

Healing with Haven

March 2008

What Will I Do With All This Stuff?

"Reprinted with permission from Grief Digest, Centering Corporation, Omaha, Nebraska, 866-218-0101."

Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S., Rockville Centre, NY

When a loved one dies and we are surrounded with all their possessions, every little thing that is left behind talks to us with a memory. Looking at all the things, touching them, remembering so many occasions, can bring a flood of tears. These are not just five-tissue days, they are tissue-box days when we have to wade through all "the stuff" and be knee deep in all the memories. This is hard work especially when we are in "survival mode" barely able to do anything more than survive.

After my two eldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy, died in the same automobile accident, I was faced with that age-old question, "What do I do with all this stuff?" Of course, I had advice from many folks who had never experienced the death of someone close to them. I followed my heart as many of us do, for there are no set rules. We do what helps our heart and hurts the least. And since we are all different, as are our circumstances, we find a variety of ways to handle the situation.

The bedrooms seem to be first place many of us face in looking over "the stuff." Some of us just close the door on "that room," leaving it exactly as it is—not wanting to move a thing. Some of us leave the door open and occasionally peek in or sneak in to just lie on the bed and soak up all the memories and feel their presence. Others transform the room into a sanctuary—a place to relax, pursue a hobby, write letters, meditate, iron, wrap packages, read, journal, exercise, sew, listen to music, use the computer, fill with pictures or simply light a candle. We can be like Frank Sinatra and do it "our way."

Some redo the room entirely and move another family member into it, answering someone's prayer for a room of

their own or making room for Grandma. Some make it into a guest room, a TV room, a sewing room, or even set up their exercise equipment in there. Those sharing a room with the loved one who died are divided, some leave the room just as it is, others choose to remove the extra twin bed, bunk bed, or larger size bed. Some add a nice easy chair in the extra space or enlarge their desk area to include a computer, while others welcome a new stereo or TV unit. Some want to make the space feel "new" and others want to soak up the memories of the old space. Do you see how different we are? We do what makes our hearts feel good.

When we get more strength to deal with what's left behind, we find we have to do this job in small segments of time. Even though well meaning relatives and friends may offer to do the job for us, we need to make the decisions about what to keep and what to give away. And believe it or not, making these decisions helps us to become stronger and to take back control of our lives. Don't let anyone rush you; take your time. Remember the cardinal rule: "When in doubt, don't throw out." Be prepared to shed lots of tears and to feel exhausted. This is hard work, not back-breaking work but heart-breaking work, and you don't have to do it until you are ready.

And the time varies for each of us! Don't measure yourself by what other people do. You will find the time that is just right for you.

Some people jump right in and tidy up everything and feel that helps them "move on" in their grief. Others have no desire to look at anything that will stir up a memory because it is too painful for them right then. And that is all right. The day will come when they are ready to deal with "the stuff."

Going through all their favorite possessions—clothes they loved, books they treasured, jewelry that marked special occasions, sports paraphernalia they relished, letters they wrote—all take their toll on our emotions and physical



Continued on next page...

....Continued from previous page..

strength. We feel drained and washed out, almost like we were run over by a truck as all the memories hit us head on. We are in the process of taking all those sacred memories and tucking them into our hearts forever—as they become a very special part of us, but this does not happen overnight.

Many of us want to share some of “the stuff” with close friends and relatives so they will have something special to help them remember our loved ones. We don’t want our loved one’s memory to be erased, and this is a great way to make sure they are remembered in a loving way. Our relatives and friends can be very touched when we “gift” them with a special treasured item. It makes our hearts feel lighter to know that these items will be used and loved rather than just sitting collecting dust.

When we start sorting through all the possessions, we need to make a few piles: one for “keepers” might be quite large. We don’t want to part with that favorite sweater, jacket, fishing hat, shabby bathrobe, pretty party dress, prized diploma, book, trophy, cards, letters, CD collection, awards or piles of photographs. As time goes on, we are able to part with a few more things that don’t seem as important any more. (Nineteen years later I was able to throw out Denis’ lifeguard sweatpants!)

As some of the items in the “memory box” are eliminated, we eventually get the box down to a much smaller size, which we will probably take to the grave with us. There are special linking objects that we will never part with, and that’s okay. They make us smile and they give us that warm fuzzy feeling of remembering happy times.

Sifting through the letters and cars and handmade items of our loved ones is a heartrending task. The tears just flow as we read each line and remember each occasion. I still have the Mother’s Day cards spanning the years, the loving birthday cards, the letters from college, the handmade Christmas ornaments and projects from 4H, but the tears they bring are happy tears now. So be good to yourself and take your time soaking up all those memories.

One widow took five years to take her husband’s golf clubs out of the trunk of her car. It was a comfort to her to tote those clubs around, knowing how much her spouse had loved them. It made her smile every time she looked in the trunk. We all find something that makes our loved one feel closer to us as we wear it, use it or display it. Just wearing the personal items we choose to keep makes our hearts lighter and brings our loved ones closer to us. I surround myself with their Hummel figurines that marked milestone events in their lives. Although you might be urged to get rid of a lot of things, and

are even pestered by some folks who want certain items, think carefully before you make any final decisions. As you get a little stronger and more able to deal with all “the stuff,” it can warm your heart to know that someone special is receiving a memento that they will always cherish.

I can still remember finding the young teenager, the son of a co-worker, who dreamed of having a ten-speed bike and surprising him with Denis’ bike which was his pride and joy. Just the look on the boy’s face made my day! Delivering my son’s precious record collection to an aspiring musician—one of my former students—brought joy to my heart. I don’t think I was ever going to listen to The Grateful Dead, or others of the same genre, but finding someone who was a fan and appreciated those records made me feel good for passing on that joy that was part of my son’s life. I could still envision my

son singing, “The Devil Goes Down to Georgia” by Charlie Daniels every morning as he was getting dressed for school. Now someone else would be singing with Charlie!

I had a lump in my throat watching my young nephews walk away with the soccer and lacrosse equipment that Denis prized so highly, but it was good to know there would be other enthusiastic athletes like Denis! I returned the gold necklace he had loved to his girlfriend so she could remember the joy it brought Denis, but I kept his gold Blessed Mother medal and chain that I had given him for his First Holy Communion. Just take your time finding the right item for the right person!

I asked Peggy’s college roommates to choose something from her wardrobe to remember her by and to keep all the pots and pans and household items that she

had contributed to the house they rented on campus. And to her sister, Annie, I presented Grandma’s diamond ring which had been designated for Peggy when Grandma had died years before. Each item meant something special to the person who received it.

There is a lot of work involved in sorting through “the stuff” and it takes time and energy and thoughtful decisions. As I disposed of some of my children’s personal possessions, I felt like I was “erasing” all traces of them, and that thought motivated me to make sure that my husband and I, our remaining daughter and dear relatives and friends each had something meaningful to keep alive the memories of Denis and Peggy. After all, “If their song is to continue, then we must do the singing.” And what better way to be reminded of them than sharing something that they loved--sharing their “stuff.” 🎵



On Crying - Part 2

by Russell Friedman & John W. James of The Grief Recovery Institute



We are aware of the research that indicates that tears of sadness differ in chemical makeup from tears of joy. We are also aware that tears perform the valuable function of washing the eyes. From time to time, we have even alluded to the published studies that indicate that women cry, on average, five times more than men. In attempting to discover if there is any physiological basis for that five to one ratio, we ran into a stone wall. Failing to find any valid studies on crying that would support a physical distinction by gender, we did a little of our own research. While anecdotal, we believe that it represents the truth. We called some nurse friends whose life experience is working with infants. Without exception, they indicated to us, that the circumstances and frequency with which very young infants cry, is NOT dictated by gender. Little baby boys and little baby girls cry co-equally. There are clear personality differences between individual babies. Some cry more than others, not by gender, rather by individual uniqueness. We did not limit our search to those who worked only with newborns. We got the same responses from experts who work with children up to the age of five. From age five onwards, distinction by gender, and the resultant attitudes and beliefs begin to magnify. The logical extension of our informal study led to the inescapable conclusion that socialization, not gender, was the key to later differences of attitude and expression regarding crying.

Although there may be no innate physiological difference between males and females when it comes to crying, we must still ask, what purpose or value, if any, does crying have in recovery from loss. Let us say that crying can represent a physical demonstration of emotional energy attached to a reminder of someone or something that has some significance for you. In fact, during our grief recovery seminars, when someone starts crying, we gently urge them to “talk while you cry.” The emotions are contained in the words the griever speaks, not in the tears that they cry. What is fascinating to observe, is as the thoughts and feelings are spoken, the tears usually disappear, and the depth of feeling communicated seems much more powerful than mere tears.

In Crying -Part I, we talked with an adult child whose Mom had died. The caller was worried about their Dad’s reaction to Mom’s death, and the fact that Dad had not cried “yet.”

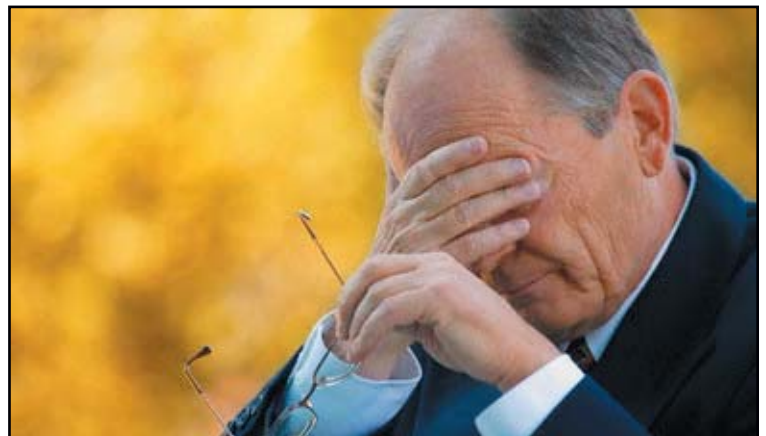
We asked the caller if they thought that their Dad’s heart was broken. They said yes. We believe that their response, based on their observation of Dad’s body language, tone, and other factors, showed them that he had been massively affected by the death of his wife. It would be unusual, uncommon, and probably uncomfortable for him to cry. And, frankly, it might not have any real benefit for him.

On the other hand, do not be fooled by those who cry frequently. In the strangest of all paradoxes, people can actually use crying as a way to stop feeling rather than to experience great depths of emotion. The tears become a distraction from the real pain caused by the loss.

The key to recovery from the incredible pain caused by death, divorce, and all other losses, is contained in a simple statement: Each of us is unique and each of our relationships is unique. Therefore, we must discover and complete what is emotionally unfinished for us in all of our relationships. Our personal belief systems about the display of emotions are also unique and individual. We may not even have a conscious awareness of what our own beliefs are. An alert to everyone, young or old: “Don’t let anyone else dictate what is emotionally correct for you - not even your children - or your parents. Only you get to determine what is correct for you.”

If you need some help in discovering or determining what might help you deal with a broken heart caused by a death or a divorce, get thee to a library or a bookstore, and get a copy of The Grief Recovery Handbook. It contains the kind of information that will lead you to your truth, which in turn will help you complete the pain in your heart.

Please do not interpret this article to mean that we are in any way against crying. What we do provokes tears all the time. At the restaurant across the street where we take our friends to lunch, they don’t understand why everyone who dines with us seems to cry. And if you visited our office, you would have to giggle when you see the gigantic stack of cases of Kleenex piled in a corner of the room. We are neither for nor against crying. We are for recovery from emotional pain. We are for fond memories not turning painful. We are for you having a life of meaning and value even though a loss or losses may have made your life massively different than you had hoped or dreamed. 🏠



Grief & Loss Seminar Series

The next seminar will be held on April 24th from 3pm-4:30pm @ 2895 Temple Ave, Signal Hill. Light refreshments will be served. For more information please contact Tina Stephenitch at 562-426-7500 ext 406.

Individual/Group Support

As many of you may already know, Haven Hospice offers individual support and group support to all people in the community who are going through the difficult journey of bereavement. For more information on our groups or to make an appointment for individual support please contact Tina Stephenitch, Bereavement Coordinator at (562) 426-7500 ext 406

Make a Difference in Someone's life

Do you have a few hours a week to listen, give support, or assist in the office? Haven Hospice is seeking people who would like to give some of their time visiting patients, helping in the office or doing community outreach. If you are interested in this rewarding opportunity, or know anyone who maybe interested in volunteering their time, please contact Tina Stephenitch, Volunteer Coordinator (562) 426-7500 ext 406 for more information.

Help us keep our mailing list current!

Are you moving and still wish to receive Healing with Haven? Or perhaps you no longer wish to receive our monthly newsletter? Please, call Tina Stephenitch at (562) 426-7500 ext 406.



Haven Hospice™

2895 Temple Ave
Signal Hill, CA 90755

Call toll-free at (877) 366-4466

