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LETTERS

‘Death Cleaning’: A Reckoning With Clutter, Grief and Memories

These letters are among the more than 500 responses from readers to our request for personal stories about dealing with their own lifetime accumulation of possessions or that of a loved one.

April 9, 2022

To the Editor:

I never had a good relationship with my mother. As one of her primary caretakers, I dreaded the end of her life. It meant reckoning with the past as I cleaned out her belongings from our family home of 62 years.

The last few months of her life I went through her private belongings. Among her papers, I found nine typed pages by my teachers reviewing my three years in nursery and kindergarten — words that my mother clearly held close to her heart. I found many pieces of artwork I had made for her that I thought were unappreciated and destroyed.

By the time she died of dementia in her home, I had received the grace to grieve her loss in a way I thought unimaginable. Disposing of her physical belongings gave me the gift of realizing a love she had for me I never knew existed.

Graham G. Hawks
Fayetteville, Ark.
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To the Editor:

By the time I’d found my mom’s fifth copy of Mickey Rooney’s autobiography, “Life Is Too Short,” I knew I had my work cut out for me. My parents were hoarders. Fifty years of clutter awaited me. Where to start?

My mom had just died from pancreatic cancer. My dad was 85, barely able to walk or see. I had a lifetime of clutter to deal with while I cared for my ailing father. Fortunately, my salvation was the man hired to refinish my mom’s O’Keefe and Merritt gas stove. He was looking for investment property.

I agreed to sell my dad's house on one condition — that the buyer deal with the clutter. He agreed. Turns out I left behind clutter to fill 12 giant dumpsters.

I needed to plan my mom's funeral, pack up my dad and his three dogs, and bring them home to surprise my wife and three kids. Heartless as it may sound, I turned my back on my childhood home and never looked back.

I took the only things that truly mattered. My memories, my dad, his dogs and a copy of Mickey Rooney's autobiography.

Ralph Nichols
San Jose, Calif.

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To the Editor:

After my mother passed, I had to work quickly and meticulously through the pain to sort through her belongings and vacate her apartment by the end of the month. She had saved almost *everything*, which left my task not only daunting but also emotionally fraught.

My childhood friend helped me and stumbled across my mother's college diary while sifting through the rubble. A dilemma presented itself. Do I respect my mother's privacy (which to her had been paramount) by not reading the diary, or do I tiptoe through it to gain the otherworldly gift of getting to know her on a deeper level after she was gone?

I battled uncomfortably for weeks to reach my conclusion. Then I started reading it — bit by bit, line by line, my heart and memory swelling with every curve and slant of her pen.

This year marks a decade since mom's passing. I not only feel closer to her through her words, but my understanding of her has grown beyond them. Her precious time capsule continues to reveal her, as many treasured entries remain unread.

Today is April 10, 1958 …

Suzanne Frey-Obolsky
Athens, N.Y.

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To the Editor:

I'm 88, living on borrowed time, and I ain't planning to dispose of even 15-year-old copies of The New Yorker. Why should I spend any of my few remaining days, months or years culling the detritus of my long life? Surely I have better, more meaningful ways to spend my end of days.

Isn't it enough that my children will receive whatever is left? Gosh, there's some pretty good stuff in that mess. And isn't it possible that inching their way through it will prove to be an interesting and rewarding treasure hunt?

And, more seriously, won't this exercise tell them things about me that could not be learned any other way, adding mortar to their memory, and perhaps even their regard for me?

Dana Wickware
Clinton, Conn.

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To the Editor:

My mother had a frog problem. Frogs, frogs, frogs. Ceramic frogs, pewter frogs, rhinestone costume jewelry frogs. Frog bookends and Murano glass frogs. Frog vases, Kermit coffee mugs, a rainbow fleet of plastic poison dart frogs clinging to houseplants. My magnificent mother was an artist and a businesswoman, and what remained of her one wild and precious life was her collection of amphibian kitsch.

Clearing out her house in a pandemic, I flung a lifetime of dusty or mildewed treasures into a giant orange dumpster. Estate sale people haggled away my mom's well-curated life to masked strangers. I honestly didn't have room for any of it, and besides, I had my own life to endure without her.

In my grief-stricken haze, I did manage to pack up one 18-gallon Rubbermaid bin to the brim. With all the frogs. A golden meditating frog, a sliver Prince Charming frog begging to be kissed, a fat brass frog with a round shiny belly. They are all over my house, and I adore every last ribbiting one of them.

Arlaina Tibensky
South Orange, N.J.

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To the Editor:

To begin, there's the distasteful word itself: clutter. When I had to close down my mother's apartment after she needed to go to a nursing home, it felt as if I were throwing away a life. Was that clutter?

Now that we've decided to move from a house to smaller living quarters, there's so much sorting to do: what to keep, to discard, or to give away. Books are like friends — what's the fate for each one? The notebooks and papers representing our professional lives of learning, teaching and various workplaces now only have value as memory triggers — out they must go. And of course there are many other items with emotional attachment to be dealt with. Is all that just so much clutter?

The word captures none of the wistful sadness of the triage required to downsize one's accumulated past life, even while looking forward to the next phase.

Peter Schmidt
Newton, Mass.

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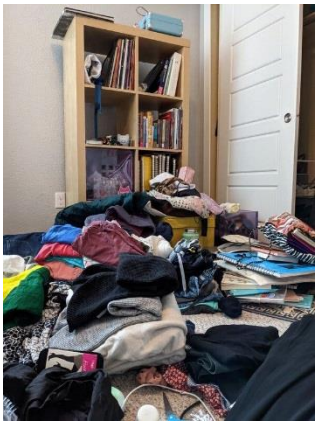
To the Editor:

We couldn't wait to get rid of our stuff as the day approached for us to start our retired life as full-time world traveling nomads. Our adult children, on the other hand, hesitated when we invited them to the house to take whatever they wanted.

We told them to act as if we were dead. Awkward giggles and denials were soon replaced with action. They started opening drawers and closets, asking questions, and taking things. Tears, hugs and giggles flowed.



We all enjoyed sharing the stories of the items together. It was much better for them to understand the connections directly from us rather than guessing later after our deaths. The whole process was rewarding and freeing.

But sadly, no one wanted the heirloom china, glassware or silver. Those treasures and other unwanted items went into the estate sale. At the end of our great disposal of 2,800 square feet of lifelong keepsakes, we had two carry-on suitcases for departure and a small trash bag for the garbage man.

Chris Englert
Livingston, Texas

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To the Editor:

Clothes lay strewn about the room — khaki shorts dangling inside out; a white T-shirt tossed over the arm of a chair; sneakers akimbo, pungent, center floor. He'd been wearing those clothes the day before when we'd said goodbye. He'd agreed to meet us in Maine two days hence. But now, just a glass of water half empty on the table, his fingerprints still visible, alongside a note and the pen he'd used to write it.

The surprises you find in your 20-year-old's room: ticket stubs from an Orioles game 12 years prior; two mysterious chestnuts; the unseen and now crumpled report card from his most recent semester at college; a machete under the bed. More clothes in heaps: black corduroys atop a blue striped polo; bluejeans tangled in heavy gray socks.

Which clothes had he finally chosen to meet the train that took his life? I'll never know. But I decided to wash nothing, folding instead each item ever so meticulously, starting with the sheets he'd just slept in, the scent of youthful slumber grievously fresh.

Anne Sobel
Princeton, N.J.

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To the Editor:

When my mom died, her kitchen contained four white dinner plates, four white coffee mugs and four drinking glasses with her initials and those of my dad entwined. That glassware was a special purchase on her part, as she rarely indulged in anything just for herself. The collectibles in the house that were gifts to her over the years had long been donated or given away.

My house contains several different dish patterns, enough tableware for a complete service for a party of 64 — not that my house would hold that many. I rotate the china patterns and matching glassware to match the seasons of the year. As I do that, I catch my reflection in mom's mirror hanging over the dining room buffet, and notice how much I look like her now. That face in the mirror has the sheepish look of someone who has indulged far too much.

Mary Edwards
Pittsburgh

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To the Editor:

Someday, we'll sort, together, we said. Boxes of love and life — pictures, letters, music. Someday never comes. My husband's A.L.S. progresses. He dies, in my arms. Simon says, freeze. I could move nothing of his.

Then a call. "My friend fell and is paralyzed. This is awkward, but since your husband recently passed …" Purpose. I move and gather — the shower chair, ramps, and on and on. I bring them to this family. We meet and share, and of all things, eat soup by the fire, play cards, smile.

Back home, my house is different without the A.L.S. trappings. I put his guitar back by the piano. I put his hairbrush in my purse. I open boxes — our life pours over me, and I sort. I remember us, who I am, the person left standing, the winds of love at my back. My closets clean, my heart full of love and gratitude. Better now.

Vera Cole
Green Lane, Pa.

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To the Editor:

When my estranged mother lost her independence to Alzheimer's dementia last summer, her care fell to me. She went into assisted living; her modest belongings went to Goodwill. Ten boxes of her personal effects now occupy my living room.

I invite my mother to pare down the contents of her 10 boxes. She gamely pores over her forgotten journals. She giggles at her former self and declares lucidly that the journals have served their purpose. We disassemble the spiral notebooks for the recycling bin.

Her photos document the life of a professional fiddle player, spanning decades and genres. I see the landscapes of her Northern California road trips and music gatherings. My mom poses naked with hippies around a swimming hole, laughing then as she is laughing now at these foggy, perplexing memories.

I am getting to know my mother just as her life is waning. Reviewing her life's work and play, enjoying her unfiltered, childlike commentary, I realize: This version of my mother I can love. We may never make it through the 10 boxes, but that's OK. What matters is the process.

Karla Gostnell
Portland, Ore.

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To the Editor:

By the time my mother passed at age 100, there was only one item left in her apartment that she cherished — a huge framed needlepoint tapestry of Moses in the bulrushes hovering over her bed. As a work of art it was hideous and its sentimental value was vague — something about being a family heirloom that my mother had buried in Poland and then retrieved after the war. But to my mother it was priceless. "Don't sell the Moses," she pleaded. "And don't let Merle take it."

Merle was her aide, a devout Christian who admired the biblical scene of baby Moses and would tease: "If you're not good, I'm going to take Moses." Unlikely, since Moses was very heavy and the size of an upright piano, but my mother took her seriously.

Now Moses resides in the back of my closet, swathed in a mover's blanket and plastic wrapping, safe from Merle and the world, as I promised.

Gail Birnbaum Kraushar
New York

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To the Editor:

As a pastor for over 40 years, I have preached hundreds of sermons. Before the advent of computer word processing, these sermons were handwritten and edited and then typed. Six cardboard file boxes have accompanied me through four moves.

One morning's musing found me wondering what would happen to these sermon files after I died. I pictured my grieving son clearing out my condo, opening the boxes and solemnly saying to his wife, "These are my dead mother's sermons." What would he do with them?
What *could* he do with them?

That very day I deposited all six boxes in my building's dumpster. I have felt lighter and freer since — and my son will never know what he missed.

Louise Westfall
Denver

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To the Editor:

Emptying our house after 38 years was daunting, but clearing the attic turned out to be one of the most moving experiences of my life (pun accidental). I no longer felt that I was looking at my past; I was walking right back in. Teenage boyfriends' letters recalled the angst of adolescent love. Camp photographs evoked Texas Hill Country air. Forty-year-old letters from my sister and brother expressed the same concerns we share today.

Then I found the scrapbook devoted entirely to my year as a high school cheerleader. I'd spent the last 50 years ridiculing my teenage self for so desiring that honor, but turning the pages of that lovingly assembled keepsake, my 68-year-old committed feminist self finally understood.

I'd been discarding literally hundreds of possessions, but never once had I contemplated parting with my gigantic megaphone with a cartoon of our high-school mascot (a mule!) painted above my name and my list of cheers taped inside. It now lives in our basement storage — my overdue recognition of that 17-year-old. C'est moi. I might as well embrace her. My kids can deal with the megaphone.

Sydney Stern
New York

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To the Editor:

After moving my wife's parents to a nursing home we cleaned out their home of 50 years. We traveled 2,000 miles, using vacation time, and spent seven 12-to-14-hour days throwing their stuff out, giving it to charities and in some cases selling items. There were papers to sort through, clothes to get rid of, cherished family mementos and keepsakes to store or dispose of, a house to sell, and so much more. We would be emotionally drained, go to sleep, and have to do it all again the next day.

For the first few days the emotions would get to my wife, and she would start crying and need time to get past them. After being very meticulous in the early days, the last couple of days we were numb and just getting rid of "stuff." In the end a couple's entire life's accumulation was just a burden for someone else.

It was the hardest task either of us had ever done, taking a physical, emotional and to some extent even spiritual toll that took many months to recover from.

In the end, the best thing we can do is to plan ahead and provide guidance for those who decide the fate of our belongings, or better yet, determine what's truly important and get rid of everything else.

Joel Robe
Eugene, Ore.

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To the Editor:

After years of cajoling from her children to move to a living space with fewer steps and more companions, my 91-year-old mother-in-law finally relocated from her house into assisted living. As she recovered from a fall, my fiercely independent mother-in-law apologized to her children for deputizing them with the task of cleaning out the family home.

Decades of accumulated memories, books, houseplants, furniture and kitchenware confronted us, as children, in-laws and grandchildren sifted through her worldly goods. Hours extended into days of cleaning, and tossing once-precious items became too easy.

“Could you find the blue and red wool scarf my grandmother knit for me?” she requested. The scarf was the last gift her grandmother had given her before she escaped from Nazi Europe at the age of 9. Months later, her grandparents perished in Auschwitz.

I remembered holding that old, stiff, handmade scarf in my hands, but couldn’t recall where I had triaged it. After searching unsuccessfully through trash bags, my husband and his brother reluctantly moved on. Then a small victory revealed itself at the bottom of her bureau — a child’s hand-knit scarf in the blue and red of the American flag.

Sharon G. Forman
Scarsdale, N.Y.

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To the Editor:

The last shiva guests had barely left when we began filling garbage bags. My father, always a tyrant, had become a pack rat. Having broken off contact with my parents decades earlier, I never saw the house where they spent the last 20 years until the morning of his funeral.

While our mother sat in the kitchen, wondering what widowhood might mean, my siblings and I hauled out broken luggage, attachments for long-gone vacuum cleaners, countless pieces of twine. We filled six dumpsters in three days, yet barely put a dent in what he’d accumulated. It was cathartic to toss so much so fast.

Whenever one of us found something we might want to keep — a backgammon set, unused postcards aged to a perfect kitsch — another sibling immediately lodged a competing claim for it. How quickly each of us became as selfish as he was. How hard his legacy is to resist.

In the end, all I took were photographs of myself as a toddler and of long-dead relatives I’d never met, and two manila envelopes of my childhood artwork, which I’d discovered at the back of a basement closet. There was nothing else worth fighting over, nothing worth holding onto.

Lois Leveen
Portland, Ore.

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