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How to Lovingly Empty a Home

By Dr. Kathleen Begley, Book Author and Professional Speaker

Note to Readers: *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success.*

For the past three months, my husband, Joe, and I have been clearing out my mother-in-law's house in a neighboring suburb of Philadelphia. She died in my arms in January, less than two hours after being released from a nearby hospital. Her name was Jeanette Strub. An extremely organized woman, Mom marked many of her possessions with the initials of people she wanted them to go to after her death.

Mom left Joe everything he ever gave her – including several pieces of original art. And me? I was bequested dozens of items, including the war-time bride and groom figurines from the cake at her 1943 wedding and the gavel she used as president of the Philadelphia chapter of a nationwide dog club. Mom loved people of the canine persuasion as much as I do. But the best bequest to me: a music box that plays “I Just Called to Say I Love You.” I had never seen it before Joe dug it out of a drawer. You can imagine how much how much I cried when I wound it up for the first time and heard the song a few weeks after Mom died. It was like a message from the grave.

Sorting through marked items was the easy part. Joe and I now are getting down to the personal stuff: yellowing greeting cards, bulging photo albums, stuffed manila folders, assorted travel souvenirs, and neatly folded bed linens – to name a few. I know that numerous companies exist to help empty homes of the elderly and the deceased. But I have strong and personal reasons for spending countless hours on this task.

Mom took 86 years amassing her possessions; they are the ultimate reflection of her life. I want to show her things the respect they deserve. They are all Joe and I have left. If you're one of the many baby boomers now experiencing the loss of one or both parents, here are a few things I've learned so far from this ongoing experience:

Cherish the task. Some friends and acquaintances have implied that cleaning out Mom's house is a thankless job inflicted on me. I see it differently. Instead of viewing the task as a dreaded chore, I honestly view it as an honor. Sure, the job involves some heavy lifting, both physical and mental. But doesn't everything worthwhile?

Get supplies. During our first visit to empty the house, Joe and I failed to bring a single box. I think we were still in shock over Mom's death. So we sorted things in piles on the floor of the living room, creating a ginormous mess that would have horrified Guess Who. After that debacle, I hustled off to a storage store, where I bought almost \$100 worth of supplies.

Avoid rushing. I'm really grateful that Joe and I have the luxury of time. Although Mom's rancher is for sale, looky loos so far are not falling over each other with offers. What would you expect in this horrible real estate market? Truthfully, I enjoy having time to reflect on Mom's life as we carry out this process of discovering her keepsakes and treasures.

Consider value. Often, the worth is not monetary. I dare say Mom's license plate is of no interest to anyone but Joe and me. It says Jolan, her first name in Hungarian. All her life, Mom prided



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herself on her Eastern European heritage. Someday, I hope to visit Budapest in her honor. Joe intends to frame the license plate.

Create categories. In divvying up Mom's possessions, I've created four main categories: stuff for others, for charity, for us, and for the trash. At first, I resisted putting anything in the fourth category, even half used tubes of toothpaste and well-worn polyester underwear. I'm getting better at discarding inexpensive grooming items and yellowing underwear, but I still become sentimental when I come across a card sent by my father-in-law to his bride many decades ago. I know, I know, I know – that's why objective transition movers exist.

Accept help. Although I like to stop and smell the Emeraude cologne as I do this once-in-a-lifetime task, I did take several friends up on offers to lend a hand. We spent one morning wrapping a large assortment of breakable items in newspapers and towels. My gal pals wanted to help me long into the afternoon and evening, but I couldn't get my foggy mind around which of hundreds of books, videotapes, and DVD's to keep and which to pack.

Look in nooks and crannies. In the recesses of a drawer in her bedroom, I came across a pair of bronzed baby shoes. I assumed they had belonged to Joe or to his brother. At first, I was perplexed because they closed not with shoelaces but with a buttoned flap. Upon closer examination, I realized that the shoes went back to 1924, a generation further than I initially had thought. They were Mom's. As I stood by her bed staring at the tiny footwear in which she learned to walk as a toddler, I caught a peripheral glimpse of the walker in which she moved as an old woman. In an extraordinarily profound moment, I witnessed both the beginning and the end of a life well lived. For several minutes, I stopped sorting and packing – to have a good cry.

Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.