

# STUFF

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The day was a typical hot and muggy Florida late afternoon with lovely ocean breeze blowing. Neil, my beloved husband and I were on our way to a second hand store appropriately named ANTIQUE HEAVEN. Neil drove with lackluster enthusiasm on his sweet face while I shivered with excitement at the treasure I was sure the find. Another store. Another chance to find a treasure. The hunt was on! MORE STUFF. This was another opportunity for my collecting genes to be appeased by the occasional (Neil would say regular) expedition "to go and just see what they have". Upon entering the huge and dusty shop, once a furniture emporium, I wandered aimlessly when suddenly I found "them". "Oh look," I cried to Neil, "our dishes!" "Which dishes?" was his hesitant reply as he slowly approached. His response reflected the fact that the four sets of dishes we owned were huge, lovely and underused. "Why the Lenox Ming, you know the partial set Aunt Louise gave us" I squealed. Here before me must have been another 150 pieces of Ming china with all manner of demitasse cups, bone dishes, and treasures ranging from tiny to huge (much of which no one uses any more). Aunt Louise, nearly 90 now, had a wonderful story about where she got the dishes and how often she used them that we had heard many times. As my eyes danced with glee, Neil turned to look me in the eye and issued his eternal question, "But, what would you DO with them?" "Ownership" I replied. "It has nothing to do with what I plan to DO with them, it's all about ownership" said I, my eyes glazing over in rapture. "It will complete our set!" Never mind that we were hundreds of miles from Michigan, and that at home we had my mother's dishes, his mother's dishes and our own dishes as well as a few smaller sets of tea dishes and many just pretty miscellaneous dishes. "How will we get them back home?" he said in a weak voice that clearly reflected his sense of having lost this round. "Oh we can send them" chirped the shop owner. And that was the end of that.

Now let me tell you another story.

Fast Forward 15 years. My beloved Neil is gone. The house we built together is way too big and my sons, who will eventually have to tend to me when it is my turn to need help are far away. It appears that I must make a change that is too hard to make. I must move. The Ming china in a cabinet, its massive numbers of lovely and elegant pieces shining and glistening in the soft light of the chandelier in the dining room must be considered. Do I move the china, sell it or give it away. One of my sons says, "Mom,

just get rid of things. Don't give things to us. We don't need anything. Just get rid of stuff."

The Ming dishes are part of my stuff.

My stuff is a part of me.

If I get rid of my stuff, what will be left of me?

The Ming dishes, in my heart a part of my Aunt Louise, are only part of my china collection. Neil's Mom's dishes and those of my mother and grandmother are beautiful and precious - because of their own intrinsic beauty, but primarily because of who they belonged to. The dishes connect me to my family and give me a more expanded identity and add meaning to my life. I can't help but imagine that some essence of my family will magically rub off of them and become more a part of me. I would like that!

But for me, the real truth of collecting anything has to do with story-telling. Everything I value as stuff has a story. And while it is the story, not the stuff that I really value, without the stuff the story could get lost. And THAT is what I fear the most. Acquiring the Ming China was a story. Aunt Louise shared her story. And stories become us as we live our lives, remembering our family and friends through tales of giving and receiving, holding those we love in gentle awareness. As the great storyteller Garrison Keeler said, **"Gentleness is everywhere in daily life, a sign that faith rules through ordinary things: through cooking and small talk, through storytelling, making love, fishing, tending animals and sweet corn and flowers, through sports, music and books, raising kids — all the places where the gravy soaks in and grace shines through.** Even in a time of elephantine vanity and greed, one only has to listen for the sweet stories of gentle people."

In the 1600s, educated Europeans did not visit museums as we know them. There were none. Instead there were private "cabinets of curiosities," called *Wunderkammer* in German (wonder rooms), whose owners would open them to visitors by invitation. Descended from the medieval church treasuries of sacred relics, luxurious vestments and gem-studded silver altar plate, these wondrous rooms typically housed vast assortments of things—preserved specimens of animal and plant life; exotic pelts, feathers, teeth and tusks; dinosaur fossils (their origins a complete mystery at the time); stones, minerals and substances believed to have magical, curative or antidotal powers; fragments of Greek and Roman art, coins, medals, and other costly objects of beauty, rarity, artistic or scientific value.

The collectors were usually men of science or scholarship—apothecaries, booksellers, "natural philosophers"—who would amass such treasures for serious study. To own a Wunderkammer was a mark of wealth and intellectual accomplishment, and magnificent ones were established by kings, aristocrats and princes of the Church. Given the variety and significance of these collections, many were cataloged by their owners, and when published, often with detailed engraved illustrations, the catalogs themselves served as important reference works.

The **Ashmolean Museum** in Oxford England, is the world's first university museum. Its first building was built in 1678-1683 to house the cabinet of curiosities that Elias Ashmole gave Oxford University in 1677. The collection began modestly in the 1620s with a handful of portraits and curiosities displayed in a small room on the upper floor. In 1636 and 1657, Archbishop Laud and Ralph Freke added notable collections of coins and medals, later installed in a strong room of their own and now incorporated into the Ashmolean coin collection. The objects of curiosity included Guy Fawkes' lantern and a sword said to have been given by the pope to Henry VIII, both now in the Ashmolean, as well as a number of more exotic items, including Jacob's Coat of Many Colors

There were also those who collected entire Wunderkammers, among the most avaricious being Peter the Great of Russia, whose acquisitions became the foundation of the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg.

As might be expected, the auction hammer awaited cabinets that did not become the basis of present-day institutions, and in recognition of this, the final vitrine is devoted to auction catalogs. One of them accompanied the sale of the shell collection of Elizabeth Bligh (1752-1812), which consisted of shells gathered by her husband, Captain William Bligh of "Mutiny on the Bounty" fame, and his colleagues. That nearly all the catalogs in this last section are illustrated with shells — and were often valuable for naming or describing new species — balances the captions' account of the sales of various collections by evoking the awe-inspiring natural beauty so basic to the Wunderkammer craze.

Collectors come in all shapes and sizes and from all cultures. Researchers indicate that nearly all children collect things, sometimes beginning as early as age three. It is about that time that children begin to understand possessive pronouns such as "mine" and "yours". The first collector was probably Noah who filled up his gopher wood Ark, on instructions from above. (I should have used that excuse when I was buying china!) People collect stuff to impress others, to increase their own sense of who they are, to obtain power, or to increase their sense of security.

Exactly what makes something a collection or someone a collector is elusive. Virtually anything can be and has been collected from stamps to swizzle sticks. But just how many swizzle sticks does it take to make a collection? It seems that a collection must be a set of objects, meaning more than one, and that the items must be related in some way - they must have some kind of cohesive theme. Collecting can be quite elaborate. The collector spends considerable time planning the hunt for an object and anticipating the moment of acquisition. The hunt for just that perfect addition is at the heart of collecting. The objects, once acquired, must be removed from their typical use and then organized in some way. My son has a collection of original SUPERMAN comic books organized by number which he rarely touches, never reads, and keeps in an airtight sanitary box. A perfect collection (he was always going to sell them to pay for his college education but somehow that never happened). Many collectors think of their collections as a legacy to pass on to the heirs or even the world. Some, especially art collectors and collectors of historical artifacts, donate their collections to museums. This has led some to suggest that collecting is a way of managing fears about death by creating a form of immortality. And to some extent, that is very accurate. William Randolph Hearst has been described as a ruthless, autocratic, entrepreneur who had a total inability to control himself along with an almost pathological urge to amass and accumulate riches and treasures to demonstrate his power, an urge that he never satisfied. His San Simeon mansion has been described as "not built to suit certain living needs, but in a Bastard-Spanish-Moorish-Romanesque-Gothic-Renaissance-Bull Market-Damn-the-Expense Style". His fabulous wealth and his determination to possess kept a staff of thirty men employed at his warehouses on 143<sup>rd</sup> street in NYC, where millions of dollars worth of art and antiques lay crated up, including the entire cloisters of two monasteries and tens of thousands of books their owner would never see. Hearst had a tremendous fear of death. Never did his employees or friends discuss the issue. His staff went to extremes to keep him in the illusion of eternal life. When one of the palm trees at San Simeon died unexpectedly, the gardeners painted its leaves green until it could be replaced. But the immortality he tried to purchase failed him and he died a sick, weak old man in 1951. However, his collections still thrill us today so it could be argued that he achieved his immortality at that. J.P. Morgan was another collector positively distrustful of any object costing less than a six figure sum who seemed intent on de-nudeing Europe of its old treasures. With blank cheques and European agents, he bought any major work of art he wanted. Together with other collectors with familiar names like Mellon, Frick, Carnegie, Rockefeller, they amassed for their young country treasures from the old. Even included were sacred relics, often bones, from medieval times. Because there was no way of keeping the bodies of the Saints, the

custom when an eminent or holy man died was to boil them in wine and water thereby leaving bones that could be honored and buried. One obvious problem with this practice is that, once divided from the flesh, the bone of a saintly knight of Christ was impossible to tell apart from that of a commoner, a thief, or even an infidel, a fact used to best effect by relics merchants. Saintly remains can be found in hundreds of churches and monasteries to the point that one wonders just how many bones any one person could have. Collections of these relics were bought and sold for enormous sums. Such was the potential value of relics that when St Francis of Assisi, exhausted by fasting and strenuous penances, was nearing his death, he was put under round-the-clock armed guard to prevent looters from snatching his body. To the mind of the believer, relics are imbued with talismanic qualities. It is a curious fact that they who want to be closest to the life they venerate often find themselves involved in the most gruesome aspects of decay and death. Relics, however, are dead and alive – dead obviously but alive with the aura, the spirit of something greater, and more holy, than we are. They may appear shriveled but at the same time they are a link to another place, carriers of a living force, and emissaries from a world beyond.

Some collectors show extreme behaviors that straddle the border between eccentricity and pathology. Television is a monster in exposing the timid hoarder. We all become attached to our possessions and save things other people would not. So we all share some of the hoarding orientation. But we are not hoarders. Almost all hoarding is carried on in secret and is often done by highly intelligent people. Although hoarding is considered a mental disorder it may stem from the extraordinary ability of the individual to see the rich detail of every object. We disregard the color and hue of a magazine cover as we search for the article inside. But if we paid attention, we might notice the soothing effects of the colors and the meaning of the object would expand in the process. In this way, the physical world of the hoarder is different and much more expansive than that of the rest of us. Hoarders connect stories to objects just like the rest of us. Sometimes the hoarding person can allow themselves to get rid of something just by telling its story. It is as though the process of letting go also means the object can go as long as the story goes with it.

Modern collectors make your head spin with their world-wide jaunts on private jets with their own curators and unlimited wealth. Many movie stars appear to be collecting art as a hedge against the current economic uncertainty. While some collect art that they know and cherish, others collect just to keep. Many are speculating in contemporary art works by unknowns in the hope that they will increase in value – a market not for the timid investor. Many use **Christie's**, an art business and a fine arts

auction house, currently the world's largest, with sales for the first half of 2012, \$3.5 billion, representing the highest total for a corresponding period in company and art market history. Christie's has its main headquarters in London's King Street and in Rockefeller Plaza, New York. It is owned by Groupe Artémis, the holding company of François-Henri Pinault, a French businessman who owns one of the biggest collections of contemporary art worldwide and displays this collection in Venice at the museum Palazzo Grassi. As of 2012, Impressionist works, which dominated the market during the 1980s boom, have been replaced by contemporary art as Christie's top category. Asian art was the next most-lucrative area. Christie's charges 25 percent commission for the first \$75,000; 20 percent on the next \$75,001 to \$1.5 million and 12 percent on the rest. On 22 of June 2012 George Washington's personal annotated copy of the "Acts Passed at a Congress of the United States of America" from 1789, which includes The Constitution of the United States and a draft of the Bill of Rights, was sold at Christie's for a record \$9,826,500, with fees: the final cost, to The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. This was the record for a document sold at auction. A month or two ago, the painting, THREE STUDIES OF LUCIAN FREUD by Francis Bacon was sold for \$142.4 million - a worldwide auction record for any work of art.

The ANTIQUES ROADSHOW has fanned the flames of collecting since 1977 and beats glamorous DOWNTON ABBEY as Public Television's number 1 rated series where Tiffany Lamps and baseball cards are the stars. It is rare that a piece from the ROADSHOW, no matter how valuable, ends up being sold, say its creators because "people are so excited about what they own and so eager to learn about it that they almost always keep their items". The crowds at the ROADSHOW are friendly, not competitive, with much oohing-and-ahhing says the host, Mark Walberg. The ROADSHOW is not easy to impress either. They have turned down \$200,000, items where the guest knows everything. "We want storytelling. We want the drama of the guest learning something", they state. Executive Producer Marcia Bemko "It is a very human and universal thing to try to understand ourselves, and our objects help to do that". And there we have the crux of collecting!

There are thousands of book collections, thank heavens, in our world. There are millions of book collectors; probably each one of you has books tucked away that are trophies of inspiring or educating words, books that contain stories precious. Literature has been called A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED. "Like a child that needs to hear the same story over and over again to grasp the shape of things, the structure with which to see the world, all reading and every story reassures that there is form, that events have a beginning and an end, that catharsis follows catastrophe, that sometimes good wins

over evil, and that the bedlam of our daily lives can be cast into a mold of meaning, of recognizable convention. We need to rehearse this in the face of a chaotic world, again and again, for reading and storytelling are consolations for the perplexed". Collecting is an aspect of this process. The collector, like the reader, seeks to convince himself that there is structure, that things can be ordered and understood, even if they seem to obey alien rules. The library, a space where books are ordered and classified and not just jumbled in heaps of unconnected titles, becomes a story in its own right. Within, at least, things on their shelf have their place in the scheme of things. Scores of book collectors scour these shelves to find some scrap of meaning, something to hold on to in the chaos of randomness and chance in our world today. When we find these treasures, we keep them and, at times, become contented hermits reading and rereading these the stories that make meaning in our lives.

The lives of bibliomaniacs are rarely quaint...none more so than that of Sir Thomas Phillips (1792-1872) whose stated ambition was to own one copy of every book in the world. His is a story of obsession that ended in complete and devastating failure. Though the windows of the house were never opened and the smell of old paper and mildew prevailed, the amiable Sir Thomas entertained scholars in his enormous house, designed to hold books first and people second. He moved to a bigger mansion, but the constant stream of new acquisitions kept complicating things so that unpacking of the books was never accomplished. It was his intention, he stated, to keep the books from destruction...to insure their immortality. It was his great ambition to leave his collection to the nation but his correspondent Benjamin Disraeli, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, was unable to find a buyer. When Sir Phillips died his collection was in disarray, only partly unpacked and not fully catalogued. It was put on the auction block. His was never a collection, but an accumulation, without benefit of an ordering mind to inhabit and rule it. The sale of some of Phillips priceless collection is still ongoing at Sotheby's, nearly 180 years later.

And, there are people who, instead of stuff, collect people. Let's take a very famous collector of women, Casanova. The count, once a gallant who had spent his life tearing through Europe making and losing fortunes and having love affairs wherever he went had become a cranky old man whose remaining social activities consisted of warring with his servants and writing his *Histoire*. Writing in the 1790s, it was the one way in which he could not only gain the fame and respect that had eluded him during his life, but also immortalizes the collection for whose acquisition he was to become so famous.



One of the projects undertaken by Casanova in his chilly study while waiting for another glass of wine and cursing the tardy servant, has survived in the achieves, along with the rest of his papers: it contains notes for and redrafts of the second act of an opera called DON GIOVANNI. While the extent of Casanova's involvement in the writing of it is uncertain, it seems likely that he did indeed serve at least as an adviser to the man who was to take the credit for the libretto, Lorenzo da Ponte, whom Casanova had known for many years and who could hardly have wished for a more competent or experienced consultant.

A little nearer to home, there is an old and interesting collection of Pinball machines in a museum run by none other than Tim Arnold, a veteran arcade operator who ran "Pinball Pete's" in East Lansing for many years. Fully staffed by volunteers, excess revenues are donated to the Salvation Army. There are more than 400 machines that Tim has collected and rebuilt which provide hours of entertainment for many and for him, a life-long passion and reason to be.

A stunning new book, ART AS THERAPY by Alain de Botton is a vivid expose of what he believes collections of art and objects truly mean. He claims that they are not just there, for their own sake, but for therapeutic reasons. "It is a medium uniquely well suited to helping us with some of the troubles of inner life: our desire for material things, our fear of the unknown, our longing for love, and our need for hope. We are accustomed to the idea that music can have a therapeutic effect on us but so can art and objects of beauty be an apothecary for the soul" He describes the meanings of china and glassware as objects that demand careful handling because of their delicacy and admitted weakness. They are not fragile because of a deficiency or by mistake. They are made fragile by design in the search by their maker for transparency and refinement and desire to "welcome candle light upon their depths". "It is one of the duties of civilization to allow the more delicate forms of human activity to thrive, to create environments where it is OK to be fragile" he states And all of us feel that need for ourselves, to be vulnerable nonetheless valuable. Careful handling of china and lovely old glassware is required. "It teaches us that moderation is admirable and elegant, not just a tedious demand. It tells us that being careful is glamorous and exciting, even fashionable. It is a moral tale about gentleness told by means of a piece of porcelain or a glass. It is training for the more important moments in life when moderation will make a real difference to other people. Being mature and civilized means being aware of the effect of one's strength on others, he maintains.

The Smithsonian is our nation's collector of stuff with a yearly budget of \$480 million. This gargantuan enterprise was created in 1846 with funds given to the U S by British scientist, James Smithson, who never left any explanation as to why he chose the US for

his bequest. He died in 1829 but it was not until 1835 that our government was informed of the gift. His will was contested so it took two years in the Chancery Court for the bequest to be settled. It was about this time that Dickens in his book BLEEK HOUSE described Chancery Court as follows: "Being in the Court of Chancery is like being ground to bits in a slow mill; it's being roasted at a slow fire; it's being stung to death by single bees; it's being drowned by drips; it's going mad by grains". Finally in 1838, Smithson's personal library, his personal notes and effects along with 104,960 gold sovereigns arrived in the US after a six week voyage, chaperoned by none other than Alexander Graham Bell. The Smithsonian was to be, "an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men". From the complete kitchen of Julia Child to a scrap of Confederate flag our Nation's belongings are saved and cataloged. Every collection is a marvelous theatre of memories, a drama of past and present.

There is a growing body of literature dealing with attachment theory and the meaning of stuff. Flood, fire, and thieves often rob people of their self-identity as belongings are lost. This represents not just the loss of the item, but the loss of a part of the self....who we really are. Attachment to possessions is not just identity but also appears to reflect and influence an individual's growth because it represents past and present relationships. Our stuff brings past meanings into the present, and maintains present meanings. Possessions also help people cope and adjust to change. Well-known is the adaptive role of a young child's baby blanket while we, as adults, keep or dispose of stuff to aid in life transitions, such as moving, losing a loved one, or adjusting to any major life change. We oldies preserve ourselves by passing along possessions to younger family, if we can. But one of the worst parts of growing old is the decreasing ability to have or keep our possessions and the consequent inability to maintain our former relationships with our self. Stuff helps a person grasp "me" and provides opportunities for knowing who I am or who I was or who I am becoming. Possessions not only help elderly people adapt to new living environments, they also influence others' perceptions. A study of old folks in institutional care who were surrounded by personal possessions, get well cards and photographs were better cared for by staff who perceived them as less dependent, and more socially capable.

I would like to stop here and read you a story, written for children about us oldies and our memories.

Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge

By Mem Fox

There was once a small boy called Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge and what's more he wasn't very old either. His house was next door to an old people's home and he knew all the people who lived there. He liked Mrs. Jordan who played the organ

He listened to Mr. Hosking who told him scarie stories.

He played with Mr. Tippet who was crazy about cricket. He ran errands for Miss Mitchell who walked with a wooden stick. He admired Mr. Drysdale who had a voice like a giant. But his favorite person of all was Miss Nancy Alison Delacourt Cooper because she had four names just as he did. He called her Miss Nancy and told her all his secrets. One day Wilfrid Gordon heard his mother and father talking about Miss Nancy.

"Poor old thing," said his mother

"Why is she a poor old thing?" asked Wilfrid Gordon

"Because she's lost her memory," said his father.

"It isn't surprising," said his mother. "After all, she is ninety-six"

"Whets a memory?" asked Wilfrid Gordon. He was always asking questions.

"It's something you remember," said his father.

But Wilfrid Gordon wanted to know more, so he called on Mrs. Jordan who played the organ.

"What's a memory?" he asked.

"Something warm, my child, something warm"

He called on Mr. Tippet who was crazy about cricket.

"Whets a memory?" he asked

"Something that makes you laugh, my darling, something that makes you laugh."

He called on Mr. Drysdale who had a voice like a giant.

"Whets a memory?" he asked.

"Something as precious as gold, young man, something as precious as gold".

So Wilfrid Gordon went home again to look for memories for Miss Nancy because she had lost her own.

He looked for the shoe-box of shells he had found long ago last summer, and put them gently in a basket.

He found the puppet on strings which always made everyone laugh and he put that in the basket too.

He remembered with sadness the medal which his grandfather had given him and he placed it gently next to the shells.

Next he found his football which was as precious as gold and last of all, on his way to Miss Nancy's, he went into the hen house and took a fresh, warm egg from under a hen.

Then Wilfrid Gordon called on Miss Nancy and gave her each thing one by one.

"What a dear, strange child to bring me all these wonderful things," thought Miss Nancy.

Then she started to remember.

She held the warm egg and told

Wilfrid Gordon about the tiny speckled blue eggs she had once found in a bird's nest in her aunt's garden.

She put a shell to her ear and remembered going to the beach by the tram long ago and how she had felt in her button-up boots.

She touched the medal and talked sadly of the big brother she had loved who had gone to the war and never returned.

She smiled at the puppet on strings and remembered the one she had shown to her sister and how she had laughed with a mouth full of porridge.

She bounced the football to Wilfrid Gordon and remembered the day she had met him and all the secrets they had told.

And the two of them smiled and smiled because Miss Nancy's memory had been found again by a small boy, who wasn't very old either."

In a WALL STREET JOURNAL several weeks ago, the Author Andrea Combes chronicled a 2012 Survey that found 86% of baby boomers and 74% of Americans over the age of 72 saying that family stories and keeping true to last wishes of loved ones were far more important to them than a money bequest. And truly, this last economic downturn and steep health care costs may mean less money being left by parents. Keeping family history alive is often done through family mementoes and heirlooms. It is the things that make your family unique - not money, but stories and personal possessions that become most important in any legacy discussion. The article urged a younger generation to "ask Mom to tell you a story" since families often fail to record their histories, so the stories often die with their storyteller. Well, I don't know about your families but in mine, the stories are often cut short by the time constraints of jobs, tending children, errands or whathaveyou, leaving many stories dangling. And I readily admit that I wish I had been a better listener when my parents were telling their stories to me. We are the keepers of our own novel - a book of our own about us. We are the precious holders of memories that chronicle the history of our nation and the history of ourselves. We are very important. We are the storytellers of our lives that bear witness to the unfolding of events so exquisite and stately as they bring witness to our days. We have not all invented something or created something or developed something, but we have all been the star of our own life production with our heartaches and joys and curiosities and discoveries. We are the keepers of our own flame in the guise of our belongings and our utterances. It is a great, a noble gift to write, to talk, to regale, to reveal, to expound, to reiterate over and over again the tales of ourselves and those we love. Of course, we must heed the cute prayer we have all heard, written with this very topic in mind.

"Lord, Thou Knowest that I am growing old

Keep me from becoming talkative and possessed with the idea that I must express  
myself on every subject

Relieve me from the craving to straighten out everyone's affairs

Keep me from the recital of endless detail

Give me wings to get to the point

Seal my lips when I am inclined to tell of my aches and pains

Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally I may be wrong

Make me thoughtful but not nosey, helpful but not bossy

With my vast store of wisdom and experience it does seem a pity not to use it all. But thou knowest, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end."

So don't wait for your family to ask YOU to tell them a story about yourself or your stuff. Just go ahead and talk. The purpose of life is to matter – to count, to stand for something, to have it make some difference that we lived at all. Our stuff is part of that story. Treasure it.

So, yes, we think of disposing of our stuff and worry about that process, but let me lead you in one final direction. We, ourselves, our bodies are also "stuff" in the scheme of things. Yes, indeed we are. And how are we planning to deal with ourselves? Mankind has been devising new ways to dispose of itself for thousands of years. Motivated by a desire to leave an environmentally sound legacy, more people are choosing to forgo bulky coffins, cement vaults and monuments. Instead they are opting for little more than, well, a hole in the ground. Since Americans currently bury around one million tons of steel caskets each year, it is said that we pollute our environment with ourselves. But we have a few new choices. We can choose to be sprinkled on the sea, or be rocketed into space in a satellite which will orbit our earth until eternity (or until the satellite wears out!). Celestis Inc continues to book passages to the Earth's orbit with the moon as destination for \$25,000. Another option is to become a "reef ball" that provides a habitat for sea life. A company named Eternal Reefs mixes cremated remains with environmentally friendly concrete and casts them into a basketball-size "pearl". The pearl is then attached to a honeycomb-shaped reef. Whole families can become a reef (no charge for pets)! Eternal Reefs has installed more than 1,700 memorial balls in 20 locations off the East Coast since 1998, which it says is helping to fortify the ocean's diminishing ecology. So you see, dealing with our "stuff" can include us! What will they think of next?

So, indeed, objects tell stories, never standing mute to their purpose, their creation, their beauty and their owner. And yes, it is the stories we cherish, but it is "stuff" – the "things" that jog our memories and make lively the days and years of our lives. The how-to-get-rid-of-stuff books tell me that the dolly I had when I was about 7, for whom my grandmother made all the clothes, could be used by someone else and that probably it is time for me to get rid of her, let her go, send her away, and, "pare down my stuff". De-cluttering they call it nowadays. But then, what do I do when I want to spend time

with my darling and accomplished grandmother? When I feel like it, I can take out the clothes and touch them, marveling at the hand sewing and beautiful smocking – knowing that as she made these lovely dresses and nighties she was thinking about me, just as I now think about her. What stories I can tell about my Kentucky grandmother who grew up on a tobacco plantation, graduated from Valparaiso University in Indiana, became a landscape artist and bible scholar long before most women achieved as much. Thinking about her is a pastime that will increase as I grow older and more inclined to review my past and its loved ones. Her things are examples of my “stuff”, my treasure. And yes, I will pass them along to a family member if any one of them would express an interest, or be willing to hear the stories of her. I have considered writing a note attached to my treasured things, threatening to come back and haunt anyone who dares to sell or give away the family stuff. But then I worry that I might end up like a client Neil once had who came into his office fit to be tied because she had put her children’s name on a piece of masking tape underneath each of her possessions – tables, chairs, desks and on and on to indicate who would inherit what when she died. Well, that day she had gotten mad at one of her children and decided to disinherit him but was upset because that meant she had to get underneath each piece of furniture or bric-a-brack to see which name it held so as to remove the name of the disfavored child!. Clearly it is better to make a written list than to resort to masking tape!

Where is the Ming China, you may ask? Well, it is right where I can look at it, use it, enjoy it, cherish it, touch it, show it off, and rejoice in my fortune to own it. I use it for everyday, with the pieces seldom used stored in a china cabinet not frequently opened. Where are the other sets of dishes and glassware I own? They are either sitting out on a shelf or tucked into a box in my attic where I know exactly how to find them. Would I buy an additional piece, if I found it at a jumble sale or antique fare? Yes, you can bet I would! Collections always have the elusive missing piece—and so does mine. While I do not feverishly hunt that piece, as I once did, I cherish the concept of wholeness – of things being together and belonging to each other in a set.

The beauty and harmony of art in any form, if it is in a form you particularly love, is a treasure. It stirs you to research its story, if you do not already know it, and then tell its story. It is one of the joys of being alive. So enjoy your stuff, learn its story and share it. Give it away if you must, but send the story of it, along with it. And if you have to sell something on eBay, tuck a written note with the story inside. But before you make a move, ponder the following essay I found by an unknown author. It is called,

Keeping.

Some things you just keep, like good teeth, warm coats and bald husbands. They're good for you, reliable and practical and so meaningful that to throw them away would make the garbage man a thief.

So you hang on, because something old is sometimes better than something new, and what you know often better than a stranger.

These are my thoughts. They make me sound old; old and tame and dull at a time when everybody else is risky and racy and flashing all that's new and improved in their lives.

New spouses, new careers, new thighs, and even new lips.

The world is dizzy with trade-ins. I could keep track, but I don't think I want to. I grew up in the fifties with practical parents - a mother, God bless her who washed aluminum foil after she cooked in it, then re-used it - and still does. A father who was happier getting old shoes fixed than buying new ones.

They weren't poor, my parents, they were just satisfied. Their marriage was good, their dreams focused, their best friends lived barely a wave away.

I can see them now, Fifties couples in Bermuda shorts and Banlon sweaters, lawn mower in one hand, tools in the other. The tools were for fixing things - a curtain rod, the kitchen radio, screen door, the oven door, and the hem in a dress. Things you keep

It was a way of life, and sometimes it made me crazy. All that re-fixing, re-heating, re-newing. I wanted just once to be wasteful. Waste meant affluence. Throwing things away meant there'd always be more.

But then one day my father died, and on that clear autumn night, in the chill of the hospital room, I was struck with the pain of learning that sometimes there isn't any 'more'. Sometimes what you care about most gets all used up and goes away, never to return.

So while you have it, it's best to love it and care for it and fix it when it's broken and heal it when it's sick. That's true for marriage and old cars and children with bad report cards and dogs with bad hips.

You keep them because they're worth it, because you're worth it.

Some things you keep.



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