



Treasured Objects and Places

Starting over: Frank lost his wife, Marie, almost a year ago. Death came swiftly, ending a marriage that for 37 years had withstood myriad other tests. The brain tumor was discovered just four months before Marie died. During those last few months, the couple did not discuss what Frank and their two married daughters might do with Marie's things, and Frank has not felt up to making such decisions since his wife's death. But they cannot be put off any longer. After much thought, Frank has decided to move to another town to be closer to one of his daughters. He will have to decide what to take to his new, smaller condominium—and what to do with everything else. There are so many memories . . .



Just as Frank was wise to postpone making a decision about where to live—he needed time to grieve and to attend to more pressing matters—he also did himself a favor by putting off sorting through his wife's possessions.

In Frank's new condominium, space will be at a premium. He will have to choose carefully which items he will take along. Taking some treasured items will provide a sense of continuity and ease the transition. Because of the smaller space, storage pieces such as cabinets and chests of drawers will be important.

If he can afford it, Frank might want to buy a few new items to mix in with the old. Doing so honors the memory of his wife, serves as a bridge between past and present, and symbolizes the beginning of a new phase in his life. Ideally, Frank should make the move an adventure, using colors and room arrangements that feel good to him.

Before moving, of course, Frank will need to sell his home and pass along, store or dispose of things he chooses not to take with him. These are big, often complicated tasks. He should take his time and freely reach out for help from family members, friends and professionals. He also should realize that the one-year anniversary of Marie's death is coming soon. This probably will be an emotionally difficult time.

Once he decides which belongings he will not take with him, he might want to give them to family members and friends. This can be a meaningful process—a way of sharing Marie's memory with those near and dear. Perhaps his daughters can help.

Frank should remember that feelings might be hurt. Conflict might arise. They often do when sentimental and valuable items are at stake. But if he is sensitive, the emotional fallout can be kept to a minimum. With Frank providing leadership, the



family as a whole may want to gather and discuss who might inherit what.



Sharing treasures: *Elizabeth could feel her health and energy slipping away. She had had a good life, and a long one. Memories of her 86 years were as solid and real as the home full of antique furniture and other belongings she had accumulated. Each item held special memories. On the back or underside of each piece of furniture, Elizabeth had taped the name of the person she wanted to inherit it. She had put similar tags on many of her other belongings. Doing so gave her a sense of peace and happiness. One by one, she contacted her loved ones, talked to them about the items they would inherit, and discussed the fond memories associated with them.*

For Elizabeth, the process was a satisfying one, a chance to give of herself and express her love.

Most of us keep mementos: special gifts, cherished photographs, travel souvenirs, old farm tools, a christening outfit.

Collecting sentimental treasures is a normal, important part of living. Such items provide a thread of family history and a sense of place—not insignificant in today’s increasingly mobile and

fast-paced society.

In passing on her belongings, Elizabeth had the opportunity to review her life and find meaning in her memories. Sharing these experiences with loved ones was to her benefit as well as theirs. This type of reminiscence is healthy, particularly late in life. It preserves family history and folklore, helps resolve fears and conflicts, and promotes intergenerational understanding.



Life goes on: *Sarah and Paul are proud of their two children. Bruce, the oldest, will graduate soon from college. Barbara is newly married and working full time. Still, they terribly miss their youngest child, Brenda. She died in an automobile accident seven months ago, shortly after her high school graduation. It has been both difficult and comforting to walk into her bedroom and stand amidst her things. She always will hold a special place in their hearts. Yet Sarah and Paul know that the time has come to decide what to do with the items in her room.*

Sarah and Paul need some time to talk about what to do. It is sure to be emotionally draining.

They might want to offer some things to Brenda’s siblings and close friends. Perhaps each could select something of sentimental value. Toys or stuffed animals might be donated to a daycare center. They might want to give clothing and other items to a needy family, a church mission or a consignment shop in another town. Money raised from items sold

could be used to purchase a memory gift for Brenda’s school, church or favorite organization.

Brenda’s bedroom might be redecorated and converted into a guest room. The furniture could be sold or donated to a charitable cause. The room could be converted into an office or an area for reading or sewing. Sarah and Paul might want to keep a few pictures or accessories in the room to remind them of Brenda.

Moving in with a child's family: *Fran's mother, Anne, has continued living in the same house since her husband's death two years ago. Anne has taken her husband's death extremely hard. She has yet to go through all his music (he played the violin and piano), his golf equipment and trophies, his extensive collection of books. In fact, all his books are in the same place on the shelves, all his stereo records in the same filing order. . . Anne recently had a stroke and needs physical therapy and emotional support at home. Fran, who is married, has suggested that Anne move in with her and her family in their house in a nearby city. Although Anne would have her own bedroom, she would not have the same space or privacy afforded by her own home.*

Anne might consider moving in on a temporary basis first. Then, if the arrangement does not work well, either Anne or Fran's family can back out gracefully.

Anne might want to take some things to help her feel at home in Fran's house: a comfortable chair, a reading lamp, a telephone, family photos, a special picture, her own linens, a favorite quilt and her own TV. She might want to consult with her physical therapist and other professionals about special furnishings—a bed, a chair—that meet her needs.

One benefit of living with Fran's family is that Anne will be better able to interact socially. Fran's family, in turn, might find Anne's presence enriching: her contributions, her wisdom. The arrangement might give Fran a chance to help Anne reflect on her husband's possessions and reminisce about his accomplishments and their life

together—a good starting point for helping Anne decide what to do with her home and everything in it.

If Anne decides to sell or rent her home, she might want to videotape the house and her husband's room before any changes are made. As she is making the video, Anne could provide commentary and tell stories. Anne will likely need Fran's or someone else's assistance in making the video.

Anne will probably find that making the video eases her sense of loss. Watching the video, now and in the future, will provide satisfying moments for Anne and her children's families. The video is a vehicle for preserving family history, telling family stories, and encouraging a richer intergenerational understanding.



Friends helping one another: *Mary's beloved husband died 14 months ago. Since then, she has had a hard time making ends meet. Her three children have been in touch often, but they have families and live several hours away. One of her best friends, Josie, lives alone in a large two-story house with a finished basement. The home is convenient to church and shopping. Several other good friends live nearby. Mary and Josie recently have been talking about living together to share company, housekeeping responsibilities and expenses. Olivia, a friend from church, has listened to their plans with interest. She, like Mary and Josie, is in her 70s and is in good health for her age. She enjoys gardening and yard work more than cooking and cleaning. Olivia lives alone on a nearby ten-acre farm with her golden retriever. Her husband died two and a half years ago.*

Mary, Josie and Olivia obviously need to discuss many details before deciding to live together. If they decide to move in with one another, they would be wise to try it first on a temporary basis.

They will be faced with a range of important choices as they consolidate their households into one. They must decide what they still need once their resources and belongings are pooled. They also must think about where they will store the other items, or who will inherit or buy them.

Mary's and Olivia's homes could be rented out during the trial period to help with living expenses. Each could keep a list of possessions and up-to-date wills.

Living together is a challenge. But it can be worth it. There are many advantages, such as companionship, sharing of skills, and the ability to live comfortably on less money.

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 make us smile.

Things that bring back memories. . .
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

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