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Love Me, Love My Stuff

by Barbara Belzer Adams

Hank decided it was time for me to do my Swedish death cleaning—a method for getting rid of the cherished objects around your house your heirs probably won't want—so he jump-started the process by breaking three thirty-year-old holly green glass vases I'd found on vacation and a raku bowl I'd spotted at an art festival two decades ago.

I should probably mention that Hank is a cat.

A feisty grey tabby just past the kitten stage, Hank paved his initial path of destruction in the early morning hours, three consecutive crashes startling me awake. In fairness, he probably had some help: I had put the vases in a kitchen cabinet for safekeeping and my guess is that another family cat opened the door (it's a unique ability that you have to see to believe: he stands on his hind feet, his claws engaged over the top of the door, then pulls it open by walking backward), giving Hank unfettered access. In less time than it took me to run out of the bedroom, a pile of shattered glass lay on the floor and next to it was a remorseless Hank. He took care of the raku bowl later that day, knocking it off a low shelf WHILE I WATCHED.

Four items down (literally), how many hundreds to go?

Nothing Lasts Forever, Not Even Us

They say the average American household has more than 300,000 items in it, but the figure has never been substantiated and I'm not sure how you'd even measure it. Should a box of lightbulbs count as one thing or four? But enough quibbling. The fact is, I have a lot of stuff. I like my things and people like adding to my collections. That's how the single, dark purple glass telephone pole insulator I picked up—imagine something so pretty having such utility, no pun intended—eventually became more than a dozen, how

the creamer and sugar bowl set that was once my parents' is now one of too many to mention.

To keep things somewhat under control, I do make a regular practice of clearing out cupboards and closets, generally without feline assistance. Still, I have a long way to go to achieve bare-bones Swedish death cleaning nirvana.

For the uninitiated, the idea behind Swedish death cleaning, also known as döstädning, is simple and pragmatic: declutter now so your loved ones won't have to do it after you're gone.

That last part, of course, makes the concept as painful as it is practical. No one really likes to imagine the inevitability of not being here.

Sure, we write our wills, make notes about what goes to whom. My aunt was listing the items she intended to leave her kids when my uncle asked what I would get. "My best regards," she said. Hey–at least I wouldn't have to worry about hanging onto something out of guilt, trying to squeeze a few dollars out of it online, donating or tossing it, or trying to pass it onto one of my adult kids, who have accumulated their own things and generally don't want mine.

And there's the rub. Most of the time, the people who love us don't necessarily love our stuff.

I'm not talking about the woman on the TV reality show who was finding it difficult, perhaps understandably so, to offload her collection of wooden penises.

Instead, I mean the more mundane things that have given us joy: the dishes we wished for when we got engaged, our highly curated collection of kitschy cookie jars, the old metal typewriter ribbon cases we hunted for … even three holly green glass vases and a raku bowl.

Belongings=Belonging

Emotion plays a big part in what we get, what we keep, and why we hope the next generation will care about them too.

Our belongings fill a deep-seated need, psychologists say, often to the point that we see them as an extension of ourselves, wooden penises aside. For that, we have evolution to thank.

British psychology professor Nick Neave, who directs the Hoarding Research Group at Northumbria University, told *Scientific American* the comfort we derive from our possessions goes back to early humans' desire to keep enough food, weapons, and tools on hand to survive.

Granted, there are few circumstances where glass paperweights or old postage stamps might be the difference between life and death. However, the evolutionary holdover is that our possessions make us feel less vulnerable. Inanimate objects comfort and even define us, helping us find like-minded community, which can give even more meaning to our lives.

Enmeshed as we are with our "stuff," it can sting when our kids reject it. Don't want my souvenir spoon collection? When did you stop loving me?

Of course, in most cases, love (or lack thereof) has nothing to do with it. Maybe our kids are avowed minimalists. Maybe it's an issue of storage or lifestyle: Who wants twelve place settings of gold-rimmed, hand-wash-only bone china when dinner is at the coffee table in front of the TV? Or maybe it just comes down to different tastes. To be honest, even I no longer want the Queen Anne-style china cabinet I was so proud of forty years ago.

Consider the Samovar

I do think there's another factor involved in our adult children rebuffing what we consider heirlooms (and I don't mean polishing them to a sheen): not just a lack of connection to the things, but a lack of connection to the people behind them.

Hear me out.

One of my mother's most prized possessions was a brass samovar her extended family brought from Rēzekne, Latvia, when they emigrated en masse to the U.S. in the early 1900s.

Why the family never imagined there would be tea-making apparatus in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, their ultimate destination, is beyond me. But I'm grateful the samovar, with its dents and scorched wooden handles, made that long boat journey across the Atlantic. I can't help but think those relatives, who were elderly by the time I came along, were a little dinged up by the trip, too.

After my mom died prematurely in 1966, my dad held onto the samovar with fierce pride, although I do have a photo of it being pressed into service as a vase for plastic flowers (remember, it was the 60s). It's been in my dining room for decades.

While the samovar reminds me of the people who used and loved it, my own kids are three generations removed from them. They never knew my parents, much less my great-uncle Sam, who was briefly jailed for refusing to fight in the Russo-Japanese War, wound up trading his boots for his life fleeing to England, and lived to be ninety-six but lied about his age, saying he was only ninety-five. I adored "the old man," as we called him, and can picture his younger self drinking tea at a lace tablecloth-covered table, the samovar steaming nearby. To my kids, he's more or less an abstract concept, a brave man they might as well have read about in a history book.

It probably goes without saying that neither my son nor daughter wants the samovar after I'm gone (and being metal, even Hank the cat can't really destroy it). I can't bear the thought of it winding up in a second-hand store, though.

So, I think I'll take a page from my mother-in-law's playbook, who told me "You spend the first fifty years of your life acquiring things then the rest of it trying to get rid of them." About twenty years ago, she started masquerading her heirlooms as wedding and birthday gifts. (One year, she gave me a silver tray her parents received on their 25th anniversary, engraved with their friends' names, including two men called Bub.) The old man's namesake great-grandson is getting married soon and the samovar might be the perfect present.

But I'll ask first.

Because if I want him to keep loving me, I won't try to make him love my stuff.

Barbara Belzer Adams has a degree in journalism. She worked in PR, corporate marketing management and as ad agency copywriter before launching her freelance

writing career twenty-five years ago. She inherited her sense of humor from her father, but, as promised, got nothing from her Aunt Mildred.