you make the decisions? Remember, what can be treasures to one family member may not be as valuable to another. However, all members must be a part of this process.

Use the same process that museum experts follow. Museums have limited space, money, and staff so they can't save everything. Most people also have limitations on space, money and time. You should not feel obligated to save all the items that come into your life, but it is important to determine those things that are most important to preserve. Giving thought to this now, and even having a list with information about each of the items on the list, will help in knowing which items are most important to you.

Most museums have to rank the objects in their collections. Objects can be monetarily valuable, emotionally important or sometimes both. So think about your family treasures and how you would rank them. Which items would you save first? Family pictures? A drawing or wood carving done by a grandparent? A stuffed animal that you had when you were little? A watch worn by a grandparent? Children's art work? These are some of the decisions that must be made.

Start by making a list of all items that you have that you would consider a collectible or family keepsake. Then select just ten items from the list that are of most importance to you. Now rank these ten items in order of importance to you.

Here are some questions to consider as you develop your top ten listing.

1. WHO. Who owned it, made it or gave it to you? To whom would you leave it?
2. WHAT. What is its value? Monetary? Emotional? What is it made of?
3. WHEN. When was it made? When did you acquire it?
4. WHERE. Where did it come from? Are there any markings that give you clues as to its history?

This top ten listing gives you an idea of which items to safeguard first. You can then research how best to preserve and use these items, relate their history to others, and allocate time and costs to their preservation.

Heritage Touchstones

Indiscriminate collecting of keepsakes having little sentimental, artistic, historic, or monetary value

can result in an accumulation of meaningless objects. Rather, collect objects related to these values. Think about what makes your life worth living and gives you a feeling of joy and accomplishment.

Kin keeping, traditions and keepsakes are all a part of our heritage. We need to pass along the visible, tangible, and intangible keepsakes of our own to future generations. The history of items and stories needs to be passed along as well. Learn as much as you can about the history and care of keepsakes that are in your possession. If you have questions about articles, ask about the possessions you have or those you are passing on to someone else. Don't procrastinate.

Suggestions for Kin-Keepers

As you are looking through your possessions and thinking about family keepsakes, keep in mind those items that tell something about your family history. What items are most meaningful to you? What would be most meaningful to future generations? Take special note of items such as these:

- scrapbooks
- journals
- albums
- family trees/maps
- audio/video recordings
- photos
- notes, greeting cards
- awards
- newsletters
- old cookbooks, handwritten recipes
- books/stories
- written/oral and visual histories
- family tree information
- collections of various kinds
- antique and vintage glassware
- furniture
- framed pictures
- memory boxes
- quilts
- special clothing/accessories
- other textiles/handwork
- toys and children's items
- tools
- household 'curiosities'
- _____
- _____

Thoughts on Caring for Keepsakes

1. Use acid free, durable materials for storing items.
2. Permanent adhesives can ruin keepsakes.
3. Photos lose their meaning unless people, places and things are identified. Treat them like an old teddy bear. Admire and love them, but handle as little as possible.
4. Color film and photos deteriorate about 4 times faster than black and white.
5. Sunlight, heat, and humidity cause damage.
6. Protect items from insect and rodent damage.
7. Plastics may be chemically unstable, vapors may cause damage.
8. Bubble wrap has air pockets that contain gases that seep out and damage paint colors.
9. Newspaper ink can transfer on to smooth surfaces. Slip clippings in clear, acid-free sleeves and store flat.
10. Plastic bags and hard plastic storage boxes do not allow for air flow and can trap moisture.
11. Use 100 percent cotton sheeting for storing certain items.
12. Attics, garages, basements are not the best places to store keepsakes. Fluctuating temperature and humidity levels cause problems. Closets are the best choice if keepsakes aren't on display.

Be a kin keeper by treasuring your special belongings. Thinking about, seeing, and touching these items become touchstones in your life as well as the lives of others. They truly can be the ties that bind a family together in today's world.

Our Treasured Belongings

*Things everyday in our lives...
Things that are special treasures.*

*Things that we belong to...
Things that belong to us.*

*Things that make a house a home...
Things that create our heritage.*

*Things that are junk to others...
Things that are treasures to us.*

*Things that are valuable...
Things that have sentiment.*

*Things that are whimsy...
Things that are important – just because.*

Things that create feelings...

Things that tell who we are.

*All of life's things make up our
Treasured belongings.*

-Linda Reece Adler-

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June 2008

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