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No Longer Burdened as The Keeper of Things

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No Longer Burdened as The Keeper of Things

By Joan McCain

UCF Forum columnist

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For 30 days this summer, when I was between semesters and my college-age children were taking classes and living in dorms, I spent seven hours a day purging my home. Every closet, cabinet, drawer, and corner of my garage was attacked with laser focus.

I filled close to 40 trash bags, made eight trips to The Salvation Army, and took two loads of petrified chemical substances to the county dump.

And then, there were the photographs. That was the really miserable part. My first child was born in 1995, my second in 1998, and we didn't buy our first digital camera until 2006. (I had done nothing to organize those photos either.) An entire oversized armoire was filled with cardboard boxes marked "Recent Photos" (oh, the irony), "Scrapbook Memorabilia" (what a joke that was as I had never completed a scrapbook in my life), plus boxes under beds and in closets that had still more envelopes with duplicate prints and negatives.

What all those boxes said to me is that I was a failure as a mother. My children did not have a single organized presentation of anything in their life. Sure, I had hung their baby portraits on the wall—for a time. And I bought the school portraits and sent them to the grandparents, but shelved the rest. Visions of those crafty moms with their scissors and colored paper danced before me. And they mocked me.

How did I let my children's history get buried under that of everyone else's? As I dug through the stash of stuff, the chronology became clear. In my matriarchal lineage I am the only woman, descending from a mother and grandmother who were devoted to each other, and their love of dishes, mink stoles, and more framed pieces of needlework than is possible to hang in a ranch-style home.

Somehow, my brothers were not in the line of fire as the possessions were passed down the line. These women died within seven years of each other, and their possessions came to me in two waves. With it, I was bequeathed the title "The Keeper of Things."

Out of a sense of duty, I felt I had to save it. But I needed none of it, wanted very little, and so it went into the dark recesses of my home. Under beds, in closets, in the attic.

To stay motivated in my purge, I documented each day on Instagram (@joan_in_gratitude) and Facebook, and thanks to the artificial intelligence of social media algorithms, articles began showing up in my news feed. As I read, I learned I was not alone. For the first time in U.S. history, two generations are downsizing at the same time. As aging parents close their family homes, they find many of their baby boomer children don't want the contents of their curio cabinets, breakfronts, or cedar closets.

"Maybe I can sell it," the octogenarians say, only to find what they have is worth very little, if they can find anyone to buy it at all. The pieces are reproductions, dark and heavy, not at all what furniture dealers or their children want. Hummels and Thomas Kinkade paintings have no appeal to them since they are on the brink of downsizing themselves.

As I shared my purge, reactions from my friends ran the spectrum. Some were inspired and started their own purges. Others were horrified. "You're going to regret this," posted a friend beneath my photo of about 200 color slides of my 1985 trip to coastal California. I replied, "I haven't looked at these in 32 years. I don't even know what's on them." (Photos will forever be clutter to me. I take very few and delete most of them so they don't build up.

After countless hours sorting through every duplicate print, sitting next to a trash can, I got my children's photos culled down to two small plastic boxes. I have scanned the good prints, folded in the digital, and I spend a few hours each weekend making progress with online photo books of the highlights of their lives to print and give to them. I hope to be done by the time my oldest graduates from college in May.

It has been more than a month since I purged my closets and cabinets. My house looks the same, because these things were not displayed. But it feels lighter. Or perhaps it is my psyche.

No longer burdened as The Keeper of Things for two previous generations, I am now free to live a future of my own imagining. To have more with less.

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