

Luxury or Necessity

by Lynne Golodner

Every Christmas Day, I clean out the basement—pulling out plastic totes and rifling through them to see what we can toss. Most of the totes contain items that trigger memories I rarely access. Some of those bins hold old photo albums from my tumultuous first marriage, even though I divorced my children’s father and have been remarried for more than a dozen years. When I consider what to keep and what to toss, I keep these images of the past not just for my children, who might one day want to envision their parents together, but because I want to remember that there were good moments among the bad.

I dust off books and games, mop behind the couch, categorize and organize the stuff we’ve accumulated and stashed away. I look forward to this cleanse with great enthusiasm, but my husband and four nearly grown children do not. They surrender to my demands wishing I would forget this ritual. But when I clear things out, I can breathe again, like a weight has lifted off my hunched shoulders. I have space to think.

That space often feels precious, for every room of my 2,500-square-foot house, not just the basement, is filled with stuff. Photographs and paintings cover walls and counters, and all manner of bric-a-brac clutter surfaces. Just the other day, I removed several of my kids’ canvas creations from the basement wall and tossed them in the garbage. They were mostly decade-old abstract swipes of color that young children call art. With no idea who did which painting, and no claim from my kids, it was time for them to go.

Had I forgotten the lessons of the past? When I was a child and wanted something in a store, my mother would ask, “Is it a luxury or a necessity?” I took this question seriously, for my mother was always serious. If I truly needed something, she would buy it. But if

there was an inkling of want behind the request, well, then perhaps we could simply walk on and reserve the desire for another day, or never.

We went through my closet twice a year, spring and fall, the seasons when new clothes replaced those I outgrew. “If you haven’t worn it in a year, it goes,” Mom insisted. When I moved away, she came to wherever I was living and offered the same service. Mom discouraged me from shopping at mark-down knock-off stores to get a good deal because they usually carried clothing no one wanted and which matched nothing. “If you don’t know what you’ll wear it with, you’ll never wear it,” she said. “Buy outfits, not pieces.” So many times, I ignored her advice and bought a shirt that I loved but could not figure out what to pair it with, so it remained on a hanger, often with tags, until I dumped it in a bag of clothes to donate. I might not have labeled such clothing as “luxury” items but the act of purchasing them certainly was. Had my mother not insisted on seasonal donations of such items, they merely would have accumulated.

When my father died, my mother opened drawers and cupboards to find them overflowing with forgotten papers of Dad’s long-shuttered company, rubber bands and paper clips grown so brittle they snapped in half, remote controls and cords from machines discarded ages before. Dad died two months before the pandemic, so my grieving mother, alone in the home they built when I was a baby, distracted herself from the rising case counts by clearing out Dad’s accumulated junk. She filled double-thick trash bags with all the stuff she didn’t want—which was all the stuff—and left them in various upstairs rooms for my husband and sons to lug to the curb. Whenever she thought she had finished, she discovered another drawer or shelf crowded with useless junk.

His bulk purchases always seemed practical: two or three bottles of shampoo, multiple bars of soap, family-sized tubes of toothpaste, huge packages of toilet paper. It was important to have “backup,” he said, which seemed like good planning. Dad was born to Depression-era parents who likely impressed upon him their unspoken fears of never having enough. Dad wasn’t a materialistic person, and he cared little for clothing. My

mother guided his fashion decisions, telling him when it made sense to buy a tuxedo and ushering him away from the kelly-green pants.

Both of my parents grew up with modest means. Dad's father, my Grandpa Sid, drove a milk delivery truck along the streets of Detroit. Grandma Sarah didn't work, and they lived a quiet life in a small house. Once, Dad showed me the three places he'd lived as a boy—one was an empty lot, the other two overrun with graffiti and broken windows. It wasn't just a modest life; at times it was a tough one. He recalled how at age six his mother sent him to the corner bar to bring his father home for dinner and how as a teen, he got into street fights when kids made antisemitic comments.

Grandpa Artie, my mother's father, cared more what the neighbors thought than what his family truly needed. But he had little career success as a job-hopping bookkeeper, and there were appearances to keep up, so his debonair, beloved father-in-law, my great-grandfather, Grandpa Louie, made sure Mom and her siblings had everything they wanted.

I imagine Grandpa Artie's childhood home was sparse. His parents were Polish immigrants with seven children on New York's Lower East Side. They likely lived in a tenement, and I've seen those two- or three-room apartment walkups where kids slept on floors and in corners because there weren't enough beds or even space to hold them. Grandpa believed he deserved bigger things and once grown, he lived like it. I learned later that people were always bailing him out—my aunts and uncles, my parents, a wealthy cousin. So perhaps her father's overspending made my mother the practical one, and my father's family frugality made him a collector who couldn't let go.

Because in clothing stores, Mom always intoned, "Luxury or necessity?", I love thrifting, finding new life for cast-offs that cost no more than \$10 or \$20. And I think long and hard before making a purchase.

But clothing always disappoints me. I expect transformation with the feel of a fabric or the look of an outfit, yet the reality falls short. The cloth doesn't hug my curves or caress my shoulders. The pants are too tight at the waist. The shirt sleeves shrink in the wash, and the colors fade. Mom taught me to be happy with what I have, not to think that a new item will somehow make my life better. Perhaps heeding her advice, I don't own a lot of clothing. I am careful, now, with those acquisitions because I realize their limitations.

In contrast, I have way too many books. That's because when I was young, my father took me to bookstores and said, "Anything you want, Linnie! Books are knowledge, and you can never have enough." I can't seem to let go of the strong spines or careful words, even though I rarely reread them. I survey my packed shelves with titles not cracked in decades, pledging to pull them down but never actually doing so. I rationalize that books are a comfort: brilliant revelations surrounding me, words to discover, stories that might change how I see myself. Was that why Dad held onto all those old bills and outdated remotes? To cling to all the versions of himself as the years passed?

But if I don't read the books over and over, what good do they serve? I could gain equal insight and wisdom from library books, borrowed, cherished, then shared with another. Holding on to all these books may be a way of keeping my father alive. But as I think back on those dusty months when my mother dug out all the forgotten items from the hollows of her home, I know I don't want my legacy to be that I couldn't let go of the past.

I live in a nice house with walls painted deep, rich hues—peacock blue in the living room, royal purple in the family room, warm brown in the basement. Every room is filled with furniture and rugs, tables and bookshelves, and a rarely played piano my mother-in-law shipped from Washington, D.C. dominates the living room. The closets are full of old coats.

The kids are leaving now, moving into their own lives. The rooms will soon whisper with echoes. Most of the furniture has been replaced with newer choices. Just this year, I dismantled the stained and streaked dining room table and fraying chairs that I'd bought with my first husband and installed a gleaming new set of upholstered chairs and dark wood table. It has taken years to transform the phases of my life rather than cobble together moments of the past and the joy of my present. And while I love this place where we melded into a family after heartbreak and divorce and remarriage and blending, I am ready to say goodbye to what I no longer need and choose a small and cozy spot, with tall trees and land to walk on, near to a river or a forest where I can contemplate what really matters.

Luxury is defined as “great comfort and extravagant living,” while necessity is about being required, indispensable. True comfort is a deep and abiding love, even in the throes of anger or frustration. Holding on to the past reassures me that I've made a mark, created a legacy, built memories that will linger long after me.

My real treasures are a dog-eared cookbook I inherited from my grandmother and the tiny black and white photos of my parents as children—more precious than the tufted velvet Arhaus couch that I never sit on or the crystal vases growing dusty from neglect.

I don't need a big house to be happy. When my youngest graduates from high school, we'll find a quiet place, with just enough space. My husband and I will donate most of our belongings and take only what we really need: a couple sturdy sweaters, my favorite blankets, the comforter with the little leaves that keeps us warm on the coldest nights. A set of skillets and two deep pots to make soup or pasta. One good knife. Over the years, I've collected mugs from my travels and filled a closet with cookbooks, but I'll take only a few favorites, the ones I actually use. We rarely return to cramped storage units and crowded corners anyway. Leaving them for others to wade through after my life is done would be the most unwelcome gift, as my mother experienced.

And as for the boxes of memories in the basement, I will summon the courage to let them go, like my mother taught me. It is a luxury to keep things for which we have no use; the real necessity is to live simply and well while we can.



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