

Escaping the Clutter Trap

Beverly Willett clung to her stuff for protection. Then she learned the key to protecting herself



THE REAL ESTATE appraiser ordered by the divorce court was very thorough. As I walked her through our Brooklyn brownstone, I periodically wiped away tears.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't worry," she responded.

"You'll get the house."

Six years later, I did get the house. I'd tried to save my marriage. When that failed, I fought like hell for our four-story house. With so much change, I thought, my two daughters and I needed some stability.

I refinanced and turned the ground floor into a rental, but the upkeep on the house was more than I could handle on one income. After a few years of struggle, I admitted to myself that the house would have to go.

By that point, I was 57 years old and my older daughter had moved out. My goal was to sell the place and move by the time my baby went off

From left: Willett's former home, and where she lives now

to college, about eight months in the future. I'd need that much time to clean out the place.

The house was jammed with stuff—my stuff, my kids' stuff, my ex-husband's stuff, his parents' stuff. And then there were the papers: tax returns, insurance policies, medical receipts and box upon box of divorce documents. Once, I'd organized and guarded these papers carefully, as if they had the power to protect me from fears of losing my children or

my home. Now, as I plowed through file boxes, deciding what to keep and what to shred, I felt those old anxieties but also a new sort of pride. In every alphabetical, chronological box, I saw the meticulous woman who had assembled those papers. Then, too, I felt sorry for her, surrounded by the false security of papers that couldn't save her.

One day my eldest stopped by to help clear out her room. When we came to her speech and debate trophies, she chose one for safekeeping and told me to toss the rest. I

protested, but she was firm.

“Please, Mom, I’m an adult,” she said. “Throw them out.”

I couldn’t do it.

Cleaning out the house was a full-time job, and a grueling one. The pain in my back became excruciating. And the precious objects I had curated for so long began to seem ever so slightly less precious.

One day I passed my older daughter’s room, grabbed a black Hefty bag and filled it with trophies. Outside, I heaved it into the garbage bin. And I swear, as I did this, weight left my body and a lightness entered my mind. I’d been keeping the trophies as a way to hold on to the past. But had any of this stuff really protected me, or had it merely kept me from dealing with my losses? Change was inevitable. All the stuff in the world couldn’t stop that.

After tossing the trophies, I marched inside to the kitchen and opened drawers and cabinets. Why did I own six bottle openers? All this stuff used to give me comfort; now it just felt sticky.

I held stoop sales and gave things away. Parting with things freed me. Finally, I could process my pain and move beyond it. I began to ask myself questions I’d been afraid to ask, like, *How little can I live with?* For the first time I could remember, I felt excited for my future.

One night shortly before the house sold, as I was reading in bed, I remembered the 77 text messages I had kept on my phone from a guy I’d stopped dating two years earlier. Sweet messages that made me feel good about myself, from someone who just wasn’t a match. I wondered, *Why had I kept them? Why gauge my own worth through someone else’s eyes?* I grabbed my cellphone, found those messages and hit “Delete all.” ■

Former attorney Beverly Willett, 63, lives in Savannah, Georgia. This essay is adapted from her new memoir, Disassembly Required.

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