

THE "SO DON'T THROW IT OUT" PROJECT
MONTHLY HOW-TO

BY BRETTE SEMBER

With all of the hubbub over decluttering, downsizing, Marie Kondo-ing, and Swedish death cleaning I have to admit something: I like stuff. Specifically my stuff. Though it sounds more dignified if I say that I collect things: art, locally-made wares I buy on my travels, and family heirlooms. Even so, after cleaning out family members' houses after their deaths, it dawned on me that, someday, my children would have the universally undesirable task of cleaning out mine. I imagined the things I love being trashed or donated and all of my memories being gone with them.

My grandmother traveled around the world through the 1960's and 70's and her house was packed with her treasures from trips, but we aren't sure where each piece came from or, more importantly, why it mattered to her. There are memories linked to them I will unfortunately never know.

I treasure objects not only because of their beauty or value, but because of their meaning. When I hold my green and blue swirled Murano glass vase, I see not only the craftsmanship, but I remember the laughter, conversation, joy, and closeness of the day we spent on the island of Murano, Italy riding the ferry and visiting shops as a family. My collections show a little bit of who I am, where I came from, how I find beauty in this world, and what brings me joy. Envisioning all of that being gone in an instant is painful. Marie Kondo argues that "when we really delve into the reasons for why we can't let something go, there are only two: an attachment to the past or a fear of the future." But what's wrong with being attached to the past?

When my children have to take on the task of sorting through what I leave behind, I want them to have the whole story. Sure, my blue star sapphire ring is pretty, but unless they know my grandmother wore it every day that I knew her, and that she left it to me in a gesture that filled my heart, it lacks the emotional weight that I feel as I wear it every day.

Yes, decluttering lets you get rid of things, but it also entails getting rid of the physical manifestations of memories. Sure, I can tell my kids about my grandmother's ring or the Murano vase, but if I sold it or gave it away they would never get to hold it, the memories sinking into them through the tactile engagement with the object.

Determined that the memories and meaning of my stuff not get lost in the race to declutter, I started something I nicknamed the 'So Don't Throw It Out' Project. I took photos of everything that had meaning to me (and realized that I've gotten to the point where I only own things that have meaning to me) and wrote about where the items came from and why they were important to me. I created a document with all the

photos and descriptions and shared it with family so that they could easily figure out what each item was, when and where I got it, and, the key to saving future family heirlooms, why I saved it.

I thought I was doing this project for my kids, but, as I worked, I realized I didn't remember all the details myself. My own story had already begun to fade in my mind. I had to scramble to figure out what year we went to France and when my grandfather died. I had to dig out the paperwork for some of the art I've bought. I had to do the research to tell my own story. This made it clear to me that, if the details matter to me, I need to record them as I live. It also showed me that details fade, but emotions don't.

My kids don't necessarily need to keep the sheep figurine I bought in Scotland (home of my ancestors), and if they don't want the gold shamrock paperweight my father gave me when I opened my law practice they will at least understand how deeply significant that moment was to me. I can't control what they eventually choose to turn into their own treasures, but I can guarantee that they will have the memories, whether they keep the physical object or not, that meant so much to me.

Create Your Own
"So Don't Throw It Out"
Document

1. PHOTOGRAPH EVERYTHING IN YOUR HOME THAT HAS MEANING TO YOU (A PHONE CAMERA GETS THE JOB DONE).
2. PUT THE PHOTOS INTO GOOGLE PHOTOS SO YOU CAN ACCESS THEM FROM ANY COMPUTER.
3. CREATE A GOOGLE DOC + SHARE IT WITH YOUR FAMILY MEMBERS.
4. PASTE IN EVERY PHOTO YOU'VE TAKEN.
5. WORKING YOUR WAY THROUGH, WRITE A DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EACH ITEM USING SPECIFIC WORDS ABOUT ITS FORM, WHERE IT CAME FROM, DATES, + WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU. THIS WAY, PEOPLE CAN EASILY SEARCH THE DOCUMENT FOR 'BLUE VASE' OR 'OPAL RING' + BE ABLE TO ACCESS THE INFO EASILY.
6. ADD ITEMS TO THE DOCUMENT AS YOU ACQUIRE THEM OR STUMBLE UPON THEM. FOR EXAMPLE, AS YOU GET OUT HOLIDAY DECORATIONS, CONSIDER IF THERE ARE ITEMS IN THOSE BOXES YOU WANT TO DOCUMENT.