

What to do with my stuff?

By Marian L. Knapp/Columnist

Wicked Local Newton

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I have too much stuff. Over the past year or so I have been trying to clear away some of it to freshen up my living space and also to increase the likelihood that my kids won't have to deal with it when something happens to me. I have thrown away old files from old projects, clothes that I haven't worn in 10 years, bits of paper with messages that have lost their meaning, and a few disintegrating books. There were several stages of getting rid of things. First, was the decision to tackle the job, second, was going through items to determine what to keep and what to toss, and, third actually transporting them to my trash container or to a place where they could be recycled. So far, most went into the trash.

Even with all of this work I still have files to go through, more clothes to sort, and books to discard. Of all of the stages of clearing out, the longest is clearly the decision to do it. In my case, it has taken years. I spent a lot of time thinking about it and then putting it off for many reasons – not enough time, routine and special events, social obligations, daunting task – whatever. The second longest time was going through those items to find those that have special meaning.

We all have these things: old photographs, letters, defunct legal papers, souvenirs. Although a nuisance, it was worth spending time because I found things I never knew existed like the legal papers when my father changed his name because he couldn't get a job with the one he was born with, or a letter written by my mother that she never sent to her children, which made it clear that any money she had was for her own use until she was dead. This sorting and thinking took time, and few could do it but me. I am one who understands history and context.

I've been thinking that the stuff surrounding me is my own cache of artifacts representing the bits and pieces of my unique personal culture – almost like an archaeological museum collection. The big difference between my relics and those of Pompeii, for example, is that this ash-buried city has major historical importance whereas most of my things have little if any value except, perhaps, to explain family heritage to my children and grandchildren. However, most likely they are not going to try to piece together the complexity of my life but only keep things that involve important memories for them.

This means, that if I don't complete the major sorting now, my family will have to decide what to do with my stuff. This would take a lot of time and they won't know how to make decisions about what to throw away. I need to find the few things of importance and document them so that our history can be passed on to them and, maybe, through a generation or two. This would include the August 1925 articles in Boston and Woburn newspapers about my grandmother who was acquitted of bootlegging (even though she really was selling illegal alcohol) and the newspaper photo of my great grandparents celebrating their 75th wedding anniversary in 1932.

In the Nov. 7, 2011 issue of the New Yorker, James Wood's article "Shelf Life" brought the issue of "stuff" home to me. He writes about trying to determine what to do with his father-in-law's massive book collection and says, "... my task was easy compared with my mourning wife's, the experience made me resolve not to leave behind such burdens for my children."

My stuff is not just books. It is many different odds and ends. I feel uneasy that my kids might have to deal with this mass of ephemera and not know what to do. It is obvious I have to make it easy for them. To do this, I must decide what is important to pass on, tell my family what I want them to know, identify what may have meaning for them, make a plan of action with a firm completion date, and do it.

In this way I would be leaving a compilation of my life's fragments that would be small enough to fit in a large plastic storage container. I should write explanations to describe the importance of each item and describe connections to other pieces – like what we see on museum cases. This would provide a way for someone to walk through my life in less than an hour or two, which is more than enough time to spend at my museum of one.

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