

# Stuff I've learned about stuff

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Eventually I realized that my mother clung to her stuff not just because it gave her security, but also because it gave her life meaning. **BY ELIZABETH RAINS**

Three large boxes of Tupperware lids missing their bottoms; 22 boxes of books; 594 cups and mugs, several emblazoned with gold and yellow flowers and one dedicated to "the world's goofiest golfer," nine travel alarm clocks; 142 pillow cases in assorted patterns and colours; seven exercise contraptions with hand grips and foot stirrups connected by a stretchy steel spring: all of this was just a small portion of my mother's collection of stuff.

I helped her sell, donate, ship and trash her stuff when she moved to Florida this summer. I handled so much stuff, that I feel like stripping my own house bare, sleeping on moss and eating off slabs of bark.

My mother would never do that. Stuff means a lot to her. Born in 1917, she is a tiny woman whose quick steps and busy hands mask a hip replacement and decades of arthritis. She has been busy since she was 12. She cared for her younger brother while her parents struggled to keep factory jobs. It was the Depression, so the jobs were on-again, off-again. Her family ate meals of potatoes and not much else. My mother blames the plum-sized bunion that pains her today on her parents' inability to buy their children proper shoes.

When I helped pack her stuff, she had 63 pairs, most unworn.

She also had tricks: two vanishing-ink pens, nine magic ring tricks and 14 assorted card tricks with folded instruction sheets. And she had accumulated 82 books on training dogs, raising various breeds of dogs and housebreaking puppies. But she never owned a dog. I found a book on Shetland sheep dogs in her library. "My friend has two shelties," I said.

"Take it and give it to her," said my mother, adding the book to the sofa-sized pile of stuff she had deposited in a bedroom for me to take home. "A lot of people have dogs. It's nice to give them a book."

My mother has given stuff to friends and family, but seldom to herself. All those unworn shoes? All of the 21 blouses I found in a closet with price tags still attached?

She will probably never wear the stuff, and she probably never had much of an in-

attention to do so.

She toiled most of her life taking care of five children and my dad, a demanding, irritable man. In a letter she wrote to me before he died last year, a letter I tossed away because I could not bear to ever again read a certain line, my mother said she had looked back upon her life. The line contained an uncharacteristic lament: "I regret that I didn't have more fun."

But she tries hard to make sure everyone else has it. When I was a child, she invented craft projects for me and my sisters. Later she collected the magic tricks for our children. For the adults, she has gathered jokes — in three shelves of joke books and in her memory. "Did you hear about the man who fell in the upholstery machine?" she quipped, as we packed a donation box of my father's clothes. "When they pulled him out, he was completely recovered."

She easily parted with my dad's things, but her own stuff was more dear. My mother wanted to discuss every item I was sorting, down to a half-pack of toothpicks, to decide whether she or someone she knew might have use for it. Eventually I realized that she clung to her stuff not just because it gave her security, but also because it gave her life meaning. "My husband was always working on his business," she said. "When I wanted to talk with him, he would say, 'Not now, dear.' So I would go shopping."

She shopped for stuff, thinking of what other people might need. Whenever she visited my home, she brought boxes of stuff. A few years ago, she saw crystal candle holders on sale. She bought 16 pairs. "A gift to give people when you visit them," she explained during the packing marathon, as she placed the delicate crystal in the bedroom for me.

When she took her afternoon naps this summer, I would creep into that room, remove much of the stuff and put it in the garage for the three-day moving sale we were planning. There was little space left for browsers among the tables, boxes and shelves of stuff in the double garage, but at least 100 people squeezed through. My mother's artificial-flower collection went



LARRY HUMBER

fast. We managed to sell all of her furniture and enough dishes, small appliances, games and knick-knacks to fill a large pick-up truck.

We sorted what was left along with boxes of non garage-sale items. There were trash piles, donation piles and ship-to-Florida piles, as well as the bedroom take-to-Vancouver assortment. Ultimately, 41 boxes went to Florida. Eighty-four boxes and 29 black plastic bags of stuff were donated. Canned goods went to the food bank. I didn't count the number of trash bags we discarded.

It took almost a month in total to pack, but suddenly, unbelievably, her house was bare.

My mother now lives in the southern

part of the continent, and it will take a plane trip rather than a car trip to visit her. As I sat last week sorting through the stuff she gave me, stuff that so fully filled the trunk and back of my car that you couldn't squeeze another dishcloth in, I found one of those fun items: a game of Jack Straws, a version of pick-up-sticks with tiny shovels, ladders and pitch forks.

I will play the game with my four-year-old grandson and tell him about his great-grandmother. I will tell him about the interesting time I had helping her pack and about the very most wonderful thing of all the stuff she gave me. She gave me love.

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