

Protecting memories — and looking to the future

By Maria Rodgers O'Rourke

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Last year, my siblings and I scaled a two-story mountain — the accumulated possessions of 40-plus years — and emerged dusty but wiser.

The five of us, with help from spouses and grandkids, moved my mother from a two-story, four-bedroom house with a (literally) full basement to a one-story, two-bedroom condominium.

After our dad died, mom stayed in the family home for 10 more years, tenaciously guarding the homestead as Irish matriarchs do. Eventually, the time came to consolidate and streamline her living situation, but how to negotiate what to keep and what not to?

My siblings and I alternated between understanding and frustration with mom's deep attachment to her things. The real issue, of course, was not the stuff but the memories and hopes that it held for her — and for us.

Have you ever returned to a place where you'd been a child and marveled at how everything had shrunk? When I visited to my old grade school, the desks looked tiny, the ceilings seemed low and hallways that once loomed as cavernous felt close and confined.

It was the same at my parents' home. Once I grew up and came to visit or drop off grandkids or groceries, it felt smaller. The 15 stairs I counted and climbed every time I raced to my room; the bedroom I shared with my sister, our respective turf marked by masking tape; the furniture, the door frames, even the light — all had become smaller than they were in my memories of childhood.

One day during the process of moving our mom, I found myself alone at the house. It was my opportunity to say goodbye. I walked through every room and was struck with random memories: creeping into my parents' dark bedroom after a bad dream; Simon and Garfunkel blaring from my brothers' record player; sisters sunbathing in the back yard; climbing into my dad's lap as he sat in his brown chair in the living room reading the paper; the countless Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners at a dining room table that always accommodated one more guest.

Mom wasn't the only one having trouble letting go.

Professional organizer Peter Walsh of TV's "Clean Sweep" show says there are two kinds of clutter: that which binds us to the past through emotional attachments and that which clogs our future path. Accumulated to excess, both kinds rob us of now.

As I gazed at the chandelier in the upstairs hallway, which had seemed so big and remote as a child but which I could touch easily now, the gift of this painful transition process came clear: There is a way to honor the past and release it, freeing us to the future's possibilities; a way to live in the present and clear away what distracts from it.

The process of moving our mother to her new home took our family up a mountain of stuff and memory. The uncluttered view from the peak is beautiful. Mom is enjoying a renaissance, embracing her new life with a vigor that testifies to her strength every bit as much as guarding her homestead had. She has given her children something important, something that can be neither stored, discarded nor left behind in an old house.

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