

Baby Boomers Confront Stuff That Their Parents Have Left Behind

Ron Schlag climbed the attic stairs of his childhood home—and into a virtual time machine.

Here, under the eaves, were the baseball cards he'd collected as a kid in the 1950s. Over there was his mother's little white nursery dresser, ca. 1919. Against one wall was the dining room set of his late maternal grandmother, who came to share this River Edge home in the early 1960s. His ninth-grade science project on minerals; the NYU diploma of his dad, who died when Schlag was 6; a trunk of linens, the *Life* magazine with grieving Jackie, Caroline, and John John Kennedy on the cover—all this and much more.

It's all still there in the attic of the brick Cape Cod where Ron's mother, Agnes Rice Schlag, lived for 65 years—and died, at age 88, on Nov. 2.

“There's so much stuff. I don't know what's in this house,” says 61-year-old Schlag, who lives with his wife, Nancy, in a clutter-free 3,300-square-foot home in Jackson.

He holds up an off-white baptismal gown, about 90 years old.

“Something like that should be in the family, but I don't think my kids are going to take it,” says Schlag, whose son and daughter are in their 30s. “And if they take it, they're just going to stick it somewhere.”

A few generations ago, experts say, most people didn't have much in the way of material goods. But we have become a society where many people have too much of everything—whether it's fine china and furnishings, tschotchkes and souvenirs, purchased or inherited. As a result, baby boomers like Schlag find themselves chewing on yet another sandwich-generation issue: What should we do with all this stuff?

Although he hired appraisal and tag-sale experts June Regal and Lisa Regal Dodenhoff to help clear out the house—they held a sale there two weekends ago—it has largely fallen to Schlag, an only child, to decide what to keep, what to sell and how best to leave family treasures in good hands.

A Common Problem

“It's a dilemma that befalls so many of us,” says Eric Arnould, a marketing professor who conducted a research study on how older consumers dispose of special possessions. “If you think about the baby-boom generation, we're probably the most overstuffed generation that has ever existed on the planet.”

Arnould, now a professor at the University of Wyoming, says his research project was originally supposed to be about elderly consumers' vulnerability to marketing practices. “But we discovered that our elderly didn't want to talk to us about that. They'd say, ‘I

have all this stuff. The kids don't want it. What am I going to do?' We were struck by the poignancy and pervasiveness of all these stories."

At her West Milford shop, Trinkets to Treasures, Sue Card has heard plenty such tales from people who bring in heirlooms for her to sell. She has also unsuccessfully tried to give away things to her 19-year-old son and two older stepsons.

Attitudes Change

Beyond the fact that young adults often favor what she calls the "Pottery Barn look," Card believes there are just different personality types. "Some people are sensitive and sentimental, and some people, the quicker they can get rid of it, the better," she says, citing a friend who quickly disposed of her late mother's china and jewelry. "She has that 'a place for everything, everything in its place' gene."

Another boomer, Pat Carboneri of Leonia, has an abundance of items that she has bought for her three children through the years—candlesticks, crystal, flatware, stemware, tea sets, embroidered Italian tablecloths, even Hummel and Lenox Nativity sets.

"We came from a family that believed that when you have a daughter especially, you had a trousseau. My mother started one for me, and we accepted everything they gave," says Carboneri, whose married daughter Daniela has a baby and a house. "Once in a while, I'll take something out, and say, 'Do you like this?' And she'll say, 'I have something similar.' Or, 'It's not the pattern.'"

Today, she notes, gift registries enable people to request exactly what they want. And nobody wants to polish silver or dust knickknacks anymore. "I understand," says Carboneri. "Everybody works now, so time for cleaning is minimal, but it's very hard."

Arnould's advice is to hold onto precious items, because eventually, many adult kids will come around.

"They're in the process of formulating their own identities. ... It isn't until later in life, particularly when they have children of their own, that lineage and heritage become more [important]," he says.

Agnes Schlag, a registered nurse, had frank discussions with her son about her finances and medical treatment in the months before she died of leukemia.

Her stuff was another matter.

This strong woman—who as a single mom took private-duty nursing shifts around her son's schedule and worked as a school nurse to keep a closer eye on him during his teen years—was loath to relinquish her independence.

And so, after she was gone, Schlag found himself surrounded by all kinds of valuables—a china bird collection, Depression glass, Nippon urns, a 200-year-old family compote—as well as old books, photos, cards and papers, including a yellowed, seven-year-old letter to Ann Landers from a “heartbroken” woman whose father and brother had thrown out most of her late aunt’s family treasures.

Never Pared Down

“I find this stuff all over the place,” says Schlag, who retired from AT&T eight years ago and is now a Realtor. “And, as you go through it, it’s draining, physically and emotionally.”

On the coffee table is a photo of the house taken in 1943, the year after his parents purchased it.

“If you move, you pare down. She never moved, so she never pared down,” says Schlag. “She just started accumulating.” The dining-room table—part of a set that Schlag’s son and his wife will take to their Boonton home—“was always a foot thick in papers. Always,” Schlag says. And while his mom was proud to have cleared off the attic stairs a decade ago, she’d relapsed.

“My wife is the total opposite,” he says. “She wants neatness.”

And what about him?

Schlag ended up keeping his baseball-card collection, cut-glass stemware that his wife liked—and some other select items.

“I’m sentimental,” he says. “But I don’t like clutter.”

Knowing What’s an Heirloom and What’s Junk

1. Dealing With a Late Loved One’s Stuff:

Know what you have and its value: “What I say is, No. 1, do not throw anything away,” says June Regal of Regal Associates Estate Sales in Ridgewood, who has been in the business for more than 60 years, 36 of them in northern New Jersey. “Second, do not give anything away until you know what it’s worth.”

“The only things we don’t sell, literally, are prescriptions and bank statements. There are things that are in poor condition but still valuable. I have literally sold rags. I sold the contents of a home in Hillsdale where the man murdered his wife. I sold the mattress covered in blood. ... point is, you don’t know what somebody’s going to buy.”

“Shop” for what you’d like to keep: And get rid of the rest.

Times change—and, if you hire experts, make sure they're au courant. "They have to be aware of what is selling on eBay and what is happening in the flea markets," Regal says. "Thirty-six years ago, the No. 1 Hummel plate was selling for \$1,000. Today, it's in the \$50 range."

2. Getting the Kids to Value Heirlooms:

Give items a context: Put things on display, and "tell stories to your children about how the stuff is important," says marketing professor Eric Arnould, an expert on how older consumers dispose of special possessions.

Have a family meeting while everyone's healthy: "Mom might say, 'I'm going to get great joy giving things while I'm alive. What do you want?'" says psychologist Steven J. Hendlin, author of *Overcoming the Inheritance Taboo: How to Preserve Relationships and Transfer Possessions*.

Then label these things to earmark the recipient, or, better yet, give them to the people while you're around to see them enjoy the items. "That doesn't mean that the child's going to love it. But it does get an extra value," says Hendlin, adding that things bequeathed through a will automatically take on "added value" to those inheriting them.

Label old photos: Ancestors' smiling faces may get tossed if future generations have no idea who these people are.

3. Dealing With Your Own Accumulation:

Set rules for yourself. Jeri Dansky, who runs a blog centered on organizing and decluttering, offers this advice on her Web site: "You may decide you don't need to keep any Christmas cards that don't have a personal note or a photo"... [or say] "I will save only X number of my child's drawings."

Take a picture: Writes Dansky: "Sometimes taking a picture of a bulky item will preserve the memory just fine, and you can let the item itself move on."

Consider donating it. Pat Carboneri of Leonia doesn't want to sell her beautiful things at a tag sale, or on eBay, but she has donated items for charity events and the like.

Play matchmaker: "In order for me to give away anything in my life, I feel better if I know it's going to a good home," says Sue Card, owner of Trinkets to Treasures in West Milford.

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