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When Parents Die: Sorting Vestiges of Two Rich Careers

By *Melinda Beck*

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THE TASK HAD FILLED ME with trepidation ever since my mother died about a year ago. She'd even joked about it ruefully from her hospital bed: "I don't know what you kids are going to do with all that stuff when I'm gone."

We didn't know either. My father had died five years earlier and their house in suburban Chicago was packed, not just with books and clothes, but also with the vestiges of two vibrant careers. My brother and I lived in apartments already overflowing with stuff of our own. How could we make room in our lives for the things that had mattered in theirs?

Sadly, this is a quandry almost everyone faces at some point in life. A parent, grandparent or sibling dies and leaves a lifetime of possessions that must be sorted through, divvied up and dispensed with. This is the grunt-work of the grieving process and it can strain family relationships -- especially if one sibling wants to pore over every letter and another can't bear to.

"I had such a close relationship with my mother, it's difficult to even go into her room," says Sonja Brundage of Brewster, N.Y. She still can't decide what to do with the closet full of 1940s dresses in her parents' house in nearby Katonah, five years after her mother died.

MY PARENTS' HOUSE held some unusual treasures -- including a real human skeleton. My father, Ernest Beck, was a prominent medical illustrator and the skeleton -- George, we called him -- was an occasional model. My father had worked at home, a rarity in the 1960s,

and his studio was chock-full of awards, paints, brushes, medical books he'd illustrated and shelves of original artwork.



Carol Fabricatore

My mother, Joan Beck, had also worked from home during 50 years as a journalist for the Chicago Tribune. Her twice-weekly op-ed columns were syndicated in hundreds of other papers. Her last one appeared just four days before she died at the age of 75. Her office, too, was full of awards, books (four of which she'd written), letters from readers and boxes of her clips -- some 5,000 over the years, we estimated.

Time is as much of a constraint as space in this process. Miriam Bloom, a New York sculptor, budgeted one month to clean out her late mother's house in South Elgin, Ill. It took three months, even though her mother had left plans for donating her large music library. "At first, I was overwhelmed," Ms. Bloom says. "But when I saw everything she had saved, I felt so cherished. I was grateful to be able to do it."

I didn't have that luxury. My parents' house had been sold and my brother and I had to deliver it cleaned and empty. We each took a week off from work, and my husband joined us for a few days. But that was barely enough time to even peer into all the boxes, file cabinets and

shelves in my parents' house, much less carefully decide what to do with them.

There was more stuff than we ever imagined. My mother had kept not just one set of her articles, but many, including the typewritten originals. She had also collected dozens of boxes from my grandparents' home in Iowa when she faced this same task a decade earlier. So there were two generations of accumulations to sort through, including records from the corn-processing company my grandfather ran.

SOME OF THE STUFF was priceless: my father's Navy uniform, my mother's wedding gown and a tiny, tattered brown dress my great-grandmother was married in, according to a note on the box. Much had more dubious value. Like other children of the Depression, my parents had piles of used Christmas ribbons and drawers full of pencil stubs.

I was determined to find good homes for as much as possible. My daughters' school politely declined my offer of a skeleton. But Northwestern University was happy to have the stash of campus newspapers my mother edited during World War II.

I sent several boxes of Iowa memorabilia to my aunt in California. A battalion of elderly volunteers carried out armfuls of books and clothes for the church rummage sale. The surgeon who bought my parents' house was dazzled by my father's artwork and asked us to leave some.

My brother couldn't bring himself to throw out anything. He lived nearby and planned to buy his own house, so he put a moving van full of furniture, dishes -- even half-empty spice bottles -- into storage temporarily. He also stored the rest of my father's artwork and, for the time being, George.

I was more ruthless. I put my own small stash of heirlooms into storage -- including one set of my mother's columns to someday save electronically. But I didn't need stacks of letters to be reminded that she had fans around the world. I also decided I'd be more likely to look at one box of sample letters, clips and photos that I could bring back to New York than to visit 50 boxes of them storage.

Naomi Naierman of the American Hospice Foundation in Washington D.C. says employers can help by recognizing that deaths can be just as consuming as childbirth, and letting workers take time off under the Family and Medical Leave Act to put things in order. People can also help their survivors by leaving a plan for their things -- and deaccessioning themselves. "Give things away while you're alive -- it's much more meaningful," she says.

Before dawn on our last day in Lake Forest, my husband and I dragged box after box out to the curb for the one big garbage pickup the town offered.

I felt heartsick -- but I reminded myself that my mother had asked to be cremated. She'd often said she didn't want to take up space on earth, so perhaps she'd feel the same way about her files. Besides, the best things she left me are stored in my heart, where they don't take up much space at all.

Sue Shellenbarger will return next week.

Write to Melinda Beck at melinda.beck@wsj.com

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