



## Giving It All Away

I learned at an early age to never, but never, visit someone empty-handed. For every church funeral, new baby, and sick neighbor, my mother made an appearance at someone's door carrying a home baked apple pie, fresh farm eggs, or a pint of summer strawberries from her front yard garden. One Christmas Eve, my mother and I delivered a bottle of wine to every farmer who had ever sent a calf or cow to the slaughterhouse via my father's big red cattle truck. As my mother worked the Ford pick-up brakes on the icy yards of my father's customers, I jumped out of the pick-up cab and ran her gift of gratitude up to each farmer's house. Years later I realized what that gift of Mogen David wine said about my mother's lack of experience in a liquor store.

Over the years it has also been my habit to bring gifts whenever I go visit a friend or neighbor. But since learning I have adenocarcinoma, my gifting habits have changed. In addition to delivering a jar of jam or bouquet of flowers whenever I go to other people's houses for lunch or dinner, I am now giving away my prized possessions. Last month, I gave my Cote d'Ivoire chair to a good friend who has her own African connections. The saffron colored silk shawl I'd bought at a Buddhist women's center in Cambodia I gave to a friend who works as a spiritual director. Two shelves of poetry books went to my young friend aspiring to be a poet herself. And when my academic friend Julia headed back to Austin, Texas, after her visit last weekend, she left wearing the coral and Berber silver necklace I'd worn while studying in Tunisia several summers ago.

Deborah Eisenberg in her short story, “Revenge of the Dinosaurs,” writes of “Billions of intense, abundant human lives on this earth . . . vanishing, leaving nothing more than inscrutable little piles of commemorative trash.” While I’m not prepared to call my own possessions “trash,” the reality that our earthly possessions endure long after we disappear is indeed humbling.

My father lived on the same farm for 40 years and when he died, his remaining possessions might have been labeled “commemorative trash,” but they were by no stretch of the imagination “inscrutable little piles.” Instead, what remained after his death were gigantic stockpiles of anything and everything commonly found on a small family farm. On the day of the auction, 637 registered bidders showed up to see my father’s farming life laid out over the width and length of a hayfield. The auctioneers, starting on what would be a very long day of work, first called the crowd over to the half a dozen hay wagons loaded with the smaller items. Boxes of bolts, tools, shovels, pitchforks, anvils, chicken feeders, cow horn cutters, and horse harnesses were sold off by 10 a.m. The fencing wires, tractor belts, handheld planting machines, milk cans, pig troughs, cow tanks, and feeding stations were next. Then silo parts, horse saddles, corn crib elevators, hoists, and the feed mill got their turn.

As the autumn day grew dimmer, the auctioneers made it to the outer rings of the hayfield. There standing as colossal as Trojan horses were all the horse-drawn and motorized farm machines my father had collected over the decades.

Showing up in time to see the vast line-up of corn pickers, hay balers, combines and throw wagons, my sister remarked, “From a marketing point of view, this auction is a disaster.” For every wooden sleigh with velvet seats up for sale, there were another four waiting for the next bidder. If a farmer didn’t win the bid on the FarmAll M tractor, he could bid on the FarmAll A or FarmAll H. Then there were all the John Deere and International Harvester tractors. That my father had not one but two steel Red River threshing machines impressed even the Amish farmers who left praising the Lord for their good fortune, as they loaded their horse-drawn hay cutters,

cultivators, and manure spreaders onto their waiting hired trucks. One of the silver Red River threshing machines traveled half a mile down the road from my father's farm, where it still performs its new job as a lawn ornament.

The auction was a natural outgrowth of my father's favorite pastime: every Saturday that he could get away from his own farm work he'd go to bid at other farmers' auctions. Seeing my father's possessions spread out in the hayfield at the auction made me proud of my father's enduring stewardship of old horse equipment, farm tools, machinery, and other farm necessities. My father's life was never easy, but the sheer size and scale of his commemorative piles gave me hope that through his collecting he had found much pleasure.

I am my father's daughter when it comes to collecting. Over the years I, too, have accumulated stockpiles of possessions. But while my father preferred horse-drawn plows and hay conditioners, I got my pleasure from bringing home art, books, and African baskets. Drawers and cabinets in my house hold collections of old lace, antique quilts, and textiles from Guatemala, India, and Africa. In the front porch are collections of beads, sea shells, foreign coins, and naïve art postcards from former Eastern Europe. Somewhere in the pie chest is a collection of Czech glass bead handbags and bird feathers. From April of 2005 to March of 2006, my exhibition at the Hennepin History Museum titled *A Century of Aprons: American Women's Aprons—Their Art and Function* included 112 aprons dating from the 1860s to the 1970s.

I am also my mother's daughter. Giving it all away was my immediate response to the news that I am dying. Not all of us get life's pink slip in time to gift, but I have been given this opportunity. I spent the first night after being diagnosed with cancer ferreting out just the right gifts to present several evenings later at a women's group I have been a part of for 15 years. To the doll collector went my own small group of china heads and frozen Charlottes. To the book lover went a pair of antique bookends complete with quill. To the other women went the only afghan I made, a Native Indian basket by Margaret Hill, and everyday silver earrings and bracelets I used to love wearing.

Since then, I have been giving gifts to my two other women's group members, people who come to visit me here at the house, and the many friends and neighbors I wish to have something special so they might remember all the good times we've had together. Whenever people resist my gifting, I explain that gifting is my way of passing along the responsibility and stewardship for this or that object, thereby significantly shortening the time it takes to get them talking about their garden projects and plans for the summer.

One of my sons grew concerned when he heard about my giving away jewelry, baskets, and books. He began to imagine that weeks or months from now he'd arrive and find me sitting on a wooden box in an empty house with Lizzie the cat licking the last remaining plate from my grandparents' wedding china. But I can easily gift ten times more than I already have and still be surrounded by plenty of comfort and beauty. Many have compared the inside of my house to a museum, but few have seen the loaded steamer trunks in the attic.

Giving away my valuables seems even a better decision when I envision other options for their disposal. For years a few of my good friends joked how they hoped they'd outlive me so they could shop at my estate sale. They knew that, like my father, I had spent many Saturday mornings going to house sales and bringing home bits and pieces to tuck away in chests and closets. And perhaps it is my experience at estate sales that inspires me to gift the very best and most unique items to my friends. Because I have been among those who love finding a good piece of lace for under a dollar, it's easy for me to imagine strangers having a good time going through my collections in search of a bargain. However, I'd prefer to die thinking the Yoruba cooking pot and Stella Ebner woodcut will get their proper due because someone knows the person who cared for them over the years.

That my remaining collections may yet prove burdensome to my two sons haunts me. Both sons live miles away. Both sons have families of their own, and neither family at the moment has a house large enough to hold the baby grand piano let alone trunks of woven fans, embroidered stoles, and vintage Japanese kimonos.

So I think back to my father's auction ten years ago. I remember that, while the job of figuring out what to do with the farm fell on me, there were plenty of people out there who knew just what to do with my father's 77 horse-eveners and the piles of scrap metal behind the granary. I remember listening with relief as the auctioneer's expertise guided the bidding on the fifth-wheel buckboard wagon and wooden stoneboats. And I recall how good it felt seeing that hayfield covered with my father's passions and loves. We billions of people do leave behind piles of material goods every day, but every once in a while the piles we leave have unexpected importance to those who remain.

I plan to continue gifting as much as possible, while at the same time letting go of what I can't give away before I die. The 112 aprons in the exhibit I donated to the history museum to be part of their permanent collection. The other 500 or so are still piled up in boxes in the front hall closet. My collection of books about women artists will soon go to the local women's college. The rest of my books can remain on the shelves waiting to see me out. My sons will decide for themselves what mementos they want to keep and whether or not to hand over the house keys to an estate sale agent and walk away.

We humans connect to our earthly possessions in a variety of ways, but death has a way of evening it all out. My father hung on to every leather strap and horseshoe nail to the end. My mother, who never thought twice about durable goods, will die remembered for her generosity with pies and garden produce. Unlike my father, I'm embracing the chance to give away my prized possessions; but unlike my mother, I've cared too much about collecting to be able to empty all the cupboards.

There is no shame in leaving behind "commemorative trash" if it passes along something of meaning to those we care about. Through gifting I'm getting to experience in new ways the joy that comes from telling others again how much I have loved them over the years. For every item I place into another's hand, there is a blessing in return. I can't imagine this isn't a part of the "intense, abundant human lives" we all wish to live.