

Heather Carlile Carter and
Jennifer Carlile-Bortz

MAKING SPACE

Emotional and Practical Realities of Caregiving, Transitions, and Household Disbandment in the Older Adult Home

Aging Studies

Collection Editor
DAVID BETTS

LIVED PLACES
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To elders and those who care for them as they both make space
for breath and living amid this complexity.

Abstract

Making Space examines the emotional and practical realities families face as older adults move through caregiving, late-life housing transitions, and household disbandment or downsizing. Drawing on first-person narratives and qualitative research methodology, the book explores four thematic lenses: the emotional journeys caregivers navigate; the complications of strained family relationships; the transmission of legacy and inheritance; and the procedural orientations that help families move through daunting practical demands. The accounts span caregiver burden, cognitive decline and dementia, collecting and hoarding disorder, and the storied objects that convey meaning across intergenerational relationships. By revealing intensely personal, often isolating, experiences increasingly woven into the life of every family, the book reassures readers that they do not walk this path alone.

Beyond the family caregiver, this volume serves students, continuing education participants, and lifelong learners across gerontology, aging studies, social work, interior design, family studies, and counseling, with no prior academic background assumed. Undergraduate researchers will find humanizing context for empirical work on aging and caregiving. Faculty designing courses around the lived dimensions of late-life transitions will discover a course-ready resource anchored in authentic experience and narrative inquiry. Practitioners—among them geriatric care managers, social workers, health care providers, estate

professionals, and interior designers working with older adults, will gain a window into the lived experience of the families they serve and a resource for reflective practice and deeper client-facing understanding.

Individual narratives and sections are self-contained and can be read independently, making the book equally suited to small-group and community learning contexts, including caregiver support groups, faith communities, and book clubs.

Key words: gerontology and aging studies, informal caregiving and caregiver burden, cognitive decline and dementia, intergenerational relationships, late-life housing transitions, household disbandment and downsizing, legacy and inheritance, hoarding disorder and collecting, lived experience, narrative inquiry and qualitative research

Contents

Content warning		**xi**
Preface		**xii**
Acknowledgments		**xvi**
Introduction		**1**
Section 1	**Emotional journeys**	**9**
Chapter 1	Jacob	**11**
Chapter 2	Scott	**19**
Chapter 3	Megan	**27**
Chapter 4	Robbin	**35**
Chapter 5	Pamela	**43**
Chapter 6	Emotional journeys conclusion	**51**
Section 2	**Complicated relationships**	**59**
Chapter 7	Sara	**63**
Chapter 8	Grace	**71**
Chapter 9	Michael	**79**
Chapter 10	Case	**89**
Chapter 11	Kate	**99**
Chapter 12	Bex and Daniel	**107**
Chapter 13	Complicated relationships conclusion	**115**

Section 3	**Legacy and inheritance**	**123**
Chapter 14	Catherine	**127**
Chapter 15	Lisa	**135**
Chapter 16	Osbourne siblings	**143**
Chapter 17	Kit	**153**
Chapter 18	Alyson	**161**
Chapter 19	Legacy and inheritance conclusion	**169**
Section 4	**Navigating the sort**	**175**
Chapter 20	Lucy	**179**
Chapter 21	Marina	**187**
Chapter 22	Debbie	**195**
Chapter 23	Sandra	**203**
Chapter 24	Christine	**211**
Chapter 25	Navigating the sort conclusion	**219**
Conclusion		**227**
Terms		**232**
References		**237**
About the authors		**250**
Index		**251**

Content warning

This book contains explicit references to situations that may cause distress, including homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse, violent assault, political violence, and murder. These topics do not arise in all narratives, but are integral to a few accounts told by the participants. As death and dying are central to the book's context, they recur throughout. Not all of these stories are easy, and readers are invited to move through them in whatever way serves their own well-being.

Preface

Informal caregiving for an aging family member or friend and the disbandment of their household have become defining moments in our middle adulthood. The literature surrounding these experiences skews almost entirely to the practical: pragmatic guides or quantitative research studies. What has largely been absent is literature oriented to the lived experience of the caregiver. This book seeks to address that gap.

Making Space exists because of a set of china dishes.

Heather Carlile-Carter is an interior design professor whose research focuses on material culture and the meanings people attach to the places they inhabit; Jennifer Carlile-Bortz is a writer and editor. They are sisters, and it was during the disbandment of their mother's household that this project began: Heather came upon a full set of her mother's china—acquired as wedding gifts and kept intact for decades, used two or three times a year. No one wanted it, and the void that lack created was not just a logistical problem, but an emotional one. The china had been cherished—it was no longer. Discarding it seemed somehow wrong.

As both a residential designer and a professor, Heather has spent years working inside and studying the homes of older adults and understands that designers are frequently present at the threshold of disbandment without any framework for the relational and emotional complexity waiting inside. The project was

initially conceived with that audience in mind, and its origins are still visible in the participant pool—a number of contributors are artists or design professionals. But as the interviews accumulated, it became clear that the experiences being described were not design problems. They were human ones, and the book belongs to a wider conversation about aging, caregiving, and the domestic life of older adults in America.

Making Space is not a clinical text, a prescriptive guide, or a representative sample. It is a collection of first-person narratives developed through in-depth interviews and illuminated with research. It will not tell you what to do; it will show you what others have done and what it cost them, situating experiences within the broader social, cultural, and psychological frameworks that help explain them.

The book is designed for multiple audiences and uses. Students in courses across aging studies, interior design, social work, gerontology, family studies, and counseling will find it accessible with no prior academic background assumed. Professionals—social workers, care managers, interior designers, health care providers, estate professionals—will find it useful as a continuing education resource and as a window into the lived experience of the families they serve. For small-group and community learning contexts, including caregiver support groups, faith communities, and book clubs, individual narratives and sections are self-contained and can be read independently.

The book's four sections—Emotional Journeys, Complicated Relationships, Legacy and Inheritance, and Navigating the Sort—were not designed in advance, but emerged from the

interviews, each lens taking shape as the dominant orientation of the narrative became clear. This provided distinct direction for supporting research, which includes a spectrum of work from seminal frameworks to more recent studies. Each section supports deeper engagement through learning objectives and discussion questions organized into personal, theoretical, and professional categories. Further activities provide structured opportunities for application, analysis, and reflection that can be completed outside the classroom without special resources. Each section also points readers toward a curated selection of memoirs that extend the conversation.

The narratives themselves were built through a process grounded in oral history methodology. Heather conducted all but one interview across multiple conversations. The interviews were open-ended and exploratory; her role was to follow the subject's account wherever it led. Jennifer shaped each transcript into a first-person narrative, working to preserve the subject's voice, cadence, and way of making sense of events. Each narrative went through iterative drafts that surfaced questions that required follow-up interviews. The final draft was returned to the subject for review, and any changes requested were incorporated before written consent and final approval were obtained. A few narratives were written by the narrators themselves or with Jennifer as a collaborator; those biographies note either "This narrative was written by the participant" or "This narrative was developed in collaboration with the book's authors."

What follows is not a complete picture of caregiving and disbandment in America. The authors sought a varied participant

pool, attending to socioeconomic, cultural, age, gender, and sexual diversity. These are stories routinely lived in private that turn out to be widely shared. If this book does what it is meant to do, readers will find in it not instruction, but company—and perhaps the recognition that what they are feeling or navigating, they are not navigating alone.

Acknowledgments

There would not have been a book without the people who agreed to participate in it. We learned from every participant. We are grateful for the trust you extended to us and for the honesty with which you shared your lives.

Participants gave us their time over many months: sitting for long interviews, reviewing drafts, answering follow-up questions, and revisiting experiences that were not always easy to name. Many spoke during periods of uncertainty and grief, when the work was still in process, yet they stayed the course. The interviews themselves became something more than conversations. Sometimes we teared up. Other times, we laughed. There is something remarkable about watching a person think aloud as understanding begins to take shape. At times it felt like witnessing ideas emerging in real time—vague at first, then clearer and more certain as words gathered around them.

To those participants who chose to write their own narratives, thank you for remaining authentic to your experiences and allowing them to exist on the page with candor and complexity.

We also want to acknowledge those whom we do not know but who are currently caregiving and disbanding. Much of your work happens quietly, behind closed doors, late at night, and without recognition. Some of it involves dirt, mold, and the physical realities of caring for a body that is no longer functioning as its owner wants. It is arduous and gut-wrenching. We know you are there,

and we honor the effort it takes to remain present for the people you love and for those you might not.

I, Heather, also want to acknowledge Jennifer's extraordinary skill as a writer and collaborator. When I asked her to pursue this project with me, she said "yes," even though she likely knew that wrangling me through the writing process would test her patience. It did. From the beginning, she put on a figurative hard hat, showed up to the writing construction site, and made the project happen. She was dedicated to each participant's voice while she created narratives from hours of interview transcripts. She spent over two years organizing, writing, editing, and pushing this book forward. Her spreadsheets were glorious. I treasured our Sunday work sessions—even when she responded to things I had done with indecorous emojis—and I admire her greatly and remain thankful for her partnership in bringing this book into being.

And I, Jennifer, could not leave Heather's dedication unspoken. Never has anyone had a more sincere cheerleader. As a writing partner, she matches me stride for stride, except for the occasional em-dash battle. As sisters go, she is as devoted as they come.

Finally, to those who believed there was a meaningful book within this idea and trusted us to pursue it, thank you for your confidence, encouragement, and support.

Introduction

Many families do not see it coming. Or if they do, they are not prepared for its impact. A parent's health shifts, a house becomes unmanageable, a crisis arrives—and suddenly adult children find themselves managing medical and logistical demands, navigating extended family, negotiating questions of autonomy. They are untrained. All of this occurs while they are absorbing the emotional impact of watching someone important to them lose pieces of their identity: strength, ways of thinking, lifestyle. The work of caregiving and disbandment often begins simultaneously. Neither experience announces itself with a name.

Household disbandment and caregiving are typically treated separately in practical and research literature, yet in lived experience, they routinely overlap. While sorting, moving, or dismantling tasks can intensify the burdens of care, caregiving decisions themselves may lead to changes in housing, possessions, routines, and family roles. This book documents that overlap.

Caregiving takes many forms; this book is concerned with its informal realm—the unpaid, mostly unacknowledged work performed by family members, friends, and others outside the professional care system. Informal caregivers are daughters and sons, spouses and grandchildren, neighbors who stepped in and never quite stepped out.

National data indicate that 38,200,000 Americans provided unpaid eldercare during 2023–2024 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Nearly half cared for a parent; many provided care several times a week or more, and caregiving commonly continued for years. Women continue to carry a disproportionate share of these duties in the United States, remaining central to the nation's caregiving infrastructure (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025). Eldercare has become an increasingly common and long-term family responsibility across the nation. Broader demographic and economic trends, including population aging, workforce shortages, and rising long-term care costs, continue to place growing pressure on families to provide care within the home (Collyns, 2026). Research also shows that caregiving experiences are influenced by geographic and racial disparities. Rural caregivers and some racially marginalized groups almost always face greater barriers to health care services, financial stability, support services, and other resources while managing substantial caregiving tasks (Cohen, Nash and Greaney, 2024).

Unlike their formal counterparts, informal caregivers frequently enter the role with limited experience and no institutional support, scrambling to understand systems that professionals spend years training for. Boundaries are few. There is not a defined endpoint. Although caregiving is performed predominantly by women, this book includes men and nonbinary caregivers, too. They are all people who did not choose the work so much as find themselves inside it. The toll is considerable and well-documented: informal caregivers face elevated rates of stress, anxiety, depression, social isolation, deteriorating physical health, and financial strain (Rajan and Rajkumar, 2026). That is the norm,

not the exception. It is the condition under which every narrative in this book unfolds.

Although caregiving affects entire families, the work is primarily carried out by one person. That individual—often a daughter—absorbs the direct physical labor, the decision-making, the emotional management, and the anticipatory planning that surrounds it, while maintaining their own life. The load is seldom distributed evenly, and the person carrying most of it typically does so without a sense of when it will end. The work is viewed by the world at large as natural, as obvious, as something that simply gets done rather than something someone is doing at significant personal cost.

That individual cost radiates outward. Responsibilities routinely extend beyond the caregiver and care recipient to shape marital relationships. Research suggests that providing care to aging parents can influence marital satisfaction, while the caregiving process itself may alter communication patterns, intimacy, expectations, and everyday relationship dynamics as couples adapt to new roles (Brisini and Wang, 2026; Polenick et al., 2017). The demands of care can change daily routines, reduce time and energy for the relationship, and create new tensions around decision-making and responsibility, particularly when the older adult lives in the home. At the same time, couples who communicate openly about the caregiving experience seem better able to support one another and adapt together as circumstances change (Brisini and Wang, 2026).

Siblings who are not primary caregivers develop their own responses: guilt, distance, periodic intervention, disagreement

about decisions they did not have to make day to day. The question of who will take on the caregiving role—and the household disbandment—can itself become a source of conflict before the work has even begun.

Among the evolving demographics of caregiving, young adults remain a mostly overlooked population. Often, they are helping care for grandparents and other aging relatives while navigating higher education, early careers, and family formation. Yet many institutional resources remain poorly aligned with their circumstances. The Family and Medical Leave Act does not provide protected leave for many forms of extended-family care, and colleges, universities, and career-training programs have only begun to recognize the educational disruptions and competing demands that caregiving can create for young adults (Fingerman et al., 2025; Miller et al., 2024).

Dementia is present across many of these accounts—and it warrants naming directly. A 2025 study published in *Nature Medicine* found the lifetime risk of developing dementia after age 55 to be 42 per cent, with annual dementia cases in the United States projected to rise from approximately 514,000 in 2020 to nearly 1,000,000 by 2060 (Fang et al., 2025). Dementia introduces a particular kind of grief into caregiving. Families find themselves mourning someone who is still physically present, making decisions for a loved one who can no longer fully participate, and trying to sustain relationships that have fundamentally changed. Research suggests that dementia care is not experienced in only one way. Caregivers describe moments of love, connection, meaning, and reciprocity existing alongside fatigue, loneliness, uncertainty, grief, and emotional strain (Lindeza et al.,

2024). Studies further show that caregiving is not only a practical responsibility but also a relational process that can reshape identity, family dynamics, and a caregiver's understanding of loss and connection (Jeran et al., 2026).

Some forms of dementia can also change how people relate to their belongings, making it harder to sort, evaluate, or part with them, and adding another layer of complexity for families facing household disbandment (Mitchell et al., 2019). More broadly, attachment to possessions commonly increases in later life as objects become imbued with personal history and emotional meaning (Dozier and Ayers, 2021). What caregivers sometimes experience as resistance, stubbornness, or refusal may instead reflect a combination of emotional attachment, accumulated loss, cognitive change, and fear of further diminishment. Understanding this complexity helps shift household disbandment away from a simple process of "cleaning out" and toward a more compassionate view of what possessions can represent in later life.

Within a family, a home is put together over decades, and the household is layered with meaning. Disbandment takes that apart. It may be precipitated by a move to assisted living or memory care, by the death of an older adult, or by the gradual recognition that a home can no longer be safely maintained. It is related to, but distinct from, downsizing. Downsizing implies a voluntary and planned reduction made by someone still largely in control of their circumstances.

Disbandment typically involves less agency and greater urgency. It requires the sorting, distribution, donation, sale, and disposal of

almost everything a life has accumulated: furniture and clothing, photographs and records, objects of obvious value, and objects whose significance may be invisible to everyone except the person who kept them. It often requires family members to make difficult decisions together, sometimes on behalf of someone who can no longer make them independently.

As we think through household disbandment, much of its contemporary understanding builds upon the seminal work of sociologist and gerontologist David J. Ekerdt, whose research reframed later-life downsizing as far more than the practical reduction of belongings. His scholarship shows that the objects people live with over decades become intertwined with personal history, family relationships, routines, and identity, making relocation emotionally complex as well as physically demanding (Ekerdt and Baker, 2014; Ekerdt, Luborsky and Lysack, 2012). He describes household disbandment as the gradual dismantling of a long-established home during major life transitions such as illness, caregiving, widowhood, relocation, or declining independence. Decisions about what to keep, pass along, sell, donate, or release are driven by memory, responsibility, grief, affection, conflict, and reflection about what matters most. In later work, he further suggests that aging requires people to reconsider not how much they can preserve but which objects most reflect the lives that they have lived and the relationships they hope to sustain (Ekerdt, 2019). Together, his research helps illuminate household disbandment as an ongoing process of transition, meaning-making, and reshaping one's understanding of home. Aging in place—the widely shared preference of older adults to remain in their homes as long as possible—extends the timeline and emotional complexity of this labor.

With that, we need to frame hoarding. The word appears in several of these narratives, used by participants to describe what they encountered in a parent's or grandparent's household. In clinical terms, hoarding disorder is defined in the *DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) as persistent difficulty discarding possessions, regardless of their value, resulting in clutter that disrupts the use of living spaces and causes distress or impairment. Collecting, by contrast, involves organized, intentional, and targeted acquisition—selectivity is the distinction. What many participants in this book are describing, on reflection, is not hoarding disorder in the clinical sense, but accumulation taken to an extreme: decades of objects acquired with purpose and kept with care, overwhelming in volume but not without internal logic.

The vernacular matters because the word that a family uses gives direction to their response. To call something hoarding is to pathologize it, to position the older adult as a problem to be managed rather than a person who has an object-story worth hearing. Research on the families of those with hoarding disorder documents the strain it produces—damaged relationships, emotional triggering, ongoing conflict long after the physical work is done (Dewar et al., 2026). However, the line between disorder and accumulation is not always as clear in practice as clinical definitions suggest, and the book neither pathologizes accumulation nor sensationalizes it.

Another note on language follows from that. Readers will notice that the accounts use words like "stuff" and "things" where a more clinical treatment might reach for "material possessions" or "objects of significance." This is deliberate. The casual terms are

not imprecise; they are accurate to how most people talk about what fills their parents' houses, their garages, their basements. To impose clinical distance on language that is never clinical in lived experience would be a distortion.

The households in this book are full of belongings layered with accumulated meaning. Stacks of china never used. A grandfather's handwritten to-do list. A piece of furniture that crossed an ocean. When these objects are dispersed or discarded, what is lost is not merely a thing, but the tangible evidence of a family's existence across time. The disbandment of a household is a negotiation over what a family is willing to remember and what it can bear to release.

Stories operate the same way and sometimes more durably. Houses disappear. Objects are lost, donated, or discarded. But the stories attached to them—told across kitchen tables, repeated at funerals, passed from grandparent to grandchild in the particular language of a family—can survive when nothing else does. Family Caregiver Alliance, a national nonprofit organization that advocates for and supports informal caregivers, recognizes the power of story. It maintains a dedicated space where caregivers can share experiences and find solidarity with others in the same terrain. The narratives in this book draw upon that same power—accounts told in the participants' words, moved from voice to page and offered to readers who may recognize parts of their lives within them. They invite the reader to participate further, perhaps to tell their own story or to listen more carefully to another's.

Section 1
Emotional journeys

Learning objectives

After engaging with this section, the reader will:

1. Recognize intergenerational ambivalence as a defining condition of caregiving relationships rather than a sign of relational failure.
2. Connect the concept of liminality to the caregiver's suspended state between the role that organized their life and the identity not yet formed.
3. Reexamine their own assumption that conflicting emotions toward a family member must be resolved rather than held together.

Introduction

Caregivers' emotional journeys move unpredictably. Earlier family wounds may resurface during care, yet affection and connection frequently persist even within strained relationships, creating an emotionally ambivalent experience where conflicting feelings coexist.

Lüscher and Pillemer's (1998) framework of intergenerational ambivalence explains why caregiving relationships contain closeness and tension. These emotional contradictions can affect psychological and physical well-being (Fingerman et al., 2008), and positive and negative emotions do not cancel each other out (Gilligan et al., 2015). Mixed emotions are not just experienced by one person but can affect the entire family as everyone navigates new obligations (Reczek, 2016).

Caregiving can also rework identity and emotional understanding over time as people reevaluate their experiences (Kubitza et al., 2025). Loneliness, life satisfaction, and emotional well-being are impacted across the caregiving trajectory (Ping et al., 2025). Fernández-Carro et al. (2025) found that older adult caregivers experience negative and positive health outcomes, while López-Martínez et al. (2025) showed that caregivers who find meaning or satisfaction in the role may experience less long-term psychological distress.

The narratives that follow explore the ambivalent emotional journeys of five people who help us understand that caregiving is seldom defined by a single emotion. Although the caregiving aspects in these stories share the same intensity level for the participants, some journeys are of a longer term, adding greater cumulative stress to the life of the narrator. Across a spectrum from mostly positive relationships through enmeshment and intergenerational trauma, they are ordered by relational and historical accumulation over the narrator's lifespan.

1
Jacob

Jacob is an academic professional and part-time photographer. He was the primary caregiver and executor for his father, whose home Jacob disbanded while navigating complicated family dynamics.

Introduction

Jacob is a single, childless man in his late 50s whose sense of existential isolation deepens following his father's death. Jacob's experience with his father's caregiving and disbandment of his home is marked by the emotional labor of protecting parental agency amid competing family pressures. Research by Kwak et al. (2012) demonstrates that family conflict intensifies caregiver stress among adult children, particularly when disputes emerge around authority, decision-making, and responsibility for aging parents. Jacob also absorbs the emotional cost of caregiving and disbandment alone, a pattern consistent with research on male dementia caregiving, which suggests that men tend to manage caregiving through responsibility, emotional restraint, and practical action rather than overt emotional expression (Poisson et al., 2026).

Jacob's narrative

I became my dad's primary caregiver at the same time I was navigating a complicated process for advancement at work. The challenge was made more difficult because of the relationship I had with my stepfamily. My mother died when I was in my 20s, and a few years later, my father married a woman with three daughters and a son, all of whom were adults. Our differences were extensive, and without the foundation of a shared childhood, we never managed to bond. During my father's decline and death, the distance between the two sides of our family only became more pronounced.

My stepmother's children were unable to be as involved in their mother's life because they had moved away. As our parents' frailty increased, there was some resentment on my part because I had to step in frequently, sometimes without knowing what was happening behind the scenes. One incident really stands out. I got a call from one of my stepsisters telling me my stepmother had a fall and was in the hospital. None of them could be there, so I drove three hours to find my father in the room with my stepmother. The staff were unsure of what to do with Dad because of his dementia. It was an easy fix—I would take them home—but the nurse told me they had to stay. A social services investigation was being conducted to ensure that their living situation was safe.

The nurse was mortified when she found out I knew nothing about this. It turned out my stepmother's children had initiated the investigation. They were rather detached from my father, and that may have played a role in their decision to try to separate

our parents. Perhaps what made the most sense to them was a clean division. The investigation would give them the validation to support that split. However, for me, it became the final crack in an already fragile relationship.

I never let on that I knew about the investigation, not even when my stepbrother called to say their family had decided to move my stepmother out to California. It was framed as a practical plan for all concerned, but I exploded. My father and stepmother genuinely loved and supported one another. Splitting them up wouldn't be helpful. I managed to regain my equilibrium, but after that, I had to pretend that everything was fine when it wasn't.

After Dad died, I made the decision to take on the disbandment of his home by myself. I was the executor of his estate and reasoned that it was the most practical way to get the business done quickly. My partner lived hours away. My brother was even farther and was busy with his family, but I didn't account for the memories that would surface or the grief I would go through, and it was more isolating than I'd expected.

What made the disbandment even harder was that very few of my father's possessions had stories attached to them, and I had little idea of where he might like them to go. The thing with someone with Alzheimer's is that they lose connection to physical belongings. What my father might have cared about before, he didn't anymore. I'd ask about documents or other possessions, and he just didn't know. While I was searching through it all, I came across records surrounding my mother's death. My father never talked much about it, and I had viewed it as his personal

business. But seeing the records made me realize there were probably things I wanted to hear.

My brother and I didn't care much about the physical possessions. Each of us took one of the guns he had from his career as a law-enforcement ranger at a national park. We kept his wallet and keys, and there were some meaningful pieces of furniture he'd taken to his care unit. Those were easy, but there were a couple of others that weren't.

There was a steamer trunk my dad inherited from his family. After he retired, he'd taken a lot of time and care to restore it. It meant something to him, so it meant something to me. We needed to keep it in the family. Since I don't have any children, my nephew was the logical choice. My dad loved being around him. In his last couple of years, dementia made that harder, but on his 90th birthday, we had a party. My brother and his family came up. My stepmother was there, and so was my partner. My nephew made a PowerPoint of my dad's life. It made my dad cry, which made my nephew cry. Because of their relationship and the fact that he is the only one who will carry on our family name, I let the trunk go and passed it on to my nephew.

My reasoning was the same with my father's car. I felt a real connection to it and brought it to my house while Dad was in the care unit. It was part of him, and seeing it in the driveway and using it to get around comforted me. But the car also became a poignant reminder of the independence and freedom the dementia was slowly taking away from my dad. I struggled with the decision, but in the end, I knew he would have wanted my nephew to have it.

I did my final walkthrough of Dad's house alone. It was a relief to have most of my responsibilities behind me, but I also found it sad, seeing the spaces where Dad's things had once been, especially his empty bedroom. Yet the house was far from empty. My stepmother's things still remained, and I had no legal right to deal with them. With her in a care unit in California and her children showing no inclination to help, my only choice was to leave everything untouched. When my stepfamily did finally come, our interaction was characteristically bumpy.

They gave themselves two and a half days. Ninety percent of what was in that house was my stepmother's, and nothing had been touched since she had moved. My stepsiblings rented a big dumpster to put in the driveway, but I couldn't imagine how they'd sort through it all, and as it turned out, they didn't. When they left, a great deal of my stepmother's stuff remained, and the realtor had to clean it out before the house was listed.

Selling my father's home felt like divorcing an entire family. I know I won't go back to visit. It's better to let my recollections stay intact, not altered by the changes new owners will make. It was a physical connection to good memories—a cozy house, slightly cluttered but warm, with a great yard and garden that really reflected who my father and stepmother were. My stepmother says she misses the porches. For me, it is the breakfast room, a sunny place where we spent most of our time. But letting it all go helped me disconnect emotionally. The only thing that now remains for me is my dad's cemetery plot along the river.

In the beginning of this process, I coped by operating in project mode. Now, it's mostly about reflection. The disbandment

is not complete. Emotionally, it's uncomfortable trying to decide what to do with what remains. Some decisions are easy to make. I have one box of sweaters I'll have no problem giving away. But personal things—records, photographs, files—I didn't feel comfortable throwing them out before. I'm not pitching them in the dumpster now.

Looking back, I did the disbandment alone for efficiency's sake, but I underestimated the emotional toll it would have on me. If my brother or my partner had been with me, even just sitting there, it would have helped. You need to give yourself grace and wait for someone to join you, even if it means delaying a little. It's not only about sorting; it's grief work, too.

I've come to value the benefits of a good support system. Everyone needs to rant to someone occasionally. I've got my brother and my partner, and I'm trying to keep family ties strong. I still have my stepmother—she's dear to me, and I'll never abandon her. My dad would have wanted that, and she deserves it.

Fortunately, my brother is good at staying in touch. We talk often, and there's an added benefit to that. It reminds me of my dad; I miss conversations with him, and it feels good to keep that alive with my brother.

I'm focusing on my nephew, too. When everything was happening, I didn't have the energy. Now I do, and I want to make him a priority. That relationship, though, is kind of bittersweet. It reminds me that I have no children of my own, and thinking about that hits hard. When parents die, most people rotate to their children and grandchildren, but when you don't have those,

it's different. There's an emptiness, and you're not sure how you fit in. If you've been caregiving, it makes the ache even stronger.

Before my dad died, I spent years looking after him. Suddenly, that was over. The loss leaves you feeling a little rootless. You're not sure how to go on. With both your loved one and your responsibility gone, the spotlight focuses on the fact that you are in an awkward middle ground.

That's probably why I've felt discombobulated for a while now. There's nothing left—no children to pass down my memories and belongings to, and no parents to anchor me to my childhood.

It's a liminal space—between what was and the mystery of what might come next. I'm not sure how it will shake out. It's not a natural place. But that's okay. It will evolve. It's unsettling if you're used to rolling forward, but maybe it's good to be in the in-between for a while.

2
Scott

Scott is an artist and photographer in his late 30s whose work has been shadowed by years of caregiving, loss, and starting over. This narrative was developed in collaboration with the book's author.

Introduction

Scott becomes Sam's primary caregiver through years of friendship. He is not Sam's romantic partner or biological relative. Patterson et al. (2025) help explain Scott's experience by showing that caregiving responsibility does not always occur within traditional family structures.

They argue that nontraditional caregivers define family through commitment and daily involvement rather than biology or legality alone; that accounts for why Scott remains earnestly responsible for Sam despite the emotional and physical toll caregiving places on him.

Because nontraditional caregiving relationships can lack clear social recognition, the caregiver's emotional energy expenditure may also become difficult to publicly validate. Scott's relief, resentment, guilt, and exhaustion coexist rather than resolve neatly. Patterson et al.'s (2025) framework makes sense of that complexity, not as contradiction or failure, but as part of the

emotional reality of caregiving relationships that fall outside conventional family categories.

Scott's narrative

Fifteen years of caring for Sam cost more than I could ever have anticipated when I sat in that first waiting room, texting his mom updates. His needs consumed so much of my life that my own got shoved aside. There's nothing left in reserve—and the flashbacks still come. Whenever I see a wheelchair or someone on oxygen, it feels like a punch to my gut.

I know I'm not alone in feeling guilty about the relief that it's all over. It's okay to feel that way—doing my best has to count for something. Still, part of me can't stop asking: Was it worth it?

Sam was starting his life over when I met him in college. He had been a mall manager who had given his all to his job, but after two decades of stress, smoking, unhealthy mall food, and an endless supply of Dr. Pepper—the gig was over. He had a quintuple bypass in his late 40s. That's when he decided to go back to school and finish an art degree he'd started years before, and that's where our friendship began.

At 23, I was feeling aimless. Fresh out of a religious cult, I was studying the Bible out of guilt and to clear up the religious confusion I'd been living with. I couldn't relate to the students around me. My upbringing and life experiences had been vastly different from theirs. At home, my mother was ill, my father was disabled and addicted, and their relationship was in chaos.

Sam also felt out of place. He was 50 years old and had already had a career for longer than most of his classmates had been

alive. His father had passed away, his family was falling apart, and he'd just had his own personal wake-up call.

We became roommates around a year after we met, and a bit later, he found out he needed another heart surgery. In keeping with their dysfunctional dynamic, not one family member made it to the hospital. That's when I first became his caregiver. He didn't have anyone else in his corner, so I stepped up and kept his mother informed. He recovered faster than was expected and was back in class in no time.

After we graduated, neither of us wanted to move back to our small hometowns, so we decided to relocate to a larger city and find teaching jobs. Sam had fully healed from his surgery by then, and it seemed like the best option.

Our first apartment was a disaster, but after that we moved to a trailer home in a little park tucked back by a lake. Sam had his own bed and bathroom on one side, and mine were on the other. That was important to me because of all of Sam's stuff. He loved music and had thousands of dollars' worth of vinyl and CDs, and an overabundance of art supplies, clothes, and books—bookshelf after bookshelf of books. It helped my sanity to have a house where I could say, "That's your side, and this is mine. This common space, here, we'll keep tidy."

We lived in the trailer park for a few years, but eventually, the owners decided to sell. By that time, Sam was fully disabled. Years prior, an employer had refused to accommodate his physical limitations and fired him, and though he won unemployment for wrongful termination, that had long run out. All he was able to offer financially now was a few hundred dollars in SNAP benefits.

A friend of ours had extra room and offered to take us in. He let us convert the formal living room and dining room into a space for Sam, large enough for sleeping and sitting areas, and a place for all his stuff. He was in serious decline by then and didn't have the faculties to manage it all. I arranged the furniture so visitors would have a place to sit, but the couches never remained clear. It was maddening because we needed the space for the steady stream of people who came and went.

Throughout the years, we'd had conversations about all his stuff. It was tough because when a person is that ill, you start to wonder whether it's right to pick any battles. but I grew up in a disorganized, cluttered house that descended into a hoard. I need order—I mean, really need it. I was in management at the time and had to be at the top of my game, both at work and at home. But with things as they were, I couldn't think straight.

So, yeah, we had words, but near the end, I began to realize he was using his stuff to hang onto life. If he kept something, it meant he'd be here to use it, tomorrow, next year, whenever. At a certain point, you have to give in and protect their psyche. When they want to dictate how to store their mattress when transitioning to a hospital bed, you can't be saying, "Hey, dude, it doesn't matter. It's going out on the curb the week after you pass." You might think it, but you can't say it.

As he slipped further into his decline, my days became consumed by Sam's care. There probably should be a diagnosis for the kind of anxiety a caregiver faces. It's like soldiers in a war zone—caregivers negotiate landmines. Will there be an emergency today? Will his dinner stay down? Will his pain keep him

up? Will I get enough sleep? You're bombarded by the what-ifs. Layer in the emotional and spiritual complexities on top of that, and it's overwhelming.

Finally, Sam told me he was done being poked and prodded. He was tired of fighting and was done, just done. One of the elders in my church and his wife were godsends. They'd been social workers and helped us navigate the hospice process. With their guidance, practical matters were considerably less confusing, but there were still questions on other fronts. During his final stretch, a number of nurses and doctors would ask Sam, "How do you maintain a positive mindset?" He would always attribute it to his faith. But in our personal conversations, he still had a lot of big questions for God—why did he have to suffer? Why was he dealt these cards?

We both grew up in a faith that offered clear assurances about what comes in the hereafter, but no matter your foundation, you can't help but struggle with the question of mortality. Both of us were facing Sam's, but something other than reckoning with the unknown was gnawing at me. I had my own identity crisis to deal with. No one tells you how to help someone die. There's no way to measure if you're doing it right.

Looking back, it was a burden I shouldn't have taken on alone. I didn't ask for help loudly and often enough, and we both slipped through the cracks in our faith community. When I let them know Sam could use a visit, they would come, but until hospice was arranged, it was mostly a matter of out of sight, out of mind.

Sam passed about a month after hospice came in. When he died, I had so many conflicting emotions. There was grief, and

empathy, and then having those moments when I would think, "Oh, I need to go check on him," followed by the jolt of his absence. Even though I believe Sam now has his answers, I'm still trying to reconcile why God allowed his suffering—unless maybe to give us the opportunity to demonstrate his love to Sam while he was here.

All of that is part of a universal process I understand. The harder part is admitting my grief for Sam is stitched up with guilt. I feel unshackled, and that feels selfish. But for my own sanity, I need to change that narrative and open myself to a different kind of grieving, one that lets me accept the comfort of being unburdened, break the cycle of giving, giving, giving I fell into, and cut myself some slack for the resentment I sometimes feel.

A great deal of that bitterness is tied up in Sam's stuff. I'd lugged everything from place to place for over a decade—most of it never used. When he died, it all became mine to deal with. I was probably the worst person to inherit it. I love music, art, books—but an inheritance of this consequence? I don't even like gifts. The worst thing you can do to me is give me one. The only way I could keep my head and not let myself get completely paralyzed was to get nihilistic with his possessions.

Everybody wants to say their things are valuable, and even after their death, they'll continue to be worth something. They're not. None of it matters. Our houses are just fancy, expensive storage units. I pulled out what I wanted, and a lot of the rest went into the dumpster. An artist friend took his hoard of art supplies. What she can't use, she's going to donate to a school. That feels right. Sam is living on somewhere in those supplies.

Going through it all helped bring me some peace, but emotions stirred up again. What did those years cost me? They were my 20s and 30s. What the hell did I give up? I could have found a wife and started a family. I could have spent more time with my mother, who ended up passing during this stage. I'm left reanalyzing it. It feels more like a gradual descent into both our graves.

With Sam, I depended heavily on the belief that we are to take care of people less fortunate, but maybe I did that to an unhealthy extent. I now understand: yes, love your neighbor as yourself, but from the overflow of a full cup. Do not let your charity make you die of thirst. I still believe in the Golden Rule, but from a place where codependency doesn't take root. Don't let yourself be someone's sole lifeline. Each of us is frayed and not strong enough for that.

I still don't have all the answers. Maybe I never will. In a way, we're like a painting trying to understand the three-dimensional aspect of a sculpture. Something greater than us sees the depth. I give myself grace for the not knowing.

Sifting through a box of Sam's photographs reminded me how much I missed being behind the camera. The first words of the Bible are "In the beginning, God created," and later it says he made us in his image. Part of what that means, I believe, is we are creative beings like him. I'm ready to honor that—I'm grateful for the photographs Sam and I made together, but I'm looking forward to making new ones on my own.

3
Megan

Megan is a librarian and educator holding an MLS and EdD who has worked in higher education for more than two decades. This narrative was developed in collaboration with the book's author.

Introduction

Megan's journey is marked by the slow and painful process of separating her own identity from the emotional patterns she inherited from her mother. The concept of posttraumatic growth, introduced by Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun (2004), offers a framework for understanding her experience. Rather than focusing on recovery alone, posttraumatic growth examines how people can be transformed through prolonged emotional struggle and reflection—a process that, as Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) argue, coexists with suffering rather than replacing it.

As a child and young adult, Megan was molded by her mother's expectations and anxieties, routinely feeling responsible for soothing her emotionally while suppressing her own needs. In the midst of disbanding the family home and reflecting on their shared emotional world, Megan begins to reinterpret both her mother and herself with greater compassion.

Megan's narrative

"Megan," my mom's note begins, "Please know that a lot of this was written when I was upset. Don't read too much into it." I sit on the floor of her bedroom, a box of journals in front of me. It has been secreted under the bed, waiting for me to bend down and discover it.

Grieving, lost, and isolated, I have been disbanding the house my mom lived in for decades, her inner world now at my fingertips, pieces of her life falling into place as I turn the pages.

My mother was a complicated person, ruminating over things for days and taking everyone else along with her. There was so much self-doubt, so much insecurity, while at the same time such a sharpness and anger. My identity was defined by her. Even now, I hear her voice in my head, in the everyday decisions of my life.

From an early age, she expected me to live up to her standards. I tried, but when I couldn't, my struggle emerged as anxiety, fear, and intense homesickness—traits that became family jokes and sources of shame. Even as a child, something in me knew the relationship was tangled. I wanted to find my own ground, but my mom couldn't release her hold. We both felt at fault for a dynamic neither of us had chosen, and we never arrived at a place where we could rest in just being ourselves.

She wanted me to be everything good: a wholesome, grounded girl, but a cosmopolitan world traveler; the well-educated professional, but not too independent to wander far from home. She lived through me, and I could never quite measure up. When

I chose differently than she would have, it felt like rejection. When I followed her path, it came with the quiet judgment that I should have done more. That was our dynamic.

Yet she did want me to grow and succeed. She had a genuine desire to see me flourish. The night before I went to college, my fears got the best of me, but my mom courageously cut the apron strings and away to school I went. To my astonishment, I discovered that being there was precisely what I needed.

I was stronger by the time I graduated, but my parents pushed me one step further. My mom had always dreamed of studying abroad, so when she suggested I go to France, it felt like she was handing me something she never got to have. I went, and it proved to be one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. My confidence grew. Success became an addiction, and conquering one challenge only made me want to take on more. When the program was over, I wasn't ready to stop—I went to Germany and got a job as a nanny.

My poor mother must have wondered what she had created. This tangent was not what she had in mind. She wanted a daughter who went abroad in the normal fashion and came home to settle down in a way that looked familiar, like her friends' children, like my cousins. Despite her encouragement to expand myself in my early adult years, her ambivalence about my independence had not resolved. There was a desire for me to be the kind of person who would have such adventures, but at the same time, a fear that if I did, I would be forever far away.

I ended up coming back after a year and, instead of striking out on my own, moved in with my parents. It was not a good thing.

We went through quite a rough patch before I met my husband and got my own apartment at last.

After we married, he and I decided to go to Japan for three years to teach English. But before we left, my mom went down on her hands and knees and begged me not to go. I'm not sure why, but something in me stopped fighting then. I decided I would be the woman she needed me to be. We left for Japan, but after a year, we came home.

In retrospect, I think my mom would have taken back her pleas the moment they were uttered, but it wasn't in her makeup. For me, caving in to her neediness resulted in years of unspoken anger on my part and a shame I carry to this day.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been so hard on her; she spent her life capitulating. Maybe she harbored the same anger toward a life spent bending to the expectations of others.

She was an unplanned child who once overheard her own mother confess that the pregnancy had brought her to tears. My grandparents adored her, and it was obviously an off-the-cuff statement, but my mother embedded the painful message that she was unwanted. The burden of that stayed with her to the end.

Forging an identity that could prove her worth was a lifelong effort. Although she was a pioneer for social justice and antiracism, she steered clear of being a rebel. Her driving goal was to live an exemplary life on a larger scale than her birth family. As a young college student, she wanted to major in political science, with dreams of Washington, DC, and a life in politics. Her advisor told her it wasn't something women did. Teaching and nursing

were careers for her, so she majored in English and became a teacher. She hated every moment. It squashed her. She'd gone in with confidence and got knocked down.

In her writing, she talked about the feeling of never fitting in with her family of origin, the relief that came from living in another state, about the joy experienced from being a mother to my brother and me. She had a knack for making something magical out of everyday life. She was physically affectionate and cuddly when we were little. There was endless singing and reading. Every year, we had a winter picnic. My dad fried the chicken; my mom made the potato salad and chocolate pie. We drove out to who knows where, parked, and ate our picnic in the car. We went hunting for bittersweet, and she made wreaths and flower arrangements, placeing them all over the house. It was like two personas coexisted within her: the magic-maker and the exacting critic. But no matter how mad or disgusted she could be with us, we knew that behind it all was a rock-solid, unshakable love.

Those ups and downs were the markers of our lives until the day we found out she was dying. There was an incident in the late spring, and three weeks later, another one. They did a full body scan and came in and said, "Hey, good news—your heart's great!" And then, "But there's advanced cancer." With treatment, her life expectancy would be six months; without it, who knew. She opted for no treatment.

It was the right decision for her. Except for the first night, when her anger spilled over onto me because I was the only one who could bear the brunt of it, the ensuing weeks were surprisingly even-keeled. There was nothing but love.

She was determined to maintain control, though, and was adamant that her exit from this world be dignified. There would be no messy disruptions that would diminish her sense of self. Hospice bathed her daily. Her clothing and sheets were changed. Without fail, her hair was washed every day until she passed. Those little routines made all the difference in retaining her poise and agency.

If she had any regrets, they seemed to center around leaving her life unfinished. There was so much still ahead, even small pleasures, like our long, detailed conversations about those inconsequential dramas that seem so significant in the moment. In the middle of one of our last conversations, she piped up, "I just don't want to miss out on the rest of that story."

The week after she died, my dad decided to deal with all of her clothes. Not much else was done until he passed. Now I have a basement full of generations of things going back to my great-great-grandparents—photographs, mementos, furniture. That space was my mom's lifelong albatross. She managed to keep things organized, but had never been able to clear it out to her satisfaction. It weighed on her to her dying day because she didn't want to leave us a mess. It flooded recently, and things that we once cherished are now trash. She'd be mortified to know what I face.

Now I'm here, reading my mother's journals. They aren't the uninhibited musings of a private diary; but instead show an awareness of audience. Her thoughts have been censored—probably the worst things taken out. There are no surprises. She must have been relieved that she had enough time to curate what she left

behind. Her effort speaks to her lifelong vigilance toward editing how she was perceived.

Still, the journals are real. They're poignant. Reading them is reassuring. "My children are here," she wrote after receiving her diagnosis. "They've been very present. It seems like they love me like I love them." Her words are cathartic, I think, for both of us. She was processing as she wrote and arrived at a different point from where she began.

I have, too. One of my first memories is of my mom teaching me to write, and I've kept a journal since sixth grade. I'm truly grateful to her for that. My own words have helped dissipate the anger and frustration that have been tangled up in my grief.

Differentiating from my mother is slow, painful work. Yet, as I grieve, I'm stepping into my own authority. Oddly, it's my mother guiding me as I nurture that identity. Something in me has softened toward her and toward my life. The expectations—the censure—were not indicative of her feelings toward us. Instead, there was love. That truth comes through both our writings. I have pages of her voice to prove it. For the first time in a long time, I feel a bit of confidence. I am less alone—she has been with me this whole time.

4
Robbin

Robbin is a never-married public service professional and part-time costume designer. She is learning to navigate the pending disbandment of her grandmother's home and living with a mother who has dementia.

Introduction

For Robbin, what begins as overwhelming emotional exhaustion becomes a process of clarity, boundary-setting, and redefinition of what love and family can look like. She gradually realizes that relationship patterns with her mother and grandmother have paralyzed her, and they could easily continue with her daughter unless she consciously makes different choices.

Research on family enmeshment clarifies some of the emotional dynamics surrounding Robbin's experience. Hann-Morrison (2012) describes maternal enmeshment as a family pattern in which emotional boundaries become blurred. Robbin captures this emotional fusion when she describes herself, her mother, and grandmother as the "Three Musketeers", functioning less as separate individuals and more as a single emotional unit.

Through therapy, caregiving, distance, and raising her daughter, she begins recognizing how material possessions, gifting, obligation, and emotional dependency have defined her

understanding of love. Anderson's (2024) *Difficult Mothers, Adult Daughters* helps frame how these emotionally fused mother–daughter relationships are commonly maintained through guilt, caretaking, and dependency across generations. Robbin's transformation emerges as she slowly separates love from obligation and possessions, choosing instead to build a healthier emotional inheritance for her daughter grounded in boundaries and intentional connection.

Robbin's narrative

When I was first asked to contribute a narrative to this book, my life was in free fall, overwhelmed by a glut of decisions and possessions. Juggling a mother with dementia, a grandmother surrounded by clutter, a house I didn't want to keep, and a daughter I longed to guide well was mind-numbing. I had to sit in that chaos for months and learn how to untangle it. But although this crisis brought everything to the surface, the impetus for change has been present for a while.

A few years ago, life surprised me. A child stepped into my world, and my sense of what was normal reset. She was 15 and a ward of the state. That came with baggage, but I knew right away she was meant to be my daughter, and less than 18 months later, she was. But because of the childhood she had endured and because of what I'm still trying to unravel from mine, I know how easily she could get caught in the same snare I have been.

My family's always been female-centric. Smack dab in the middle stands my grandmother, sculpted in lines and angles by a childhood of poverty. I didn't understand how dire her early

years were until she told me that as kids she and her siblings would rummage through garbage cans to find food. At 14, she tried to escape. She quit school, got married, and had my mother at 15. Soon after, my aunt was born. My grandmother told me she didn't dare rest after giving birth, afraid her husband might harm the baby. She divorced him, married a carbon copy, had two more children, dealt with more abuse, and divorced again.

During the 1960s, she waitressed in a restaurant across from a fire station. Her regular customers knew her circumstances. The ladies would bring her kid's clothes, and the men left her extra money. One of those men was a firefighter. He married my grandmother and moved her and her kids into a house he had designed and built. Now she was legitimate, with a house and a stable life.

Throughout the years, my grandfather remodeled and added space. Every addition only gave my grandmother permission to collect thousands of dollars' worth of things. Now, everywhere you look, there are knickknacks, cut glass, blue and white ceramic pieces, angels, you name it, inhabiting multiple cabinets, bookcases, tables, and dressers. My friend calls it the gift shop, and I suppose it says something about our enmeshed family dynamic that I played a small role in filling it up.

My mother, grandmother, and I almost functioned as a single unit when I was younger. My grandmother was hardly more than a child when she had Mom; as the oldest, my mother helped raise her younger siblings while Grandma worked, and after my grandfather died, my mom moved into Grandma's house and never left. My grandmother, who had never been alone, wasn't

about to start. I didn't think it odd at the time, already firmly caught up in their bonds. My mother had married young, and when I was nine months old, my father left. We lived with my grandparents for a while, and they helped raise me. I became, in many ways, the daughter my grandmother had never had with my grandfather. For me, the lines of identity were blurry. We weren't a grandmother, mother, and daughter living separate lives; instead, we were the "Three Musketeers."

I remember our rituals. Each holiday season, we would line up early Saturday morning at the department store, ready to rush in and grab the newest Christmas houses or Santas. We were the ladies who went shopping, had lunch, and got our hair done. That was our life. Weekends revolved around buying. We'd come home from the mall with $500 worth of stuff. The bags would stay hidden in the trunk. When my grandfather wasn't around, my grandmother and my mom would sneak them into the house.

When I look back and scrutinize this shopping culture and the ways it bound me up with my grandmother and mother, I realize it was a symptom of something more pervasive. The foundation of our family enmeshment rested on how my grandmother used money to manipulate my mother and me and keep us tied to her. Money moved in secrecy in my family. Guilty purchases slipped into the house, and my grandparents even passed money to my mother and me behind each other's backs, making us complicit in the deceit. In the background, there were arguments about finances. My mother walked an uncomfortable line. She was a single working woman with a daughter to house and feed, ashamed to ask for money but unable to wait. On the surface, my grandparents' behavior looked like generosity, and perhaps for

my grandfather it was, but with my grandmother, it came with a price.

For a long time, I played her game. I was dutiful. I'd call, check in: "Do you want anything at the grocery store? Bananas?" She gave me money, so what was I supposed to do? Keep close, keep codependent. That was the unspoken arrangement.

What hurts most is that my grandmother can't acknowledge that I am now financially stable and have my own money. I no longer need hers. Neither she nor my mother ever bought a house, but at 43, as a single woman who has never been married, I did. And Grandma also believes what a home means to her is what it should mean to all of us. When she came up to see the house shortly after I bought it, she asked, "So you're settled here now?" I told her, "No. This isn't the last house I'm going to live in." She looked shocked. My grandfather had given her a house. She'd made it her last stop. But I knew this place wouldn't be mine. All the boxes in my garage prove it. I've lived here 11 years and have never fully unpacked, proof of a decade in limbo.

Incongruously, my things might not be unpacked, but my mom's stuff has found its way in. A couple of years back, when her dementia advanced, I moved her out of Grandma's and in with me. Now, every time we visit my grandmother, Mom finds things she wants to bring back. There are bags of her belongings sitting unopened on the floor of her closet. She loves stuffed animals and tchotchkes, has always been a clotheshorse, and would keep buying T-shirts in every color of the rainbow if I let her. Eventually, the weight of it overwhelmed me—not only my mom's stuff and her dementia, but my whole life. The clutter in my house was

unbearable and so was the clutter in my head. I was in such a painful place emotionally, I started therapy. When the counselor asked me what my goal was, I said, "Clarity." I wanted clarity on everything: my job, my house, my mom, my grandmother, my daughter.

Eleven years ago, I moved two hours away to get out of the bubble containing my grandmother, my mother, and me. But it became clear I hadn't escaped. After an argument concerning my daughter, we were estranged for quite some time, but my grandmother has had two years to sit with what living without Mom means. "Living alone is for the birds," she says. Well, that's what happens. When you're mean to people, you end up alone. My stepping back made her feel that loneliness, and she gained enough insight that we patched things up.

I've carried a lot of anger toward my grandmother and haven't completely worked through it, but I'm feeling more tolerant. I realize she's never gotten out of survival mode. Her grip on life is white-knuckle tight. She can't process her emotions, so she keeps people in a chokehold. Money became a tool for comfort and to keep people close out of fear of abandonment. I remember a conversation where she admitted, "I have all of this because I never had anything." It means nothing to me, but it means everything to her. She's attached to the memories, and that's how you get stuck with the stuff.

She is slowly resigning herself to the changes in her life. In the past when we visited, she always asked my mother, "When are you moving back?" I told her Mom and I were going to stay put. I've found my place, and my mother's staying with me. Grandma

said, "Well, I've realized everybody's got to do what they've got to do."

Knowing I'm not coming back, that I'm unraveling the decades of enmeshment in which I've been wrapped, gives me more clarity about my grandmother's house. I have no real attachment to anything in it. The attachment I had was to my grandfather and the house he built, but it's not that house anymore. I don't need anything from the inside, but if it's demolished, I might take a brick from the outside in honor of my grandfather.

I've learned love isn't wrapped up in money or things. One thing about being an only child: the focus is on you—presents for every occasion, for birthdays, for holidays, because it was a Tuesday. But gifting can be overwhelming, even abusive. You get weighed down and lose touch with what is important. Now, I try not to give my daughter things, even though the desire is strong. Being in her presence—loving her, catching up, sharing her life—that's enough.

A few days before New Year's, I called my grandmother up. I told her I wanted to make New Year's Day lunch at her house. I was feeling nostalgic. I wanted black-eyed peas and cornbread like we used to do. Things are changing, and our future is uncertain. She's 92, and she's frail. She's still mean, but she's frail. We had a good time. And while I was cooking, I was thinking, "I've come full circle. This is the kitchen I grew up in. I used to sit there on the counter and lick the beaters. My grandfather showed me how to make eggs and bacon here." I started cleaning out Grandma's overstuffed kitchen drawers. Surprisingly, she didn't interfere. My daughter, carrying some things my mother had given her, came

out of my mother's old room, where the two of them had been poking around. My grandmother asked what she had. My daughter told her, and my grandmother said, "Okay. If you see anything else you want, take it." Those words had never been uttered to my daughter. This was the woman who, not very long ago, had said she never wanted her great-granddaughter in her house again. That's progress.

5
Pamela

Pamela is an educator and caregiver whose mother has dementia. She is slowly downsizing a home full of belongings, many of which are rooted in their Native American heritage.

Introduction

Brave Heart et al.'s (2011) work on historical trauma provides an important framework for understanding Pamela's narrative because it explains how trauma can persist across generations, shaping emotional expression long after the original events occurred. Historical trauma is cumulative and collective. Rather than disappearing, these experiences become embedded within family systems—transmitted silently across generations.

Pamela's narrative reflects many of these patterns. Her mother and father were both defined by severe childhood trauma. Pamela recognizes this complexity, describing her mother as loving while also bearing unresolved emotional injuries.

The framework also helps explain the contradictions within Pamela's caregiving role. Although her childhood was marked by abuse, she remains devoted to her aging mother. The narrative demonstrates how intergenerational trauma does not erase love, loyalty, or cultural values. Instead, caregiving becomes a space of coexistence.

Pamela's narrative

My mom's house feels more peaceful now than it did when I was growing up, but when you walk in, it's like a heavy blanket settles over you. I don't know if it's bad energy or bad memories, but sometimes it feels cursed. Still, it's home. My mom's there.

My three youngest children and I live with her, and together we see to her needs. She tries hard to be independent but needs someone nearby at all times. At 87, she's frail and was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She's feeling defeated, and I'm a bit scared, but it's my turn to be here for her.

My mom was born in a hogan in the heart of the Navajo Nation, close to the Hopi Mesas. Her grandfather was a Hopi trader who offered jewelry and supplies in exchange for my grandmother's hand, but come to find out, he already had a wife on the Hopi Reservation. My grandmother chased him away, but she was pregnant with my mom and was quickly married to someone else. Back then, you didn't have a choice; you married whoever your family told you to.

Sadly, misfortune kept finding her. Two more marriages, two more children, two more deaths. That hardship left no one untouched. My mom, the oldest of the children, had it especially hard. Because she was half Hopi, her stepfather, who was Navajo, shunned her, and she was left to care for her younger siblings. Her stepfather was a cruel man, and my grandmother didn't go out of her way to protect my mom. Eventually, she was sent to live with distant family members, raised apart from her mother and siblings. A granduncle, a Baptist preacher who ran a mission school, ended up being my mom's saving grace. She enrolled at

the school in third grade. Her family never brought her back for vacations, but that lack of attention meant she was far away from the troubles at home.

My dad's childhood was no easier. He continually ran away because of his parents' abuse, but his father would drag him back and chain him to a tree for days to keep him from leaving again. When he was nine years old, my dad started drinking to escape the cruelty. He was shipped off to boarding school, and that's where he met my mom. He left soon after, but they reconnected later in a summer training program. It was there that my mom became pregnant with their first child, Linda, who she later gave up for adoption. Not long after that, my dad went into the military. When he returned, my parents married, but the horrors of their childhood were going to be a challenge that would shadow their entire life together.

I don't think my mom's ever gotten over the trauma she experienced from her childhood or her marriage to my father. In our culture, it's instilled in you early on that you don't hang on to it. What was, was, and you move on. After she gave up her first child, my mother had three other children with my dad. When we were little, she wasn't the best of mothers, but I try to focus on the good times, and I believe she did the best she could with what she knew how to do. No one showed her how to raise children.

My mom worked, and when she wasn't at work, she was emotionally checked out. Sometimes, she'd physically escape to get away from it, not for long, maybe a weekend, but that meant we were left alone with my dad, even when he was intoxicated. I don't have a lot of memories of my mom caring for me one-on-one. It was my sister, Tina, who did that.

I didn't grow up hearing "I love you" or getting hugs. My parents were both raised without love or affection and didn't know how to give it. I used to watch my friends and the tenderness in their homes and wonder, "Why don't we have that? Does my mom really love me?"

Our home was not the safest of places, and neither was our world. When I was six, I was assaulted by a neighbor. My brother Brian was the only one who picked up on it—he knew something traumatic had happened, but I couldn't speak about it. At that age, you don't know any better. The offender had threatened me with a gun, so I kept everything inside. Five years later, it all came out. The perpetrator had abused 12 other girls in the neighborhood. I had two close friends who lived nearby, and when I found out that the same thing had happened to them, I opened up. The older sister of one of them told a police officer during a school safety talk, and that's how everything surfaced.

At first my parents didn't believe me. They were friends with the offender's family, and they didn't want to rock the boat. I don't think they knew how to handle the news, honestly. They didn't have that ability.

Part of that might be because reputation was important to my parents. Our family seemed admirable, and my mom always wanted to maintain that.

Mom's a beautiful lady. She carried herself well and wanted us to do the same. We couldn't leave the house without being presentable. She would say, "You represent the family. People will judge you. You need to show that you were taught to be respectable, caring, compassionate, and properly dressed."

My mother did, of course, love us. She provided for us. We didn't have the best of everything, but we had what we needed. We had to make do with one pair of shoes for the year and handmade clothes, but we always had the best food. She wanted what she considered to be the best, never used generic labels, and always cooked a three-course meal.

Still, the traumatic parts of our childhood weren't easy to deal with. After years of boarding school and military influence, our parents treated us like little soldiers. Everything had to be spotless—everything perfect. Affection and praise weren't part of that world, only criticism. Dad inflicted pain on us daily, and Mom never saved us from it. She had the power to do so but didn't and left us in it. There were reasons for her behavior, but to this day, I still hold a little resentment for that. Those patterns of anger and excessive discipline are hard to break free from. Even though I tried my best to change what had become ingrained, I was still frustrated and angry as an adult and didn't yet understand my trauma. My two oldest children bore the mark of that. I'm not proud of how I raised them, but fortunately, my kids are okay, though it took time and reflection to correct the hurts.

My mom treats her grandkids differently than she dealt with us. They're told they're loved. She hugs them. I'll hug her, and she's able to accept it without cringing. She deserves recognition for that growth and all the things done right. She's a retired social worker who put 30 years into the system and gained a reputation for being a caring person. Kids who had nowhere to go were always welcomed into our house, and they still come back and thank her.

Kindness and compassion are core principles in Navajo teachings. You learn that you don't cheat; you don't steal; you don't hurt. But compassion is the core. Kindness wasn't always given us, but we were raised to give it.

By the time I was an adult, my relationship with my mother had evolved. I was able to see her more as a victim, and she invested more time in me. When I divorced and was raising my kids alone, she was there for me and helped when I needed her most. What she didn't do for me as a kid, she did for me then. And now, the tables have turned once again. My mom is dependent on me.

She's a hoarder, and we need to work with that. We're slowly decluttering, but because she grew up with nothing, everything she has now brings value to her life, and she will hang on to it forever.

When she can't locate things, she gets upset. She can't always pinpoint what she's looking for, but she's certain it's missing. Not knowing makes her uncomfortable, as if she can't protect anything anymore. Her collections are her safety net. They don't have anything to do with decoration; they're about her security.

We still have a lot of my dad's things, cultural items that meant a lot to him. His ceremonial eagle fans, gourds, and tribal cradleboards represent the good parts of who he was. They're precious to us, and we keep them like we would keep diamonds, stored safely, not displayed. Many were used in the Native American Church, where he was an active member. During the holidays, he went above and beyond to make them special for us. It meant so much to see my father in a healthy setting, surrounded by a sense of togetherness and comfort.

Traditionally, in Navajo culture, the possessions of the one who has passed are given away after the fourth day to release their spirit. We did that with my grandmother. In our culture, we share. We're supposed to let our items go instead of hanging on to them.

Our family no longer follows that practice exactly, but with my mom, there will be a day when her things are brought out.

Health-wise, Mom's always been a strong person, but lately I've noticed signs of depression. She cares less about her appearance. I have to tell her, "Mom, we're going out in public," when she's about to leave in clothes that are mismatched.

I don't know if that's part of age or if she's lost some of her drive. She often says, "Why is God keeping me here so long? Why is he doing this to me?"

When Brian died about seven years ago, my mom's desire to live slipped a bit. Then two years later, my dad passed. Even though their life together had been difficult, they were each other's person, for better or for worse. She depended on him more than she'd ever admit, and when he died, her drive to live faded even more.

But right around the time our dad died, something unexpected happened. We found our oldest sister, the child Mom had given up for adoption. As long as I can remember, from the time she first told us about her first child to the moment we found her, Mom never stopped hoping. She told us to keep looking for her, to keep praying, and to never give up. Now that Linda is here, Mom's holding on a little bit stronger than before. She's getting

to know her firstborn, to live a few more years with her, and in that, there's a small piece of healing.

Even so, I can see her decline. Her memory is fading. She talks more about being tired, about wanting to be with Brian. It seems she's torn between worlds. Part of her ready to rest, part of her still tethered. Maybe it's love that keeps her going. Love for her grandkids, who make her proud; love for Linda, who came back after all these years. Maybe it's love for a hardscrabble life, one where she fought every step of the way to survive, where she struggled to provide for us, and where she made monumental errors along the way. A life scarred by trauma and abuse, both received and given, yet one in which she never conceded defeat.

6
Emotional journeys conclusion

Summary

Each of the five narrators in this section shares recognizable ground, most notably with their sparring emotions—love and anger, obligation and resentment, relief and grief. They all experience what Gilligan et al. (2015) remind us of: opposing emotions do not neutralize each other. One must come to terms with the juxtaposition. But beneath all the narratives, and perhaps most significantly, each participant finds themselves in what Jacob calls "a liminal space", suspended between the caregiving and disbanding that have recently impacted their lives.

Ekerdt et al. (2004) suggest mortal liminality is one of the defining characteristics of later-life household disbandment. The threshold crossed is marked by increasing restrictions for the older adult, as disbandment is typically prompted by actual or anticipated age-related limitations and an understanding that time and future choices are more finite.

Liminality was first defined by French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in 1909 to describe the threshold state between a coming-of-age ritual and the advent of adulthood (van Gennep,

2019). But instead of a ceremony recognizing maturity, our five participants share a rite of passage—the transition from caregiver to bereaved. Jacob, Scott, and Megan lose people. Robbin and Pamela lose the connection to a living person whose mind is being erased by dementia.

van Gennep's anthropological framework of liminality eventually extends into both psychological and spatial dimensions. Victor Turner (1969/1977) brings liminality into the psychological, describing it as a "betwixt and between" state of being in which the roles and relationships that once defined a person no longer exist and new ones have not yet formed. Others extend the concept into physical space, identifying transitory environments defined by anonymity and passage rather than belonging. Read alongside these frameworks, the earlier work of Gaston Bachelard (1958/1994), in his *The Poetics of Space,* reveals what both dimensions share—that physical spaces are shelters for consciousness itself. He describes a forgotten cupboard holding raisins as a vessel of anticipation and memory. The attic symbolizes reflection, order, and conscious understanding, while the basement represents the hidden emotional terrain of fear, loss, and the unconscious. Dismantling a home is never simply the removal of possessions. It is also the unraveling of the psychological spaces in which a life has been lived. It is as much an interior act as an exterior one.

Turner's psychological liminality is visible in each narrator's loss of the role that, for a time, organized their life. Without the structure of caregiving to anchor him, no parents behind him, no children ahead, Jacob does not know where he fits. Scott is caught between the value of the genuine friendship Sam represented

and the toll 15 years of caregiving exacted, still reckoning with the resentment he carries and unable yet to say whether it was worth it. The space Megan is traversing is replete with her mother's emotional imprint, an identity so thoroughly inherited she is only now learning to distinguish it from her own. Robbin's losses are still accumulating as her grandmother declines and her mother's mind disappears, and the different kind of life she is trying to build has yet to take shape. For Pamela, the threshold is cultural as much as personal. She is positioned between the teachings she was raised with and the family patterns that violated them, watching her mother caught in her own suspension, "part of her ready to rest, part of her still tethered."

Bachelard's process is also visible in each of these narratives. Jacob performs his final walkthrough alone through rooms systematically emptied of possessions and chooses not to return after the sale, unwilling to have his memories diluted by others' reimagining of the home; the only space left to him is his father's grave. For Scott, the space he is left with after Sam's death is saturated with someone else's consciousness—the vinyl, the art supplies, the books—and getting nihilistic with the possessions is his way of clearing Sam's memory from the space so he can begin to inhabit it as his own. Mid-dismantling, Megan confronts two parallel reckonings: the flooded basement, her mother's lifelong albatross, its contents now decomposing, forcing what her mother could never bring herself to do; and the journals, her mother's curated interior world, generating memories that lead her to say, "She has been with me this whole time." Robbin knows the disbandment of her grandmother's house is still ahead, but the interior work has already begun. She finds herself thinking

she might take a brick when the time comes, a token to remember her grandfather, and discard the rest, physically and mentally. Pamela's mother's house is another matter entirely. It will not be emptied of possessions as it passes to Pamela, but it will need to be emptied of what it carries—trauma, cultural memory, the weight of a life that fought every step of the way to survive. "I don't know if it's bad energy or bad memories," Pamela says, "but sometimes it feels cursed." The house is waiting for her mother's passing and for the demon it has never been allowed to shed to finally be dispelled so better memories can fill the space.

In the midst of this discomfiting ambiguity, all five participants are moving toward the other side. Jacob gives himself grace and finds comfort in his brother and nephew. Scott picks up a camera. Megan's mother's journals show her that she is less alone than she thought. Making lunch in her grandmother's kitchen, Robbin recognizes how far she has come. And with her mother's firstborn child coming back into their lives, Pamela takes pleasure in watching her mother rally. None of them has crossed the threshold entirely. Each is still in the in-between, but with a certain acceptance of it, waiting.

Engaging the material

Discussion questions

Personal

1. Intergenerational ambivalence describes holding love, frustration, obligation, and resentment toward a family member at the same time. Where in your own family relationships have conflicting emotions coexisted, and how have you made peace with the juxtaposition?

2 Consider a period of cumulative stress in your own life. How did its gradual buildup differ from a single crisis, and what did you notice about your emotional capacity over time?
3. Liminality names the threshold state between a former identity and one not yet formed. When have you occupied an in-between space after a role in your life ended, and what helped you move toward the other side?

Theoretical

1. Apply the concept of the emotionally ambivalent experience to two or more narratives in this section. How do the narrators demonstrate that opposing emotions coexist without diminishing one another?
2. Compare how historical/intergenerational trauma operates in one narrative with how maternal enmeshment operates in another. What distinguishes trauma transmitted across generations from emotional fusion within them, and where do the two overlap?
3. Using the poetics of space, analyze how at least two narrators' interactions with physical spaces externalize their interior emotional work.

Professional

1. How might a practitioner assess where a client falls along the caregiving trajectory, and how should intervention differ for a caregiver early in the role versus one approaching or past its end?
2. Mortal liminality suggests that disbandment confronts older adults with the finitude of time and future choices. How can professionals working with families in transition acknowledge this threshold without pathologizing the grief that accompanies it?

3. What clinical value is there in normalizing intergenerational ambivalence for clients who express guilt over their mixed feelings toward a care recipient? What risks arise if a practitioner reinforces only the positive or only the negative pole?

Further activities

1. Reflect on a caregiving, family, or emotionally demanding relationship in your own life that involved conflicting emotions at the same time. Create a two-column chart identifying moments of connection on one side and moments of tension, exhaustion, resentment, or grief on the other. Then write a brief paragraph explaining how the coexistence of these emotions compares to the emotional ambivalence described in this section.
2. Assess a caregiving-related situation from your own professional field or area of study through the lens of this section. Identify ways emotional ambivalence, family dynamics, or cumulative stress may have been overlooked within the situation. Then propose two practical changes that could better support caregivers as relational and emotional participants rather than only providers of care.
3. Develop a visual "emotional timeline" tracing the caregiving journey of one narrator across the section. Include major emotional shifts, relational turning points, moments of conflict, and periods of exhaustion, connection, grief, or identity change. Then write a short reflection explaining how the timeline illustrates the idea that caregiving emotions evolve rather than remain fixed.

Voices in the conversation

- Albom, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Doubleday, 1997. A journalist records his dying professor's final lessons on living.
- Edelman, Hope. *Motherless Daughters*. Addison-Wesley, 1994. How early mother loss shapes women across their lives, including their parenting.
- Elliott, Alicia. *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*. Doubleday Canada, 2019. Memoir tracing intergenerational trauma through the specific details of her own life, connecting each to the longer history of colonial violence.
- Knott, Helen. *In My Own Moccasins*. University of Regina Press, 2019. An unflinching account of addiction, sexual violence, and intergenerational Indigenous trauma.
- Mailhot, Terese Marie. *Heart Berries*. Counterpoint, 2018. A poetic memoir of reservation life, PTSD, and the weight of colonialism.
- Ramírez-Valles, Jesús. *Queer Aging: The Gayby Boomers and a New Frontier for Gerontology*. Oxford University Press, 2016. First-person narratives from gay men navigating aging, AIDS aftermath, and caregiving barriers.

Section 2
Complicated relationships

Learning objectives

After engaging with this section, the reader will:

1. Identify how pre-existing relational dysfunction shapes the caregiving experience.
2. Distinguish ordinary relational tension, negotiable across a lifetime, from dysfunction that caregiving intensifies beyond negotiation.
3. Examine how their own boundaries around primary territory influence what they perceive as intrusion in a caregiving relationship.

Introduction

Caregiving and disbandment are never just practical matters—tasks with a clear beginning and end. The role's physical and emotional demands put informal caregivers at heightened

risk: anxiety and depression run high, and isolation, declining health, and financial pressure commonly follow (Cejalvo et al., 2025). This is frequently the baseline, and it exacts a toll, surfacing what was already present in families and giving existing tensions a new arena in which to operate. Relational Dialectics Theory suggests that these tensions are not unusual or pathological; rather, they are ongoing relational contradictions that people negotiate throughout their lives (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996).

However, the narratives in this section move beyond this negotiation and into something more entrenched in the family dynamics, relationships in which the foundation was already unstable before caregiving began. Unlike emotional journeys, which primarily reflect an individual's internal emotional experience, complicated relationships foreground the interpersonal tensions, contradictions, and negotiations that emerge between people as they navigate caregiving, aging, loss, and household disbandment together.

Dysfunction can deepen when caregiving becomes necessary or disbandment arrives. Family members are thrust into close quarters—physically or emotionally—ill-equipped to manage both the demands of the moment and the relational history already evident. Incompatibility in how each person handles stress increases carer burden (Romano et al., 2020); for those already experiencing high emotional distress, poor or conflicted family relationships compound it further. The caregiver's load is measurably linked to family support—when emotional bonds are weak and families struggle to adapt and share responsibility, what might otherwise buffer the burden is simply not there (Kimura et al., 2019). That absence takes multiple forms across

these narratives: geographic isolation, marital dysfunction, and family indifference. It also manifests in something quieter—the failure to acknowledge the work itself. Caregivers who perform high levels of care without recognition fare demonstrably worse than those whose efforts are seen (Macias, 2023). When that lack of acknowledgment is layered onto an already strained relationship, the emotional reckoning that follows is seldom clean or quick. Pauline Boss (2010) describes this as ambiguous loss: a loss that remains unclear and has no resolution, leaving those who experience it stuck between competing emotional states with no clear path forward.

In some of these narratives, the relational strain is not only present but inherited—patterns of loyalty, enmeshment, and emotional management passed down through families and reenacted, commonly without awareness, in the caregiving relationship itself. Bowen's Family Systems Theory reminds us that the relational dynamics caregivers navigate are rarely original to them; what surfaces in these moments has been in the family long before the current crisis arrived (Calatrava et al., 2022).

The narratives that follow represent six distinct experiences of caregiving within already complicated relationships, presented in order of escalating relational intensity, from those in which dysfunction is chronic but diffuse to those in which it is direct, acute, and untenable.

7
Sara

Sara is a Gen Z artist devoted to championing her grandmother's integrity and safeguarding her stories and belongings.

Introduction

Sara's experience focuses on the struggle to preserve the humanity of someone increasingly reduced by others to labels such as "hoarder", "senile", or "problem". For Sara's grandmother, possessions are not random objects but symbolic extensions of her life. Family members view the accumulation as pathology and burden, while Sara understands it as an expression of her grandmother's loneliness and artistic identity. Sara's efforts to reframe her grandmother's situation find little traction within the family, and that isolation is not incidental: supporters of individuals with hoarding typically experience strained family relationships, particularly when other relatives distance themselves or respond with criticism rather than empathy (Dennis, Rosen and Salkovskis, 2025).

Sara's narrative

When she was young, my father's mother was a free spirit, with long, beautiful hair flying as she rode her horse bareback in Tennessee. She was an artist and in love with the world. I still view

my grandmother through this lens. But for most of my family, that earlier version is no longer what defines her, if it ever did. Instead, she has come to embody the place she lives in rather than being known for the extraordinary person she is. Many would call her a hoarder. Her house has some classic signs. It's full of stuff, and there's a smell. It's pretty dirty, and according to my father, it has been heading in this direction since his childhood. Once he and his siblings left home, the empty spaces began to fill up.

I want to be realistic about the situation, but instead of hoarder, I think of my grandmother as a "chronic keeper". When people hear "hoarder", they think of the TV show, huge piles of trash, empty milk cartons, and bags of dog poop. I don't want people to view my grandmother that way. Still, if you walk into her house, you might be hard-pressed to see it the way I do.

Although she wants to have a house to be proud of, the relationship with her things has a stronger pull, and if you really look at her house, you realize that nothing is being kept randomly. She's so good at seeing beauty and potential in everything that it's hard for her to let go. But more than anything, her collecting comes down to love. My grandmother is trying to protect family history and the people she's loved and lost. She's still grieving the deaths of her parents and grandparents, so their belongings are sacred. A piece of paper with a heart her grandkid made is treated the same way. She could use help loosening her grip, but there aren't many in her life who try to understand or reach out a helping hand.

My grandmother has been married to my grandfather for 50 years, and she's quietly endured a lot. When she talks about

their relationship, her pain is evident. He has narcissistic tendencies, was an abusive father, and most people in my family don't view him as a good person. She had a stroke a while ago, and because he won't drive her around, she hasn't been able to go out with friends. Now her whole world is the place she struggles with the most, and she's been forced to confront it alone, without any help from him.

My mom and dad understand what she's dealing with. There's hoarding on my mom's side as well. But it's always been a bone of contention with my dad's twin brothers. They're very well off and married to women with Type-A personalities. Their homes are minimalist and very clean. My grandmother tells me you could eat off their floors, and I know she's feeling shame when she says it.

I let my dad deal with his brothers, but I've taken it upon myself to try to change my cousins' viewpoint. To them, our grandmother is a hoarder and kind of senile. That's the image their parents gave them, and that's what they're going with. They're completely indifferent to what goes on and haven't spent much time getting to know her as a person. When my boyfriend and I moved in together, I told one of my cousins, who was about to start living with his girlfriend as well, that our grandmother had given me some beautiful art and wooden furniture. I said it in a grateful way, but that's not what he heard. Instead, he said, "Don't tell her that we're moving in together. She'll try to pawn her stuff off on us."

It's surface-level things like that that show me what my cousins think. They don't want to get their hands dirty and don't want any

of her stuff landing in their laps. But if they would take down their walls, deal with the smell of cat pee for an hour, and spend time with her, it would make her entire year. It gets to me because there's a lot of weird, unspoken tension, and I'm not sure how to get through it. A lot more has to be weeded through before I can really advocate for her.

As painful as all this is, I can totally see where my family is coming from. They want to get a lot done before my grandmother passes. But it's been years now, and I feel we've learned what's possible. For all of her things, the thought that others might throw away something that has real significance to her makes her anxious. Her hope is that they will all end up in the hands of someone who will appreciate them, and she's going to keep them until they do. So the answer isn't to throw all her stuff away. She's lonely and needs love more than she needs to get rid of things. While she's here, we need to respect her connection to her things, listen, and treat her as a person.

Five years ago, after I graduated from high school, I helped my grandmother clean out her garage. It was packed floor to ceiling with stuff, much of it art supplies. Even I agreed that it had gotten out of control. There were bunches of scraps for projects, carts of books, nasty paint brushes, half-used paint tubes with dried crusty acrylic paint, and craft supplies. It was a monumental task, and it took a lot of resolve from both of us to clear out the sheer volume of what had accumulated. In the beginning, I wasn't in a place where I felt comfortable telling her what to throw away, so as we sorted, I just listened, and she began to tell me stories.

Something shifted between us during those months. She'd always been my confidant, but I became hers as well. She began saying things like, "I've never told anyone else this story," or "No one understands how valuable this is." It was then I knew I wanted to learn more about her than I wanted to throw away stuff.

Throughout her life, she's held a lot close to her chest. There's so much she hasn't shared. Even with me, the answers tend to come in short snippets, but when I ask, more comes out. That's how I learned about a marriage before my grandfather, an abusive one that no one in the family knew anything about, not even my dad. When I asked her about it, her answer was short but willing. He was very abusive, and they weren't married long. She met my grandfather not long after. When I asked why no one knew, she said, "Well, no one's ever really cared. It's never come up."

A little while ago, when my boyfriend and I moved in together, there was turmoil in the family about my decision. I expected my grandmother, who is very religious, to react the same way. But she didn't. She said, "You don't want to get married to someone who is not the right person. Whatever you need to do to figure out that he's the one, do it before you commit to a lifetime together."

I remember feeling surprised. But knowing the story about her first husband, maybe I shouldn't have been. There was a kind of solidarity in her response. It told me a lot about her concern for me but also about her own life and marriages. That part of it makes me a little sad. I think if she could go back, there might be a different decision. She might have chosen someone who

would have let her be herself, that young girl riding bareback on a horse, hair streaming.

My grandmother is confident I will keep the stories safe, including the darker ones, not in a "don't tell anyone" way but in an "I trust you enough to share this" way. With the stories that concerned her things, at first, I found myself thinking, "Who cares about the story? No way we're keeping it," but she would convince me of something's worth, and I couldn't help but believe her. Now when she mentions certain items repeatedly, I make a mental note because that usually means they carry more significance than something with only a passing story attached. It's one of the ways I know which things to save from the dumpster, the ones that will keep her memory alive.

I think the garage also marked a turning point for her. There's more clearing and sorting going on in her house now, and although I've moved away, she is still making visible progress. She's been vacuuming more, and the living room and kitchen look better. A lot of effort has gone into my dad's old bedroom. But there's still a lot to do, and at the heart of that is her art.

For years, she's been painting portraits, scenery, and pets on rocks. Ladders with shelves are stacked with her creations. And now it's shells. The living room has shell sculptures everywhere. That's what she creates all day, and they're piling up. Because of the stroke and the lack of support from my grandfather, she's been forced to become a homebody, and her creating instinct has been kicked into overdrive. Without that side of her, she wouldn't be herself, but it has become a burden and opened her up to a lot of criticism from our family. I genuinely think her

things are cool, even though they're dusty and some are kitschy. For my dad's brothers, it's only more clutter. One of my uncles has literally said, "If you can't get a handle on this, we're just going to get a roll-off and dump it."

My dad defends her. "She's almost a prisoner now. If you force her to throw away all her art and everything she likes, what do you think she would do all day? This is probably keeping her alive. It's keeping her from going insane."

It must be heartbreaking to know how her family feels. My grandmother hasn't felt seen for most of her life, and love has always had strings attached. Family is important to her, but her house isn't a place where people congregate anymore, and she believes that's her fault. She yearns for someone to affirm her stuff as meaningful and say, "Yes, this is special because of the story behind it and because of what it means to you." The threat of the dumpster terrifies her. She wants her memory and the identity of those who passed before to be preserved through her things, not tossed as meaningless junk. I intend to honor that. I'm going to hold onto her stories and her creative soul, her way of finding beauty in ordinary objects, and I hope I can get others to at least see her for her humor, for her character, and for being a loving mother and grandmother. It's going to be a tragedy if they only know her as a hoarder and someone who painted rocks.

8
Grace

Grace is an artist, collector, and firstborn sibling in her 60s who is in the middle of navigating the challenges and experiences that come with aging. This narrative was developed in collaboration with the book's author.

Introduction

Early in Grace's story, her mother's behaviors register as frustrating and difficult to navigate. Over time what Grace comes to understand is more complicated: that those behaviors were rooted in a lifetime of fear and loss rather than directed at her personally. Grace's experience aligns with the concept of filial maturity, the psychological renegotiation through which adult children come to see parents as complex, imperfect individuals (Morais, Faria and Fernandes, 2024). That tension becomes especially visible during the disbandment process, where Grace struggles to preserve her mother's agency while also making decisions her mother can no longer realistically manage. Her final realization that she has inherited many of the same emotional tendencies and attachments to objects brings the relationship full circle.

Grace's narrative

My mother influenced my love of objects and collecting. Both of my parents loved antiquing, so whenever I visited, there was

usually an outing planned. One birthday, they gave me $75 to spend at an antique mall. I found a one-of-a-kind plaster fragment from a religious relief: a pair of clasped hands. I loved it immediately. When I showed it to my parents, however, they were skeptical because they couldn't find anything similar in their antique price guide and felt it wasn't worth the asking price. Even though I was willing to pay the difference myself, they discouraged me. Instead, I chose a pair of Scottish terrier coin banks that were listed.

That moment captured something essential about my relationship with my mother. She was loving and devoted, but she also needed control. I dealt with that trait throughout my life, and it became more pronounced as she aged.

My mom was an attentive parent who encouraged each of her children's talents. But she was also anxious and emotionally complex. When I was in second grade, she had a nervous breakdown and spent a month hospitalized for severe anxiety. Because children weren't allowed in the hospital then, my brother and I would stand outside her window and wave during visits. Her anxiety abated for a while, only to resurface briefly when my sister was born, but for decades, she managed it quietly while raising three children and maintaining a family life. She was an only child who experienced devastating loss early in life: her father died in a car accident when she was five, and her mother passed while she was in college. Those losses must have influenced her need for control, her anxiety, and her fear of illness.

After putting the three of us through college, my parents built their dream home in the town where they had met. They lived

there for 14 years and talked about eventually moving into a retirement community nearby. But although they joined waiting lists and toured facilities, they never actually dealt with their belongings. Whenever I visited, I offered to help sort and organize. My mother always said no.

The catalyst came when my father injured his back badly enough that he couldn't drive or maintain the property. My siblings and I decided we would all gather for a long weekend to help move them into a retirement community a few miles away, and I agreed to come out for an extra two weeks under one condition: my mother had to let me work. She promised she would.

We arrived knowing the task would be enormous. My parents had filled a four-bedroom house, a three-car garage, and a basement with a lifetime of possessions. Even before the move began, I could sense my mother struggling emotionally. In retrospect, I believe memory loss and small strokes had already begun.

The first days were chaotic. We sorted donations, trash, auction items, and possessions designated for the new apartment. By the second day, my brother and brother-in-law realized we would never finish in one weekend and asked if I could stay an entire month. Because I had the most experience with antiques and the most patience with my mother, I agreed.

My father seemed energized by the move. My mother resisted it at every turn. Every object had to be discussed with her. She delayed decisions with distractions, errands, coffee breaks, and lunch invitations. She told me which rooms I could enter and which were off-limits.

One afternoon I brought her into the bathroom and asked what she wanted to keep.

"Everything," she answered.

So I made decisions myself. Among the things I threw away was an orchid with only a single dying leaf. Two days later, my mother looked around the bathroom and said, "My favorite thing is missing."

"What was it?" I asked.

"I don't remember," she said. "But it was my favorite."

We got there eventually. The bulk of it was sifted through, the rest boxed for later, and my parents were relocated.

For my father, the retirement community brought relief. Meals were provided, property maintenance disappeared, and daily life became easier. My mother disliked it immediately, especially the food.

As time passed, her anxiety intensified in ways that now clearly seem connected to dementia. She became preoccupied with schedules and control. If we went out, she insisted we return by five o'clock because the dog needed medicine "exactly" on time, even when that wasn't true.

As her dementia worsened, she became more argumentative and dissatisfied. She complained constantly and wanted to move somewhere else. I spent our time on the phone trying to redirect her but reasoning no longer worked.

Then COVID arrived.

For over a year we could only communicate by FaceTime. My mother could not understand why she had to remain isolated. It

wasn't until I visited after restrictions lifted that I fully understood how severe her dementia had become. I had thought she was simply forgetting names, but in the days that followed, I realized she truly did not know who I was.

During one visit, she kept asking when I would return. I suggested she write it down in her calendar.

"How do you spell your name?" she asked.

"F-A-V-O-R-I-T-E D-A-U-G-H-T-E-R," I joked. Minutes earlier she had insisted she didn't have children. She looked at what she'd written, then replied, perfectly deadpan, "I don't have favorites."

That moment still amazes me. She had no memory of having children, and yet her wit was intact enough to deflect the suggestion that she played favorites. The dementia had erased the fact but left the personality. How does that happen?

Gradually Mom's anger faded. She became gentler and calmer, even though she rarely recognized us. The food she had once complained about endlessly suddenly tasted good. She smiled more and seemed content.

My father, meanwhile, became her full-time caregiver. My siblings and I worried about him constantly. During COVID he developed chest pain in the middle of the night but delayed seeking help because he was worried about leaving my mother alone. He received cardiac stents and recovered, but the incident made clear how much strain caregiving placed on him.

My parents lived in the retirement community for nine years as my mother's dementia progressed. One afternoon, while visiting my brother's house for dinner, my mother fell and struck her

head on the concrete garage floor. She suffered a skull fracture, brain bleed, and broken thumb. Although she initially seemed stable, she later developed sepsis and declined rapidly.

I traveled to visit immediately. During her hospitalization, my father acknowledged what he had resisted admitting.

"I can't take care of her anymore," he said. "If she can't walk, I'm not able to carry her."

While my mother remained hospitalized and later transferred to rehab, my father and I began what I privately thought of as "Disbandment Part Two." In the nine years at the apartment, my mother had accumulated newspapers, junk mail, medical books, medications, and stacks of boxes never unpacked from the original move. This time the process felt gentler. There was no frantic deadline. My father and I sorted through possessions slowly, sharing stories and memories across the two weeks I was there.

Several days after I returned home, my mother entered hospice care. Two weeks later, she died. I am grateful I was able to spend time with her before she passed. She didn't know who I was, but she seemed happy during our visits.

I wish my later relationship with my mother had been easier. She invariably dismissed my perspective, even in areas where I had expertise. Still, I loved my mother, and I know she loved all of us. My siblings and I openly acknowledge both the tenderness and the frustrations. She was not cruel or intentionally hurtful. She was generous, funny, devoted, and invested in her family. She spoke proudly about each of us, celebrated our accomplishments, and tried to guide us using the framework of her own life experience.

At times she struggled to truly hear perspectives different from her own. When I tried to talk honestly with her about our relationship, the conversations almost always upset her. I learned there were subjects better left alone, and I kept our conversations focused on safer ground: dogs, weather, daily routines. That acceptance brought a certain peace but also sadness.

Looking back, I can see how much fear informed my mother's life. Fear of illness. Fear of loss. Fear of being alone. Fear of losing control. Those fears expressed themselves through anxiety, routines, possessions, and finally through the rigidity and confusion of dementia. The disbandment of my parents' home forced me to confront all of those things at once. Going through it became more than a practical task; it felt like handling the physical evidence of an entire emotional life.

Some objects held joy and family history. Others revealed loneliness, worry, or unfinished grief. Among my mother's papers I found sympathy cards from when her own mother died, kept for decades, tucked carefully away. Alongside them were calendars filled with meticulous symptom logs: "8:30 woke up feeling terrible. 8:45 took pills." Together they created a portrait of someone trying very hard to hold herself together.

The irony is not lost on me that I inherited many of the same tendencies. When I drove home after the funeral, my car was packed with objects from my parents' lives: an antique secretary, quilts, my great-grandfather's band saw, boxes of photos, and countless smaller items. I collect things. I attach meaning to objects. Now, when I look around my own house, I sometimes realize I may already own more than my parents ever did. Some days that feels

comforting. Other days it feels overwhelming. I am not ready to downsize, but I do want to create a home and studio that feels peaceful. Although my home contains beauty, history, and a trove of art supplies, it's also a place of unfinished organization and deferred decisions. Witnessing my parents' disbandment, I do not want my own to become a burden for someone else, and yet I understand why my mother held on. Our belongings become containers for memory, identity, aspiration, and comfort. Letting go of them can feel like letting go of parts of ourselves.

What the disbandment taught me, more than anything else, was that my mother's grip on her belongings was never really about the things. It was about everything she had lost and everything she was afraid of losing still. I do not blame her for the difficulties between us. She sustained losses and dealt with anxieties I can barely imagine, and as I grow older, I understand more of what she struggled with. I also recognize how much we had in common. I am, undeniably, my mother's daughter.

9
Michael

Michael Humphrey is a journalism professor and a former journalist. He was the primary caretaker for both his father and mother. This narrative was written by the participant.

Introduction

Of all the narratives in this section, Michael's traces the longest arc, from estrangement through crisis to something that, by the end, resembles repair. When his father's situation deteriorates, he is drawn into a caregiving role he neither seeks nor feels prepared to assume. Cleary (2022) found that many men navigate affection, responsibility, vulnerability, and emotional distance simultaneously within paternal relationships, expressing care indirectly through acts of support rather than direct emotional disclosure. That pattern emerges and strengthens in Michael throughout his experience, as caregiving gradually becomes a vehicle for reconciliation, forgiveness, and relational repair.

Michael's narrative

The phone rang at the end of a good day, one in which I felt notably aligned with my wife, my work, and myself. It was a rare feeling but short-lived. I answered to a voice tinged with southerness and impatience. She was a social worker at a tiny nursing

home on the outskirts of Branson, Missouri. This was 13 years ago, and I most remember the way I felt during the call. My chest shrank and tightened with each word. And I remember one line:

"You need to come get your dad."

I was a few weeks into a PhD program in Colorado. At 44, the challenge ahead of me was exciting but daunting. I tried to explain that my wife and I did not have the time or money for a major life change. That my dad and I did not have the relationship for an intimate level of involvement in his life. If I said the exact words, "I don't have space," I meant it in numerous ways.

She repeated her declaration with the same solidity and judgment. He was being released from the nursing home that very day, and although the county had deemed him able to care for himself, they were wrong. He was going to die, probably by his own hand, if I did not come. I was all he had. There was no choice.

Several years before that call, I found my father after a long estrangement.

I say I "found" him, but I don't mean I went searching. After work one night in 1998, I literally found him in my apartment in Kansas City. I will never know how he got in, but I did not want him there. I had been bruised and jaded by this man whose blend of mental health disease and machismo made me feel like a paranoid little rabbit in a dark forest. I never needed to see him again.

Why did I disconnect from him? At the time, I was angry about a childhood of turmoil. He fought with Mom constantly. He would lose up to a dozen jobs in a year, fluctuating between selling something and delivering something, always losing his temper and

losing the gig. He was a critical, bloviating, mentally unstable jerk a lot of the time. Why keep that connection? So when he showed up in my apartment that night, I was awash in guilt as he told me about his troubles back in Denver, my hometown. I learned that night that he had been homeless, had a gambling problem, and was now headed to Branson to be close to his brother's family.

Now, looking from this vantage point of nearly 30 years, I can see I was afraid. His presence felt like a rock that could pull me down into his world.

After he came to visit me in Kansas City and then continued to Branson, we kept in touch, mainly to ease my guilt. I helped him get set up in an apartment for older adults on government assistance. I hoped his church and his brother, sister-in-law, and nieces could provide what he needed most—a family. In short, I tried to build a thick wall with thin nails. But it worked for nearly 16 years, until the social worker called me, and the wall fell at the worst time.

"You need to come get your dad."

Because I ran out of reasons not to, I left Colorado for Branson to bring my dad home. When I finished the 12-hour drive to pick him up at his apartment, he wasn't there. The night before, the complex manager had called 911 after getting no answer to repeated knocks on his door. When the medics had arrived, my dad told them he wanted to die. They couldn't leave him alone, so they took him to the psychiatric ward. I drove to the hospital; he wasn't there either. Sure enough, he was back in the nursing home. All this happened in the week following that first contact.

He was monitored in the nursing home for a few days. In the meantime, I cleaned out his home. My dad was a hoarder. When

the manager of his apartment building let me in, I had to shimmy between piles of things to assess how much work lay ahead. He had a two-bedroom apartment, and one room was filled with merchandise he intended to sell—random items bought at estate sales, like board games, VHS tapes, vinyl records, trinkets from Las Vegas, photo frames, tables, and most of all, trading cards. I couldn't distinguish what was his and what was flea-market fodder.

I went to the nursing home to ask him what he wanted most. I would take whatever would fit in my car. Drugged and sick, he could barely speak. "My leather jacket," was all he said. Overwhelmed with the task, I asked a local homeless shelter if they had two men who could help me clean up the apartment in exchange for a donation and two days' wages. They worked carefully and quickly, picking through his stuff with a respect for his life that I, to be honest, could not muster.

As the two went through his belongings, they started to find possessions from my childhood. The first was an 8×10 of me in a football uniform, kneeling next to my helmet, a portrait from my year as a varsity lineman. They found more—a collection of cassette tapes, a set of bound journals in which I wrote my very bad poetry, files of writings I had kept from classes, and journalism articles from my high school newspaper.

"Is this yours too?" one of them asked, showing me a page cut from a Denver Nuggets game program, signed by a team of my childhood heroes. I could not believe what I was seeing.

In 1988, my mom left Dad, and the house where I grew up was repossessed. I was in college two states away, so I assumed the possessions I left behind had been thrown away. Eventually, after

the men and I picked through his entire apartment, we found almost everything I could remember leaving.

"I found the Nuggets' signatures in your place," I said when I next saw him. "Do you remember that night?"

"Of course, man," he said, in a typical parlance he must have learned at pool halls as a kid. "I took you back there."

Dad had been a beer vendor at Denver Nuggets basketball games. When I was 11 years old, I was obsessed with that team. Someone gave him a ticket to a game, and I got to go with him. After it was over, he came up to my seat and told me to hurry. I remember going through a maze of hallways and stairs and we ended up at an exit in the back of the arena. He pointed down the hallway and said, "That's their locker room."

As the players walked out, each of them signed the back of that program.

"How did you keep all of my stuff after you lost the house?" I asked him.

He had moved more times than he could remember. Apartment to apartment, shelter to shelter, sometimes sleeping in his car stuffed with his possessions.

"I got a storage locker," he said, "to keep the important things."

I imagined his whole life stacked in that locker, safer from the elements than he was. Material lying peacefully in a dark place while he tried to sleep among strangers in a homeless shelter.

As I write this, the autographed sheet is framed above my desk. Yes, I still love the Nuggets, but it means more than that. It was

the beginning of a miracle. It was the first time I could see that healing might be possible.

Six weeks after that phone call from the social worker, my dad sat in my living room. His recovery had been impressive. He was talking, walking, and being his normal charismatic and maddening self. Now he was asking about what I had brought back to Colorado from his apartment in Branson—or more precisely, what I hadn't brought back. We were proving again why it was hard for us to get along.

"What did you do with the Peyton Manning rookie cards?" he asked for the fourth or fifth time. "They stole them," meaning the men who had helped me sort his things.

"They did not steal anything," I said. "They were careful with everything."

"They stole them," he said over and over.

I grabbed the binder. I did not see the cards at first, but after two careful rounds, I noticed a front pocket. Sure enough, four cards belonging to the rookie quarterback for the Indianapolis Colts, Peyton Manning, were carefully placed in there away from the rest of the set. My fuse lit, and I pointed them out to him. "Look at this!" I said. "And think before you talk!"

Dad was a guest in my home but not a welcomed one. We had made a physical space for him but were not giving him any space to grieve everything he had lost, including his independence. I went to bed, and the next morning, I felt awful.

Sometime between when he arrived, lived with us, and found a retirement apartment he liked, I thought more about what that

storage locker meant. For him to make space for the fragments of my childhood, even while he lost space for himself, meant a lot to me. And I started to listen to his story.

My dad was a natural storyteller, but he had three major scripts he told anyone he could corner. One was about a football championship game he played the year before he dropped out of high school—he was the hero, causing a fumble late in the game. The next was much more unlikely and nearly impossible to verify. He claimed the Beatles had stolen his lyrics to "Lady Madonna"—a story he told every stranger he met, and one I had grown so weary of that I researched and disproved it, eventually writing an article and going on a radio show about it.

But the third story, a newer one, stung the most. It was about my disappearance in my early adulthood, when he was homeless, lost in gambling, and desperate. "Where were you, man?" he asked repeatedly, sending pangs of guilt through my stomach each time.

One day, on the way to shooting pool, when he was in the middle of reciting that script, I asked him to tell me what had led him to being homeless.

First, he talked about two men who had let him down. Jay—his boss at a company that sold coffee systems at offices—had changed the way the salesmen were paid. That forced my dad to find a new job. Then he turned to a time later in his life, after I was gone. Another man, Curt, hired Dad to sell display ads for a classified newspaper he had started. He didn't know how to run a business, and he kicked Dad out of his house and ran the paper into the ground.

My dad grew up without a father, and it was clear through these stories that he had sought one his whole life, but the story of abandonment kept repeating itself. And I was part of that story in his mind.

He then spoke more about his life in Branson, how he had sold neon signs and magazine advertisements, and how he started a business buying and selling auction items. What mattered to him about the stuff was not the stuff at all. Instead, it represented his work, his agency. When I got rid of that—donating it all, no less—I had retired him. And though I had had no time or resources to do better by him, I was sorry now and told him so.

As dementia took complete hold of my dad, we made the most of it by taking him in his wheelchair to movies down the street and then eating at a local pizza place afterward. When that became too hard, we watched TV in the community room. Then I began to feed him when he couldn't do that anymore. Then I just watched him sleep.

During these quiet times, I would get anxious. My life was busy; I had my PhD and was now working on getting tenure. Dad started having fits of terror at night, and once, at 3 a.m., I drove over to calm him because I was the only one who could. One time, in the midst of it all, he said to me, "You're a good dad." I've never been a father, but I knew what he meant.

Five years after he arrived, I got another call, this time from a hospice worker. One minute he was awake and talking to the staff, and no more than 20 minutes later, he was gone. I rode my bike up the hill from the college campus to the hospice facility. I sat with his body and felt the heaviness of grief, but gratitude helped

me bear it. The emptiness was good, and that meant I had made room for him.

My dad always provided me housing, but my parents struggled to create a safe and joyful space. Their own demons and debts weighed on them, and that weight spread throughout our home. But just as walls can be repaired, sometimes the space in our hearts can too. According to the *Tao Te Ching*, "We chisel doors and windows to construct a room, yet it's the inner space that makes it livable."

Becoming Dad's shelter helped me create an inner space that was livable for us. What seemed impossible 30 years ago felt natural at the end of his life. We learned to forgive each other, and from that came the father's love we both needed.

10
Case

Case is a professional writer whose eclectic background spans psychology, accounting, computer science, and management.

Introduction

Case, like Sara, comes to this experience as a grandchild navigating a grandparent's hoarding, but where Sara moves toward connection and advocacy, Case moves toward detachment and a hard-won emotional distance. Research on the grandparent–grandchild relationship suggests that the presence of impairment or difficult behavior in the grandparent influences the grandchild's emotional and relational experience over time (Michałek-Kwiecień, 2022). Case's story never resolves into a simple condemnation or redemption arc. The contradictions remain active at the end: the grandparents were loving and harmful, victims and contributors, cherished and resented.

Case's narrative

When I was a child, I felt so privileged to have the grandparents I did. My parents both worked, so we spent the days of summer break with my mother's parents. My mother's mother, Iris, was attentive and willing to cook food for my brother and me whenever we wanted and would let us watch cartoons all

day—something we couldn't do at home. Iris was interested in technology and gave us new games for our Gameboys, which we played during commercial breaks. My mother's father, Fin, was a stern figure who worked on his yard relentlessly, but heaven help us if he came back inside to see we'd left a light on. His authoritative lectures could punctuate what was otherwise a grand time. He was harder on my brother than me, but I never doubted that he cared for us, even though it was occasionally evidenced in a frightening way.

I was partially aware at the time that my grandparents had a lot of stuff, especially in the motor home when they left the state for winter. There was a narrow aisle to walk down, things perched on both sides, but this was something I was used to when heeding the siren's call of satellite television. There was less of it in the house itself, but the corners overflowed with junk, and there was more furniture crammed in than was needed. My parents, who'd lived there with me when I was a baby, were responsible for this relative cleanliness. They'd cleared it out before moving in, making the upstairs livable and relegating a lot of junk to boxes in the garage. At that time, my grandparents were truck drivers and didn't spend enough time at home to accumulate extra stuff. During the summer, it was just how it was, and I didn't question it. The amount of things my grandparents owned was obvious but not overwhelming. It wasn't until later that the stuff started really getting in the way.

On a trip to see family in Idaho, the motor home overheated as we went over a mountain pass. I thought it was somehow something motor homes did, not knowing at the time that it was because the RV was way over the weight limit, packed with books and clothes and VHS tapes. I did know how much it

stressed me out, but my grandparents, already familiar with the consequences of their actions, took it in stride, and we did eventually arrive in Idaho, difficulties all but forgotten.

When I was 11, my grandparents' house flooded while they were in California. We didn't discover the leak until three weeks later, after mold had set in and the downstairs was completely ruined due to the ceiling collapsing. I helped clean out the accumulated junk so the walls and floor could be ripped out. It was the first time that I remember seeing a 32-foot dumpster in the driveway, as my parents and my mother's brother, Eli, separated out trash from treasures. I didn't blame my grandparents then because I didn't understand that everyone's grandparents weren't hoarders. It was just something we had to do, and I felt bad that Fin and Iris were upset about the loss of their possessions. After it was finished, with a new kitchen put in, walls repainted, and new flooring installed, I liked it. It was easier to hang out there after the school bus dropped me off. It was like a new house, and I, naively, thought that it would stay that way.

When Iris broke her hip in an airport on an ill-advised trip to see family, we had to approach the house again. My mother was furious that her mother had made the trip when she was frail and unable to navigate the airport, and now, to bring my grandmother home to receive in-home care, we had to clean out the house again. I was frustrated. Fin fought us every step of the way, especially my mother, questioned every decision, and argued for keeping absolutely everything.

Even more stuff had accumulated, and the disease that is hoarding was in full evidence in both of my grandparents by then. Fin

had begun shredding every piece of mail to use as "compost", afraid of wasting even the slightest envelope. The house was almost unnavigable with the stuff piled in every corner and closet, lining every hallway, and filling two bedrooms of the three-bedroom house. I didn't visit often, feeling pressured and stifled by the sheer amount of junk there. When we got together with my grandparents, it was usually out at a restaurant or at my parents'.

The decline in Iris was also slowly becoming noticeable, as dementia ravaged who she had been. It was therefore easier to blame Fin; he was still moving around and working on the yard, so why would he choose not to clean? My grandmother came back and was able to receive in-home physical therapy because of what we'd done, but there was no "thank you." There was never a "thank you."

That purge was really hard on my grandparents, but I didn't see that at the time. I wasn't privy to the fights that happened between my mother and her parents afterward but heard about them when she told my father, and I remember feeling my grandparents were being unreasonable. They couldn't appreciate the cleanliness of the house, which was baffling, but this was around the time that the TV show *Hoarders* was popular, and that helped me see that the state of their home wasn't a choice but a symptom. I felt vaguely sympathetic and disgusted by turns, a strange mix of pity that colored a lot of my interactions with them.

My grandmother died a few years ago, and it was really hard on my mother. Her siblings didn't live close, and it was mostly only my mom taking care of her. They'd grown closer as her mother's

dementia worsened. Though it was difficult, she submitted to the labor without complaint and tended to the childish Iris with the incredible love and care of a parent. While I think my grandmother's death was a bit of a relief, it also came with the knowledge that her beloved mother was now beyond reach.

After my grandmother died, my family gathered to celebrate her, but they soon departed, and the question of what to do with Fin became more imminent. With the rise of COVID, we started doing the grocery shopping for him because he had never had to feed himself before. I felt the obligation of taking care of him like an albatross, heavier with each day, though Fin worked hard to remain independent. He went on daily walks and visited with us routinely, though never at his house. It was like an impending doom, the knowledge that sooner or later we'd have to clear out everything again.

Finally, at the end of the first brutal year of COVID, we pitched a renovation to Fin as the only option that would allow him to stay at home as he got older and more infirm. He understood the need, and so we took him to my aunt Jael's in Washington and set to work.

I've never resented Fin and Iris as much as I did during those four months. I tried to tell myself it was the disease, that it was out of their control, that they didn't mean to leave the dirty work to my parents and me. It didn't help. It was disgusting and abhorrent and awful, from the dog-urine-soaked flooring to the dirty piles of trash. I hated my grandfather for having come to this, the way you hate an obligation you didn't agree to take on. I hated Iris for her dementia and the way she'd squirreled away money in books

and piles of old mail, so we had to go through everything before throwing it away. I couldn't even find it in myself to feel pity for them, so consumed by repulsion for what the house held. We went through seven dumpsters clearing out the trash, and I felt vicious satisfaction as we filled each one.

My mother had a difficult time with that final purge, seeing beloved memories trashed or ruined by filth. She saw the necessity, but her emotions were a hurdle she had to overcome so that we could accomplish what we needed to. We joked, gallows-humor style, about how revolted we were and built the kind of camaraderie you see on the battlefield. In that battle against the house, we fought first to just clean and get rid of trash. However, it didn't take long to see the true damage done, and we had to change our approach.

We ended up ripping up the floor and repainting, and the result was stunning. It was even cleaner than the house of my halcyon days as a child. Fin had been forewarned and initially seemed at least semi-grateful and peaceable when he returned. I think his completely fresh house stunned him like you can stun a shark by punching it in the nose, because for a couple of months, he was his normal self.

Then came the explosion, prompted by some small miscommunication and resulting in us not talking to Fin for a while. His rage was worse for being bottled up, and the hateful speech he gave my mother and Eli was relationship-breaking. My mother, already tired and angry from cleaning out everything, didn't lie down and take his wrath, and for a while, she couldn't bring herself to talk to her father. Jael and my uncle Jack had moved into the

upper floor of his house while they had a new home built in the metro area, and they took the lead on grocery duty and Fin-care. All I felt was relief. I didn't care that he was hurting; I cared that he'd hurt my mother and felt furious that he didn't appreciate four horrible months of drudgery.

As time passed, I eventually felt pity for him but still couldn't forgive. Jael and Jack moved into their new house, and we had to confront the reality that Fin needed consistent care, and my mother relented. Still hurt but willing to be the bigger person, we started checking on him more regularly. When we thought he was declining, my mother made the tough decision to call in hospice. This, however, meant that someone needed to be there all the time. We cobbled together a family schedule, alternating care so no one had to be there longer than a few days. Eli drove in to stay for three weeks at a time, and my mother was glad for the support.

Unfortunately, Fin remained spiky and vitriolic, and once he graduated from hospice and stopped declining, we downgraded to checking on him every day. I didn't participate, still alienated and unwilling to stay at the house I hated. I did take on the monumental project of getting his bank accounts in order and signing him up for electronic ones for his internet, electricity, and insurance. I helped where I could but felt distance from Fin in a way others in my family didn't. It was almost as if he'd already died and his body just happened to be living on.

When Fin lashed out at Eli, my uncle also stepped away and stopped visiting. I felt vindicated somehow, as if this was final proof that he couldn't be trusted to be a reasonable human

being. I stepped back as well, though I continued maintaining his accounts. We sold his rental home to pay for his care—care my father and brother mostly shouldered. Fin went into hospice again, and my parents and brother split the weeks taking care of him. I admired them for what they did but couldn't bring myself to go over to his house very often, and when I did, I never went into his lair. Instead, I had meals with my parents upstairs and departed without seeing my grandfather at all. He'd become just another obligation, though this time I found my resentment strangely lacking. I believed he deserved compassion because all humans do, but I had no particular interest in giving it myself.

Fin died last year, and it was hardest on those who'd taken care of him. I comforted my mother, helped my father with what I could, and talked with my brother. I did not grieve the way they did, and I stayed above their misery. Fin, the grandfather I remember, departed years ago, and only the barest sliver of him remained. He did some great things, but he also did a lot of harm, and those tangled feelings tinge my memory of him.

Iris is harder to remember because her decline had been so stretched out I feel like I'd already grieved her long before she passed. I do fondly remember waffles on a summer morning, an entire day of cartoons stretching out in front of me. I also remember, less fondly, sitting on the couch while Fin lectured my brother and me on the importance of conserving electricity. Who they were is gone, and there are only complicated memories left, echoing around an empty house.

My brother and his long-term girlfriend moved into the place after a couple of months spent cleaning it up with my dad. I'm

glad the house has someone to take care of it, and it looks different on the inside now. The curtains are open, and the downstairs feels less like a dungeon, but I can't shake the awful feeling I have when I'm there. Maybe with time it will pass, or at least grow fainter. Maybe there will be a day I can step through the front door without being assaulted by ghosts. I've made my peace with how I feel about Fin and Iris, but the house is still a grim reminder of worse times. Hopefully, one day that will fade, and all that will be left is the good. They were just people, and however I remember them, they lived their lives on their own terms.

11
Kate

Kate is a stylist from the Southeast with a passion for beauty, adventure, and her six grandchildren.

Introduction

Kate's narrative is the only one in this section in which the primary dysfunction is not between caregiver and older adult but between spouses, with the older adult as the catalyst who exposes cracks already present in the marriage. Research confirms that caregiving for a parent produces measurable spillover into a marriage, with a significant proportion of spousal partners reporting changes in satisfaction as a direct result (Ball et al., 2022). Couples in these situations commonly struggle to negotiate competing needs under relational stress (Erbert, 2000). The fractures in Kate's marriage become fully visible when her husband prioritizes devotion to his mother and sees caregiving as unconditional accommodation.

Kate's narrative

My mother-in-law, Alice, was the first older adult I assisted in the disbandment process. Her husband, Trent, had died three years earlier. After he died, Alice stayed in their condo by herself, but we began floating the idea of selling both our homes, pooling our

money, and buying her a place near us in Oregon. But one day when we went up to visit, things were no longer status quo. She was losing track of time, and her actions were becoming erratic. The idea of buying another condo for her went out the window. It was clear she couldn't live on her own. We weren't quite sure what to do, but she was still stable enough in her home to give us time to figure something out.

The physical disbandment was straightforward, but the final stage, the decision about where she would live after she left her condo, was much more complicated. Nathan felt it his duty to personally take on the daily care of his mother, and we agreed that Alice should come live with us. From the beginning, there were red flags.

Nathan and I were already on shaky ground. It became evident in our twins' teenage years, and empty nesting only exacerbated it. Given this and the anticipated stress of having another person in our home, I insisted on marriage counseling before Alice came. Nathan didn't think it necessary but did it anyway. After a few sessions, however, he still would not entertain the possibility that the dynamic might change when his mother moved in. He wouldn't consider the simplest questions: Who would make the meals? Who would be responsible for which tasks? What would the division of labor be for both of us? Instead, he stood unwavering that she would enter our household seamlessly, to the benefit of us all. With such stubbornness, what reason was there to continue counseling? Although I had grave concerns, I put them aside. We disbanded her Wyoming home, and Alice moved in. But as I feared, from that point on our life was warped.

Nathan established a pattern of behavior that really messed with my brain. I now think it was a form of gaslighting. He acted like we were on the same page when we were not. In counseling he had refused to establish guidelines with me. Afterward, he created his own and behaved as if we had agreed to adhere to them. Alice didn't voice what she wanted; Nathan decided what they were and prioritized them over me. I became the villain. It was just a freaking mess.

Many of our problems had to do with finances and territory. We began with a plan we agreed on. Alice would provide the funds for us to create a specific space for her, converting the garage to a mother-in-law apartment with a full ADA bathroom. But when construction began, Nathan took control of the project and used Alice's money to design and install what he wanted. He made choices that had nothing to do with his mother and added extras that weren't necessary to meet her needs. My suggestions for a more economical, smaller-scale project fell on deaf ears. His desires superseded prudence, and the apartment became more expensive than it needed to be.

Ironically, Nathan began to distrust me early on and decided it was I who was taking advantage of Alice. She would take me on weekend excursions, have me pay with her card, and that threw Nathan for a loop. He could designate money for his own plans and attribute them to his mother's needs, but I couldn't satisfy the desires she voiced. He began throwing the fact around that a great deal of money had been spent to bring her to our house.

"She has given us so much," he said.

"She didn't give us anything," I replied. "That's what she had to spend to move in with us."

But there was no reasoning with him.

Then there was an issue about my monthly payment, which became a serious point of contention. At the time of Alice's disbandment, Nathan and I were unemployed. This was problematic, as I had agreed to help share the expense of our twins' post-high school costs. I would need to go back to my work as a stylist, but Alice and I came to an agreement. Instead of going to work, I would receive a monthly fee from her to cover the twins' expenses, and in exchange, she would have a space in our house and receive reasonable caregiving from me.

After she had lived with us for a while, I asked Nathan for a payment. The twins had left, and I needed the money. He refused to pay me. He had full control of her funds and acted like he had no idea what I was talking about. I was the devil for even asking.

At that point, I set a boundary: if he chose not to pay me, then my part of the agreement with Alice was void. He would have to take her to her doctor appointments, cook for her, shop for her, and do whatever else she needed. He had a full-time job by then. It wouldn't be easy.

One day, I walked in when Alice and Nathan were having dinner, and it hit me: "Hey, this is not between you and me. This is between you, me, and your mother." So, I asked Alice, "Do you remember our agreement about your care? I would stay home instead of going back to work, and you would provide me a monthly amount?"

She remembered and said she still wanted to, but Nathan adamantly refused to talk about it. Later he presented me with some accounting. It was a bunch of crap. He tried hard not to pay me, but eventually he broke down. For months, he would passive-aggressively leave cash on the kitchen table for me to find.

Alice created her own definition of what caretaking should look like. I became more of a paid employee than a daughter-in-law. She put her laundry in the kitchen for me, the housekeeper, to pick up and wash. She pointed out the trash that needed to be taken out and plants that needed to be watered. There was an expectation that she would be waited on hand and foot, as she had once done for her mother. Nathan made that his expectation as well, and the designated servant was me. I had stayed home to care for the twins until they went to kindergarten, and I would stay home and care for his mother.

Some of our initial problems had to do with boundaries and space. I needed to be able to say, "This is my space," but Nathan chose not to try and understand. Alice had spent years building collections—china dolls, romantic novels, souvenir travel spoons—and several boxes had remained unpacked in her apartment. But one day, they began to appear in my house. I remember the day I came in and ceramic frogs were scattered throughout our living room. My territory had been invaded. She had never said, "Wow, I would really like to stretch out from my apartment. Would you mind if I add some of my stuff to the living room?" which would have opened a discussion about boundary expectations.

I objected. Nathan didn't say anything when I brought it up, but I know I had earned another demerit. He didn't try to work out a tenable solution, and he didn't support me in that effort, either. Instead, he began acting as if I were deliberately trying to contain Alice in her apartment. With his lack of input, Alice was given implicit permission to create her own world, encroaching upon mine. She and Nathan came to see the whole first floor as shared territory.

The situation got uglier. Nathan and I could not communicate, not even to hold a simple conversation. I was put into the penalty box. I wasn't caring for his mother, I didn't care for the family, and whatever other absurdity he wanted to throw in. "I don't understand how you can't see this. When your mother moved in, we were already struggling. And now we're here, further apart than ever." But he was unyielding.

One day I reached my breaking point. I'd had enough of the gaslighting and the volatile conversations; I moved out. My relationship with Alice had also shifted; she had come to view me through her son's lens. Even so, I let her know she wasn't the problem. I was leaving because of Nathan, not because of her. Nathan's response to her presence was the reason we separated. She was the catalyst that caused him to reveal his true self and brought about my demotion. That's what it was—I was demoted.

I was gone for about nine months. Nathan knew I would not have a conversation without a professional present. He agreed and made more effort than before. I decided to move home, and we arranged it so we would live separately within our

house. There were months of counseling and caring for Alice, and a boundary and deadline were established. I told him, "I will not live under the same roof with both of you, and I am not leaving my house again. She needs to be moved out of the house by this summer."

Nathan agreed, and by the deadline, Alice had been moved to a retirement community across town.

Nathan had watched his own parents navigate a difficult mother-in-law, one who had accused Alice of trying to run her over and was eventually moved out of their home. Trent had framed Alice as the villain in that story. Years later, the same script played out with me in Alice's role.

Perhaps there was a transference; I became Alice, the ticked-off wife, who wanted to push her mother-in-law out of her home and into substandard care. I would ask, "Nathan, do you see how this happened with your father and your mother? Do you see how their situation mirrors our own? Do you remember those years you spent trying to mediate? Why are we recreating that same narrative?"

In retrospect, I see how much having Alice move in changed everything—our patience, our trust, our idea of family. At first, I didn't hold firm to my beliefs and insist on coming to a shared understanding, and it came back to bite me. Finances and space became tangled up with emotion and a loss of control. What started as a question of territory—who had what space, who decided what—became a question of trust. My thoughts were not Nathan's. He came to a place where he didn't trust me, and I didn't trust him.

Had I known how it was going to go, would I have said, "absolutely not?" I mean, sure, but who has a crystal ball? We stumbled through every version of trying before I saw what needed to change. In the end our marriage survived because I rewrote my priorities. I said one powerful word, "Choose."

12
Bex and Daniel

Bex is a soon-to-retire IT professional. She and Daniel, a retired facilities manager, have experienced the joys and frustrations of disbanding more than one home.

Introduction

Bex and Daniel are also a married couple, but unlike Kate, they present a united front, with Daniel as primary caregiver for an atypical and problematic in-law. They are Case's parents as well, offering the same family's experience from two generational vantage points. Research finds that the emotional legacy of growing up in a hoarded home persists long after the physical work is done, producing ongoing relational conflict, emotional triggering, and difficulty separating love for the person from repulsion toward the environment (Kocol et al., 2025). Compounding the hoarding is the personality of Bex's father, who swings between relative calm and anger. When a rupture occurs, Bex steps back, and when he dies, she is left with what Boss (2010) calls ambiguous loss—grief for the parent who might have been and for the family life that never fully materialized.

Bex and Daniel's narrative

"I've gotta say, the first time I went to Bex's, I was appalled."

Daniel and Bex have been my neighbors for years and were obvious participants when Heather and I decided to write this book. Bex's parents had been hoarders. So his reply doesn't surprise me, but I burst out laughing when he tells me why.

"I walked into Bex's bedroom, and you couldn't see the floor. There wasn't a clear space anywhere."

Bex smiles, unrepentant. "I'm not a tidy person. That was the final test. If he was going to be the one, he had to accept me for who I am."

And he did. They married when they were 19 and are about to celebrate their 40th anniversary. I ask Daniel what caused him to become not just a son-in-law but his father-in-law's final caregiver.

"Because that's what family does. We knew we were going to get married, so I thought, 'Better embrace it.' Of course, I didn't know how crazy they were. I'm Irish Catholic with 10 siblings. My dad was a cop. I used to drink too much. I couldn't be more of a stereotype. And I married this girl who's the farthest thing from one, who comes from this free-for-all, chaotic mess of a family. I knew I was in for a ride."

Bex's father worked as a civil engineer and moonlighted as a dock loader at a furniture store. The inventory that couldn't be sold made it into the house—among the most interesting, a large lime green corner table whose only function was to play 8-track cassette tapes. "It was groovy," Daniel says. "But by the time I was around, it didn't work anymore."

After boys in the neighborhood went on a spree plowing down mailboxes, Bex's father secured his post inside the old incinerator,

which had sat in the backyard for years after being banned by the city for air quality reasons. "That thing was horrid," Daniel recalls, "but he didn't want to spend money when he could use what he had."

"But it worked," Bex says. "We were probably the only ones who never had to fix their mailbox again."

Two years after they married, Bex's parents, Fineas and Iris, retired and took up truck driving. Bex and Daniel moved in to look after the house and dogs. They cleared out the kids' rooms, refinished the kitchen, and painted. Daniel took on the garage, where Fineas had constructed a packed 8×8-foot, three-level shelving system, as full as every other space, including the gaps between studs. When he was done, he took a sledgehammer to the incinerator and replaced it with a new mailbox and post. Bex painted three small dogs on it, a tribute to Fineas and Iris's dogs.

"Fin and Iris paid me to clean the garage," says Daniel, "but everything else was the responsible thing to do—they were ours to look after."

When they finished, the house looked better than ever. But when Fineas and Iris returned, they were livid.

"So mad," Bex says. "We'd gotten rid of too much stuff. Not that they were using any of it or would ever use it again. We didn't know about hoarding at the time."

The hoard had its own momentum. Trucking brought hauls home from the road. RVing added summers of accumulation, and when each RV was traded in, its contents migrated inside. When Fineas's father died, his entire household followed. The

house had been taking things in for decades without ever letting anything out.

By then, Bex and Daniel had their own home but continued to check on the house when Fineas and Iris were out of town. One day, Bex went over for her usual check. "When I stepped in, the smell hit me in the face. I went upstairs and saw the floor and wall outside the bathroom soaked. Water was spewing out of the toilet tank right into the heater vent. Mold was all over the walls. I immediately had an asthma attack."

The ceiling had collapsed. "The report came back with 22 different types of mold, and five were highly toxic," she says, shuddering.

Fineas and Iris came home, hired PODS, and hauled everything out. They wouldn't sort and after the remediation, moved everything back in and never unpacked.

Iris's health was in decline. Her skeletal system had been failing her for years. She'd already had two back operations, and she began to regularly fall. On the way to her granddaughter's bat mitzvah, she fell and broke her femur in the Portland airport and was stuck there for weeks. Before she could return home, a social worker had to do a safety evaluation. "After her review, she told me, 'I know your parents are hoarders, but I have to report this. It isn't safe,'" Bex remembers.

If Fineas wanted Iris to return to their home, the downstairs had to be safe. Fineas agreed to help clean it out, though he was angry. The government was overreacting and had no right to interfere.

"It was summer and very hot. We started to call him Yeti. He'd stopped shaving, refused to put on a shirt, and wore a pair of

Mom's shorts tied on with rope. He had this wispy white hair sticking out all over." Since Fineas couldn't bear to throw anything away, he instead shredded all his hoarded paper, burying it in the yard as mulch for the worms—thus earning a second nickname: "The Worm King."

Iris came home, but not long after began showing signs of dementia, which Fineas chalked up to carelessness. "Speak clearly!" he'd bark. "Pick up your feet when you walk. That's why you're falling."

Bex had been managing her mother's healthcare since Iris's first back operation, but now the urgency and frequency increased. Her two siblings flew in whenever there was a scare, but otherwise Bex and Daniel were on their own.

"I don't blame them. We were there, and there was no one else to do it," Daniel says.

Eventually, a crack in the ceiling became worrisome. Her parents traveled to Washington to see Jael for a month, and while they were away, the third major clean began.

Bex's brother, Eli, came to help. Stuff was chest-high in the living room. Eli balanced on a chair perched on boxes when he reached his breaking point and boomed, "I hate this fucking house!"

Bex laughs. "One of the hallmarks of Eli's personality is he never swears. We swear. A lot. But not Eli. Not 10 minutes later, there's a knock on the door. The neighbor from across the street. 'I thought you could use some water,' she said and gave us two ice-cold bottles. So Eli learned that there is a righteous time for salty language."

Mishaps became routine with Iris—emergency calls, rehab centers, social service inspections. When she passed, Fineas was devastated. COVID hit and the house became filthier. Eventually, Bex and her daughter left him with Jael in Washington while they returned to clean out the house.

"We told him we were going to do it. He wasn't happy, but it had to be done." Four untrained dogs had lived there for years. Their urine had seeped between the baseboards and linoleum and up into the walls. Everything needed to be torn out and replaced.

When Fineas returned, the house was in the best condition it had ever been. He seemed grateful, though he occasionally mentioned old people becoming invisible. Then—an explosion.

It was his 93rd birthday, and the whole family had come to celebrate. Jael and her husband were living with him, waiting for their new house to be built. Jael's daughter Aviva took Fineas's car on an errand, assuming, since her grandfather no longer drove, it was the family's to share.

"Where's my car?" Fineas asked.

"Aviva must have taken it," Jael answered.

Fineas's face set into a frozen mask they all knew meant trouble. "That's grand theft auto."

He was serious. When he reached Bex's, he accused Aviva of stealing his car. She was crushed and left crying.

Bex and Eli sat Fineas down and tried to reason with him. "What a mistake," says Bex. "He could never be reasoned with. His entire brain had always been saturated with illogic." Anger built on all sides. Eli got cold and logical, Bex was out for justice, Fineas was

in it to prove everyone wrong. He said he no longer trusted Bex, that he didn't want her to have his power of attorney or continue administering his finances. "I was angry but hurt, too. I'd worked so hard over the years for him and Mom. I realized he must have been feeling a loss of power since the cleaning first began. I was stupid to think there wouldn't be a rebound. But I was just done."

Bex had nothing to do with her father for a long time. Jael's husband tended to him instead. Jael herself was so mad that for seven months she lived upstairs and seldom saw him.

When her sister moved into her new house, Bex was ready to forgive.

"He wanted to die at home. He loved his house; he was proud of it. Most of his memories of Mom were there. So we were determined to make that happen."

Hospice was called in. He'd rally, then decline—and this repeated for four years.

"I thought he was going to live forever," says Daniel, who had retired to become primary caregiver. "There's a great guilt tied up in me for not helping my sister when she took care of my dad. As the years went by, the feeling grew that the next time around, I was going to be available."

"My son stepped in. Fin did better with the two of us than he did with the women in the family. We began to talk. I think he began to see the damage he'd done. I saw some real growth. And one day, he stopped complaining about the world and just went with it."

"When he died, I felt a burden had been lifted, but it took a while to adjust. I'm still sad about it. I think about him all the time. I knew it was going to be a long, hard slog, but I realized, 'This is why I'm here.' It was like a divine calling."

Most of his family gathered around while Fineas was dying. He'd alienated Jael and Eli, but they came to his side at the end. They whispered to him and held his hand. When he died, there was sadness but no overt expression of grief. Not so for Bex. "I howled," she says. "I just let it all out." For her mother, who deserved better. For her father, who she wished could have been different. And for herself, for all the years her family had held it together so no one else had to.

13
Complicated relationships conclusion

Summary

Early in his narrative, Michael recalls telling the social worker he could not take his father in: "If I said the exact words, 'I don't have space,' I meant it in numerous ways." In the previous section, space was liminal. Here, space is territorial: the houses, rooms, and possessions over which our narrators collide, and the space one person is willing to make for another within their own life. Within the home also lies the territory of personhood, where autonomy, identity, and lived experience become inseparable from the places through which they are expressed.

Over time, the home becomes more than property. It becomes the setting in which a life unfolds, giving form to daily routines and preserving the experiences that grant it continuity. Crossing these boundaries, therefore, is rarely just an intrusion into a house. It is an entry into another person's lived world. Caregiving and household disbandment make such crossings almost inevitable. The challenge is not whether they occur, but how.

Hall (1966) observed that physical distance helps regulate human relationships. Altman (1975) expanded that insight beyond the body, arguing that people also establish territorial boundaries around the places that become part of who they are. He called the most deeply held of this *primary territory*: personalized space occupied and controlled on a permanent basis, so bound up with identity that intrusion registers as a violation of the person. Territorial control becomes one way people exercise autonomy and protect the personhood expressed through the places they inhabit.

For older people, that bond can run deep. Many prefer to grow old in their own homes, or "age in place", and often the home becomes inseparable from the self. Interviewing older adults in Madrid, Lebrusán and Gómez (2022) found the attachment so complete that one participant explained it simply: "the stones know me." This kind of territory is not reserved for the old. When the COVID pandemic hit, adults managed the constant company of others by drawing lines within the household, and borders between domestic domains proved essential to adult well-being (Costa Santos et al., 2025). Caregiving and disbandment force the same closeness, and the same territorial complexities. Negotiating them is difficult for any family. However, when troubled relational dynamics are already in place, as they are in these six narratives, every incursion into space or autonomy throws accelerant on an already burning fire.

Sara is not battling with the older adult in her story; she is defending her. Her grandmother's autonomy, already reduced by the stroke, survives in the house and its contents, so when

the family threatens encroachment with a roll-off dumpster, the disrespect strikes at her dignity. After a lifetime of loss, Grace's mother clings to control, exercised as absolute governance of the house and everything in it. Grace's assistance is deflected and refused, and she is dismissed even where she has expertise. For nearly 16 years, Michael's self-determination stood as a wall he built between himself and his father, an abstract territorial boundary against invasion. A stranger's call breaches it. Later, he realizes the tables have turned and he has become the transgressor: "We had made a physical space for him but were not giving him any space to grieve everything he had lost." Case's autonomy is juxtaposed against Fin's demands to exercise his territorial rights at the expense of everyone around him. Mitigating the damage becomes an ongoing obligation that she never chose, so she reclaims herself spatially by a self-imposed exile. Kate's agency is displaced through dishonored agreements and overruled decisions, and the loss is visible room by room: ceramic frogs arrive unannounced in her living room, a first floor turns into shared ground she never agreed to, and a husband will not hear "This is my space." And for Bex and Daniel, who spend 40 years giving care that is perceived as acts of war, every intervention in the hoard, from the newlywed purge to the final cleaning, costs them Fineas's respect and only confirms his conviction that older people become invisible, without territory of their own.

What these six accounts share is not a pattern of who transgresses and who suffers. Those roles change narrative by narrative. But they reveal that in the terrain of caregiving and disbandment, complicated relationships can turn respect and

autonomy into minefields. Yet the same narratives show that the danger zones can be crossed. Some stories end in détente; others in acts of succor. In every case, the turning point is an act of respect. Sara respects her grandmother's personhood, listening to the stories about precious things the family would consign to the dumpster, and the relationship literally grows in the cleared space of the garage. Grace's reconciliation arrives as a do-over: a second disbandment, at her parents' retirement apartment, sharing the work with her father at his pace, in a gentler space, memories passing between them. Michael's homeless father paid for a storage locker to keep the fragments of his son's childhood, making space for Michael even as he lost it for himself, and Michael answers in kind. He becomes his father's shelter, guided by a central insight of the *Tao Te Ching*: that a room's usefulness lies not in its walls but in the empty space they enclose (Lao Tzu, 2004). Case's resolution comes late, and it is respect for autonomy itself: "They were just people, and however I remember them, they lived their lives on their own terms." Kate's peace is the only one won by ultimatum. With a single word, "Choose", she demands that the marriage respect her boundaries. Retirement is Daniel's act of respect: he becomes his father-in-law's primary caregiver because "that's what family does." Bex's is harder won; so long unthanked, she chooses to forgive in order to honor her father's last claim to self-determination—to die where he lived. In every account, the complicated relationships do not become less complicated. However, the narratives demonstrate that the way across the minefield begins when someone chooses to honor another's personhood.

Engaging the material

Discussion questions

Personal

1. Primary territory describes space so bound up with identity that intrusion registers as a violation of the person. What spaces in your own life function this way, and how have you responded when someone crossed into them?
2. Filial maturity involves coming to see a parent as a complex, imperfect individual. What experience shifted your view of a parent or elder from a role to a person, and what changed in the relationship afterward?
3. Where have intergenerational patterns—loyalties, behaviors, ways of managing conflict—repeated themselves in your family? Which have you chosen to continue, and which have you worked to interrupt?

Theoretical

1. Family Systems Theory holds that dynamics surfacing in a crisis predate the crisis itself. Trace this claim through two or more narratives: what relational patterns were established before caregiving began, and how did caregiving give them a new arena?
2. Apply the concept of ambiguous loss to two or more narratives in this section. How does a loss without resolution differ in its effects from a death that can be openly mourned?
3. Relational dysfunction describes a foundation too damaged for ordinary negotiation to repair, while Relational Dialectics Theory frames tension as normal and negotiable. Using two narratives, argue where the line between the two falls—and whether these accounts support drawing such a line at all.

Professional

1. Caregiver burden is measurably compounded when family support is absent or conflicted. What assessment questions would help a practitioner distinguish a caregiver whose burden stems from the work itself from one whose burden stems from the relational system surrounding it?
2. Invisible labor worsens outcomes for caregivers whose efforts go unacknowledged. What concrete interventions can practitioners use to make caregiving labor visible within a family, and what resistance should they anticipate?
3. When an older adult's attachment to home and possessions collides with family concerns about safety, how can a professional honor primary territory and personhood while still addressing genuine risk? Where is the ethical line between protection and intrusion?

Further activities

1. Select one narrative from this section and map the relational arc we have described, identifying the moment of decline or disbandment, the surfacing of dysfunction, the distribution of labor, the breaking point, and the form of acceptance or withdrawal the narrator arrives at. Consider where earlier intervention might have altered the outcome.
2. Using Bowen's concept of multigenerational transmission, interview a family member about a caregiving situation in your own family history and identify any relational patterns that appear to have repeated across generations.
3. Reflect on a professional or personal experience in which caregiving labor went unacknowledged. Using the research on caregiver appreciation and burden, analyze what the

absence of acknowledgment cost the caregiver and what a practitioner might have done differently.

Voices in the conversation

- Conroy, Pat. *The Death of Santini*. Nan A. Talese/Random House, 2013. Conroy returns to his abusive father and works toward incomplete forgiveness.
- Cumming, Alan. *Not My Father's Son*. Dey Street/HarperCollins, 2014. A family secret reframes a violent Scottish childhood entirely.
- Gornick, Vivian. *Fierce Attachments*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987. Walks with her aging mother become a lifelong argument about independence and obligation.
- Harris, Lisa Ohlen. *The Fifth Season: A Daughter-in-Law's Memoir of Caregiving*. Texas Tech University Press, 2013. A daughter-in-law's account of caregiving and the strain it places on marriage.
- Lang, Maya Shanbhag. *What We Carry*. Dial Press/Random House, 2020. A daughter caring for her ill mother realizes self-sacrifice was itself a form of control.
- Miller, Kimberly Rae. *Coming Clean*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. A memoir of growing up hiding her father's hoarding, written with candor about shame and love.
- Sholl, Jessie. *Dirty Secret: A Daughter Comes Clean About Her Mother's Compulsive Hoarding*. Gallery Books/Simon & Schuster, 2010. A daughter's empathetic account of her relationship with a hoarding mother.

Section 3
Legacy and inheritance

Learning objectives

After engaging with this section, the reader will:

1. Explain how storied objects/possessions transmit family identity beyond their material worth.
2. Weigh the durability of a legacy of values against material and biological legacy when transmission across generations is uncertain.
3. Reflect on which elements of their own inheritance—objects, stories, or ethos—they are actively stewarding and which they have let lapse.

Introduction

As we age, it becomes increasingly important to us that we are part of something larger than our individual lives—something that continues through our family long after we are gone.

The idea that people "die twice" appears across centuries of writing, including in the work of Boethius (c. 480–524 CE). He wrote that our first death is physical, but the second occurs when we are no longer remembered by others (Boethius, 1902).

Within the context of legacy and inheritance, this distinction helps explain why possessions have emotional meaning beyond their practical value. Families do not simply pass down objects; they attempt to preserve evidence that a life matters. Furniture, photographs, recipes, tools, jewelry, and homes can become material anchors for remembrance. When objects accumulate narrative meaning across generations—passed down alongside the stories attached to them—they become storied possessions, carriers of family history as much as of practical use (Carter, 2018; Ekerdt, 2020).

Ekerdt and Baker (2014) write about the "safe passage" of objects—a process by which older adults hope their important belongings will continue with people who understand their significance. Some descendants actively seek to provide safe passage for family possessions. Others feel burdened.

Perhaps it is a baby's gown, worn by five generations of sons before vanishing without a trace when a great-grandson asks for it. Or perhaps it is an antique piece of furniture that traveled by steamship and passed through three generations, only to survive into a fourth that no longer wants it—too heavy, too connected to a time and an identity it never knew.

What disappears in these moments, either through being lost or unwanted, is rarely just an object. What disappears is a family's legacy in material form.

Erik Erikson's (1963) concept of generativity describes the human desire to leave something of oneself behind that continues after death and helps explain why objects like the gown and antique furniture carry such emotional weight. Maurice Halbwachs's (1992) theory of collective memory suggests that people remember through social relationships, shared stories, and material objects that connect individuals to a larger group identity. Richard Heersmink (2023) extends this idea through his work on materialized identity, suggesting that meaningful artifacts become part of how memory and identity themselves are stored and borne across generations. Together, these frameworks help explain why the disappearance of inherited objects can feel destabilizing. The resulting distress is not about the objects alone; people fear that the proof their family ever existed is gone.

The narratives in this section further explore these tensions and their multiple dimensions within legacy and inheritance. We begin with Catherine and Lisa. Their narratives are linked through their shared exploration of cultural inheritance, migration, and the fragile transmission of legacy across generations.

We then move into the narratives of the Osbourne siblings, Kit, and Alyson, where legacy becomes progressively more internalized. The Osbourne siblings first extend legacy transmission into material objects and the written word, preserving family identity through inherited belongings and recorded stories. Kit then establishes storytelling itself as one of the purest forms of legacy transmission, while Alyson moves beyond inherited objects and stories into inherited ethos, where legacy is embodied not simply in what is remembered or preserved but in a way of being carried out in daily life.

14
Catherine

Catherine is an associate professor in communications who grew up between Jamaica and the Cayman Islands. She now lives in Kansas but goes back home every year to visit her extended family.

Introduction

Catherine's narrative surfaces one of the most fraught dimensions of legacy: not simply what is inherited but what inheritance signals about self-worth. Her family history of forced migration disrupted inheritance systems rooted in daily presence. Political violence in Jamaica initiated a pattern of geographic fragmentation that continued long after the original trauma, shaping later voluntary international migration by Catherine and her older brother while also contributing to the eventual loss of treasured family belongings left behind in her father's garage.

Within this context, legacy objects take on heightened symbolic significance. Ahmed (2004) argues emotions stick to objects, enabling the transmission of feeling across time.

Catherine's framing of stewardship over ownership offers a counterpoint. What matters is not possession but safe passage. She comes to recognize that certain objects belong to the family unit, even when they reside for a time with one member.

Catherine's narrative

A choking stench hung in the air as the bus made its way from Wichita to Emporia. For miles, I had seen nothing but grass, occasionally punctuated by trees and shrubs. And now that we had reached the city, there was the smell.

"What is that?"

"Meatpacking plant," said the woman next to me, nodding toward an industrial complex.

Something tightened in my throat. Turning away, I stared out the window as tears slid down my cheeks. What in heaven's name had I signed up for?

Despite the open skies and prairie grass, eastern Kansas could not compare to the vivid aquamarine waters I had grown up with or the soft sea breeze that would have swept away the miasma of meat saturating the air.

Most of the kids from my part of the world went to Florida for college. I was here instead because a nun at my school had studied in Kansas and spoke of it as Canaan itself. That clarion call had been difficult for me to ignore. Now I questioned its promise. How do you recognize the Promised Land when you've been raised in paradise? No one I knew would call this anything but bleak.

But gradually, the beauty of Kansas unfurled. It had its own quiet gifts. Fellow students took me home for weekends, and I became well versed in the generosity of small-town Kansans. I met my husband here, had children, and settled into a life that that young girl could not have imagined. Now, if anyone asks, Kansas is my home.

But it's not my only one. Whenever I talk about "going home", I'm talking about Grand Cayman. My mother and two of my siblings continue to live there. There are four of us—two brothers and two sisters. I'm the youngest and for as long as I can remember we've called ourselves the "ends"—me and my oldest brother, Simon—and the "middles"—John and Debi.

My family has been in Jamaica for generations, and for the first few years of my childhood, we had a good life there, but when I was six, the turbulent political environment of 1970s Jamaica tore our family structure apart. Armed gangs fought for control, and the unrest found its way to us.

It was Valentine's Day. Debi and my cousin went to a Girl Guides gala with my aunt and returned to my grandparents' house for a sleepover. That night the house was broken into and my grandparents and aunt were attacked. My grandfather was killed, and my grandmother and aunt were badly wounded. The intruders held Debi at knifepoint until they heard the sirens. She only had a small cut on her neck but had seen their faces, and my parents feared the men might realize she could identify them.

We are all sorts of shades in my family, but my dad was of white Jamaican descent, and my sister was blonde. In a country of very brown and black people, she stood out, and my parents thought it best to get her out of the country. The next day, she was on a plane to stay with friends in Grand Cayman.

The attack changed the trajectory of my family. Within months, my mum, a pediatrician, got a job in Grand Cayman. I went with her, and later John joined us. My father had business ties in Jamaica that couldn't be left behind, and Simon stayed with him.

Although my parents remained married, our childhoods were defined by hopscotching between countries as schooling continually redrew the constellation of our family. But despite the trauma and instability and now our distance, the bond between us has never broken.

My mother is 90 years old now and has dementia. I want to be with her but can't, and there is a sense of guilt and sadness living with that.

She lives with my brother John and his family. Her coconut trees are within view from the back porch. Her body is strong, but her mind's shot.

When I do come, she still recognizes me as somebody she knows. Her face lights up and she laughs. She's not very verbal, but when I sing to her, she sings back. And then I leave again.

It was different for my mum and dad. They were present to care for their parents in ways I cannot, tending to my grandparents' needs and taking responsibility for everything their folks left behind when they passed.

They came from very different worlds. My mum's mother grew up in an emerging middle-class family and had simple belongings. My dad's mother, however, was wealthy, her home full of treasures.

My dad saw it as his responsibility to pass those things on. He was proud of the connection his belongings had to his heritage and knew each one's provenance. "This was from Simon Cridland, two generations back. This came all the way from England. This peacock needlepoint was made by your great-great-grandmother in Colombia."

He never said outright how they should be distributed, but it was instilled in us that these things were precious and needed to be taken care of. That made what happened later all the more painful.

The last 10 years of my father's life were spent with my mum in Grand Cayman. Most of the belongings from his Jamaican home went to her house, but some remained behind in a garage. He told the new owners he would come back for them but never did. Eventually the owners cleared everything out. Our hearts still break when we think of their loss. They were not just things. They represented our family heritage, many of them handcrafted heirlooms passed down through generations.

Because mahogany grows there, many pieces were built from it by craftsmen right on the island. These are things that are repaired, repurposed, and passed down, not replaced.

It's funny, but beds seem to be the thing in my family that illustrates this. We all have intricately carved mahogany ones. The bed my dad slept in as a kid was my childhood bed and is in my basement. My brother John got my parents', the one he carved his initials into when he was little.

And then there is the queen of all beds in the guest room of my sister's house. It was the biggest in our childhood home. Simon would organize fights on it, always the "ends against the middles." We would lie down like sardines—head to toe, head to toe—and he would say, "On your marks, get set, go," and we would try to push the other two off. Whoever fell first, their side lost and had to do whatever the winning team said. It was cordial but brutal, with hair-pulling and kicking, but we loved it. That bed represents

so much of our childhood that the thought of it ending up in a garage sale is almost unbearable.

Things have already begun to leave quietly, some secretly, little bits and pieces that have made their way into our separate homes. When I visit Debi, I'll notice something and think, "How'd that get here?" A cherished antique lantern that was once in my grandmother's living room hangs in her home now, along with my grandmother's mixing bowls from England. I'm not really troubled. I've come to an understanding that inheriting something is more than possession. It's a kind of stewardship, valuing the piece for the legacy and its stories and sharing that history with others. So, the things in my sister's house, I'm at peace with them being there. She's a good steward.

It can still be stressful, though, thinking about who will end up with what, who deserves what. I've got this imposter syndrome about a necklace my dad gave me. It was his mother's, and she wore it every day. It's made of gold beads that look like pearls. I was amazed, really, that it came to me and not Debi. She's the one who loves jewelry. Why me and not her?

I haven't talked to her about it and don't even know if she remembers. Sometimes I feel I'm failing as a steward. Transparency would mean saying, "I've got the necklace, but maybe you should have it." Now that I have a daughter, though, I find myself wondering if I could make a deal with Debi to hold it temporarily and have it passed on to my daughter when she's old enough to appreciate it.

There are other issues like this. My father used the same chest of drawers his entire life. The understanding was that it would go to Simon, as the eldest son. However, it ended up with John's

son instead. Simon and his partner don't have kids, and I think there was an assumption that, without a child to pass it down to, Simon couldn't be the steward. But that assumption was made for him, not with him, and he felt the loss.

I imagine that when my mum dies, there will be more of this kind of confusion—not knowing how to deal with our feelings or easily negotiate the final disbandment. It will be slightly different than my dad's, though, because my mum's legacy isn't wrapped up in objects. She believed in owning land.

When we were little, she bought this beautiful parcel in the Jamaican Blue Mountains called Silver Hill, which became a gathering place for our extended family.

Because they live nearby, Debi and John can take advantage of Silver Hill more than Simon and I can. But the two of us recognize that we are the ones who chose to leave. John and Debi stayed and reaped the benefits, although I'm not sure it was necessarily because they were physically present. My mum always said, "You don't give to your children equally. You give them what they need. It might hurt another child that you've not given them the same amount, but that child doesn't need as much." I think that's what happened in our family.

From when we were little, John has always been known as Dear John to all of us. He's the one who helped care for our father in his final years. I believe he deserves what he has been given and the opportunities he has had.

He's a reminder that our greatest inheritance is each other. It's my relationships with my siblings I treasure far more than any object I might inherit.

Now, every time we go back to Jamaica, we take a trip to Silver Hill, bring a picnic lunch, and walk around all day. When I think of the memories created over my lifetime—those in the Blue Mountains, our childhood bed wars, and our gatherings for Christmas, Easter, and summer holidays—I understand that they are what matter most to me. They are what color my world, so is a necklace really all that important?

15
Lisa

Lisa holds a PhD and is a professor of accounting. She served as executor of her mother's estate and now sustains the legacy of her mother's home.

Introduction

Lisa's narrative locates legacy in both sentimental objects and, less typically, in the retention of the family home as a means of sustaining intergenerational wealth within an inequitable housing system. Homes owned by Black families are more likely to be undervalued at appraisal, reducing equity at sale, while discriminatory credit practices limit access to comparable housing. Sustained ownership is a reliable path for the transmission of wealth across generations (Ambrose et al., 2026).

Lisa's family's strategies extend beyond property retention to the valuing of Black art and cultural material. These practices do not erase historical trauma; they reshape its effects through acts of recognition that assert meaning within systems not designed to sustain them. Their family legacy is anchored in resilience and continuity across generations.

Yet Lisa's narrative also reveals the fragility of passing cultural inheritance forward. While Lisa and her mother intentionally surrounded their family with symbols of African heritage and

Black identity, she recognizes that her children's generation does not carry the same depth of emotional investment in these connections.

Lisa's narrative

My family continues to gather in my mother's house, even after her passing. She gave us an unexpected gift when my father died. She didn't stay in the home she and my dad had shared for decades or downsize to something smaller. Instead, my mom chose to buy a place that had far more room than a widowed woman with grown children would seem to need.

Mom had 10 siblings who all had children and grandchildren, and when we came together, fitting under one roof had become a challenge. For my mother, the answer was simple. She loved our gatherings, and buying a much larger house ensured that whenever we needed space, she already had the solution: "You can come over here."

She kept a garden in the back and flowers out front. Inside, she filled the rooms with Black art. There were portrayals of Black people all around. That was her big thing. One wall was even devoted to President Obama—books, magazines, anything related to him. If he was on the cover, she owned it.

When Mom was in her late 50s, she and her sisters went to Africa with me. It wasn't just a trip. It was a pilgrimage. Everywhere we went, we were comforted by the words: "You're home now, my sister. You're home."

Africa had a big impact on my mom, and the art in the marketplaces and galleries spoke to her. She brought a lot of things back.

Before she died, my mother settled her affairs and put the house in my name. It was part of her legacy, the same legacy that many in my family have come to understand—that houses can take our wealth from one generation to the next. You can see it in how my sister moved into our childhood home when Mom bought her new one. Once my aunt died, her son inherited her place and later sold it to me. After buying my second house, I sold the first to a cousin. Another aunt lived next door, and two doors up was a different cousin.

I wanted to keep that tradition alive with my mother's home. After she passed, we rented the house to a cousin for a while and later asked my niece and her husband if they wanted to buy it. They owned a Habitat house, but this one was larger. I told my niece I didn't want to pressure them into buying it, but they were glad to have the extra space and wanted to take part in preserving Mom's legacy. We were all happy with the decision, and it would have pleased my mother.

By that time, Mom had been gone for two years, but her stuff was still in her house. The first year after she passed, I was still dealing with my own grief and couldn't bring myself to clear everything out. Later, when I regained some equilibrium, we took care of a few things. We decided what to do with her formal china and all the family photos. We went through her jewelry, and I made necklaces as gifts from her African trading beads.

I had to deal with some heavy memories as we went through the jewelry. A while before her passing, the ivory disappeared. She was very upset and convinced that I had gotten rid of the jewelry. Every now and then the topic would be brought up. "I don't

know what y'all did with my ivory," she'd say, and I had to tell her over and over, "Mom, I wouldn't have thrown it away."

After she died, we found it tucked away in her jewelry box. We'd never thought to look in there, just assuming my mom already had. It hurts that to her dying day, my mother thought I'd done away with it. She doubted me, yet it was there all along. The pain of those little cuts takes a while to heal when someone dies.

Mom also loved her memorabilia. She had worked for the Kansas City Royals and collected their bobbleheads for years. She wanted her grandsons to have them, but when we gave them to the boys, they weren't thrilled. The only one both wanted was Bo Jackson.

When my kids were young, I tried to help them understand by surrounding them with reminders of who they are: T-shirts, dolls, toys, anything that represented them. Now I do it for my nieces. That's my piece. My mom did the same. She made my daughter Black Barbie doll quilts and decorated her house to reflect our heritage, just like I do. My great-nieces will tell you, "Auntie only has Black things," because everywhere they look, they see themselves there. I'm hoping that if we keep showing them, an opportunity will arise, something will spark, and they'll have an aha! moment.

It makes me realize how necessary it is to get my kids to Africa. I want them to value our culture, especially with what's being done to DEI and our history. I want them to be outraged if political ambitions override the preservation of our past.

My mom wanted that too. She and her siblings grew up in a one-room house. It was dilapidated, and when it finally fell down, they

salvaged a board from its walls. My uncle saved a well pump, and one of my aunts has a wooden trunk she stores antique quilts in. They took the pieces of our history that held important memories of their lives.

We have regular family reunions, and at every gathering, we have one night dedicated to telling our family history, beginning with our great-grandfather and his 15 children and five stepchildren. That's a tree with a whole lot of branches, and my mom made certain none were overlooked. One year she had us do a reenactment, and for another, she dug into the census records and had my sister make a history book.

Fortunately, my niece who bought my mother's house understands the worth of all of this. After she moved into Mom's place, she and her younger sister helped me organize a garage sale to clear out my mother's less significant things. That was another tradition of my mother's. The house sits on a busy street and is the perfect site for a yard sale. Mom loved to hold them, and they were a great way to raise money for our reunions.

Our husbands hauled things out each day, and the three of us sat in the yard. My younger niece was in charge of the prices, so when people came up to me and asked how much something cost, I'd call out to her. Her kids ran around the yard while we sat in lawn chairs, joking and laughing. We had so much fun.

It was three days of "getting rid of"—furniture, my mom's clothes, and art that wasn't as nice as the pieces we had kept.

Sometimes while we were sitting around during the sale, we'd suddenly decide, "No, I want that," and put it back in the car to take home. The girls would say, "Oh, that's her blazer," or "I think

I'll keep Grandma's scarf," choosing pieces to remember her by. We told stories that came with those clothes: "She wore that shirt all the time, you couldn't stop her." There was a lot of that going on. I did it with some of her pants. When she worked as an usher for the Royals, khakis were part of her uniform. We used to tease her about it. She had so many. But when I saw them, it suddenly came to me that I wanted them for a quilt.

Quilting was another legacy of my mother's. In fact, if you asked me what was the most significant part of Black culture she passed down, I'd say her quilts. Women in my family quilted all the way back to my great-grandmother. She was very generous in sharing what she crafted, although there was always a bit of a fuss when people would ask her to make something. "They don't have any idea what it's worth," she would say. But she never stopped doing it.

No one else picked up the tradition, and my participation was only peripheral. I bought her a machine and went with her to get fabric. When she went to shows, I helped pack up and price her quilts. But I hate it now that my interest was so limited. It's not until you see your mother slipping away that you realize, "I could have done this to honor her." So now I'm trying to learn.

I'm starting slowly. Recently, my cousin finished her doctorate, and I decided to sew her something, not a whole quilt but something smaller, a wall hanging with African fabric. And now, it's getting a little bit easier to imagine transforming those garage sale khakis of my mom's into a quilt.

That sale itself was a turning point for me. There was a sense of closure as we were wrapping up, and a weight lifted from my

shoulders. We sold what could be sold and had the things we wanted. I had already begun to feel forward momentum, but now things were even further along. I said to my niece, "I don't have to come over here anymore. I'm turning the house over to you. It's yours now."

We each made $400, which we used to go to a cousin's wedding. My mom's stuff made that trip happen. It turned out to be a precious time together because soon after, my younger niece died. Her health hadn't been good for a long time. During the trip, we could tell she was under the weather, but she never complained. Once we got back, she went to the hospital. Her liver was shutting down, and although they found a donor, she died the day before the surgery, only three weeks after the garage sale.

Our family got together at my mother's house after she died. It was packed. I went to speak to the neighbors, and they said, "We see y'all are still having gatherings." I knew their words weren't a complaint but a recognition. They appreciate the continuity the house represents and understand it isn't a noisy neighborhood problem but a place of belonging for my family.

My mom's house—her legacy—was established decades before she passed and will continue to be a center of connection for us. It's where we celebrated my niece's life and where we will continue to gather for Christmas, birthdays, and any event that draws us close. Mom's things might be gone, but we don't need them. Her presence still lingers in the stories and memories that fill every room.

16
Osbourne siblings

The third generation of their family, the Osbourne siblings are Millennials and Gen Zers who were peripherally involved in the disbandment of family homes and have filled their own with the objects and stories passed down to them.

Introduction

Adult grandchildren frequently see themselves as responsible for recognizing and safeguarding meaning rather than simply as owners of their grandparents' things (Bengtson and Allen, 1993). The Osbourne siblings' engagement with their grandmothers' possessions reflects this, though not uniformly. Their differences are not disagreement but variation in how meaning is recognized and acted upon within the same family. Non-material legacy operates alongside these objects: their grandfather Hank's written life story functions as posthumous instruction, shaping behavior and self-understanding as much as any physical thing he left behind. This dynamic aligns with the Continuing Bonds framework (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996), in which relationships endure through action—here, through the handling and stewardship of what remains.

Osbourne siblings' narrative

The Osbourne siblings love stuff. There are four of them—two sisters and two brothers—who live close and remain actively involved in each other's lives. Rebecca and Grace talk often, squeezing in words about their days while their four children play. Richard and Martin, the youngest, meet up regularly.

At times, the four function as a cohesive unit, sprinkling their speech with phrases like "In classic Osbourne family fashion…", variations of which surface when they speak of the disbandments of their grandmothers' homes.

Their grandmother Dot's came first. She had dementia, and her relocation was crucial. Their father, Luke, cleared out the house on his own. The process was surgical. Only a "we're moving her out," and the house stood empty.

"I can't remember my feelings when Grandma Dot's house was being disbanded," says Richard. "There was no announcement. It just kind of happened."

"I know Grandma Dot didn't care so much about things," Martin says. "It made it easier to let go of her objects. It's what she would have done. That's a very Osbourne thing. She probably told Dad to do it that way."

The perfunctory emptying, coupled with Dot's lack of sentiment for her belongings, made the dismantling feel hollow—but it wasn't without consequence. There were items that did matter.

"Grandma Dot was structured. We did the same things every time we went over," Martin reflects. "We'd go to the candy store and come home and watch movies in the basement. She had

these plastic popcorn boxes with red stripes. Those boxes mean a lot."

Douglas, their grandfather, had been a competitive Masters runner for more than 30 years. The basement was a showcase for all his awards. "The biggest point of pride as a kid was that Grandpa was in the Hall of Fame. That basement meant a lot to my seven-year-old ego," says Martin. That's true for Richard, as well. It was Douglas's things, not Dot's, that held pull. "After Grandpa died, I was excited about going through his running gear—his shoes and stuff. That was cool."

For Grace and Rebecca, the impersonal disposal was more distressing. Rebecca remembers a set of pink ceramic mermaids that hung in the bathroom. One looked over her shoulder, baring her little booty, and Rebecca smiles as she recalls it.

"Even if it were from JCPenney, it was something associated with her. But all of it was gone without fanfare. I wasn't there to say, wait."

The experience made her determined to be part of the decision-making the next time. When Dot passed, Rebecca was present. "And you best believe when Dad asked, 'Who wants to help?' I was like, 'Me!'"

Dot's disbandment stands in stark contrast to that of the siblings' maternal grandmother, Vivienne. The first stage was a family affair, and they were all there.

Vivienne's house was in a small town in Louisiana, and unlike Dot's, its physical presence was impactful. "It was like an art museum. It felt old and authentic," Richard reminisces. "And the

neighborhood was cool. And the smell. That's the thing with Louisiana—that smell, like a wet, summery, mossy smell."

Vivienne's desire to move had been unexpected. Her husband, Hank, had died the year prior, and after his funeral, she opened the house to family. The siblings remember it as a fun but chaotic day. Vivienne had a bad habit of promising things to multiple people, and when it came time to claim them, there was a lot of "Oh, that's mine." "No, that's mine."

At one point, another "classic Osbourne thing" happened between their mother and aunt. They started yelling at each other, and then, like a tempest in a teapot, everyone shut up. Martin brings it up a couple of times—none of the siblings recall how it was resolved. Grace says she avoided conflict at any cost, and Martin acknowledges they all just disappear when things go sideways.

But that doesn't mean they don't exert themselves when it matters.

"Oh, my gosh! My gosh," Grace enthuses when I ask about the post-funeral disbandment. "We're about to have a little therapy session. Vivienne had said, 'Take what you want,' but my husband and I felt like we got last pick because Rebecca put her name on everything."

"I didn't get everything, did I?" answers Rebecca. But then she remembers. "There was a chair."

Grace ended up with the chair, but she and her husband didn't yet have room for it, so Rebecca took temporary ownership. Grace defends her rights: "Technically, it's still mine."

"But we've grown attached to it," Rebecca says, turning to her sister. "Adam was really convinced you were going to take it this year."

"He should get ready," Grace teases.

That's how the siblings converse. There's a lot of candor but no rancor. That was evident when some of Grandpa Hank's belongings came up.

To the boys, Hank's office was the coolest treasure trove in the house. From an old chest, Richard claimed a pair of sunglasses and a small case he thought was for cigarettes. He shows it to me at our interview, and I tell him it's for business cards. "Oh, dude. I've got business cards. I gotta start carrying this."

He lights up talking about the rest. "Firstborn son has Granddad's .22 lever-action rifle, his Navy saber, and his cool cowboy hat." He also has a vintage guitar, honey brown with white inlays, which he stared at as a kid and yearned to play. It now leans against a bookcase in his living room, within easy reach.

What he perhaps doesn't know is Martin's take. "I still wanted Granddad's banjo or one of the swords," Martin tells me. "But I just chose not to say anything. Maybe I still might. I just don't mind that much. Plus, it all makes me laugh. Richard got a gun, a sword, and a guitar. I got a pair of boots."

Rebecca conveys something different. "It's not whether it was important to them. It's that it reminds me of them. I think, 'Hey, that's going to make me think of Grandma Dot.' Whereas with Vivienne's stuff, while I appreciate that she loves it, it can feel burdensome. Even though it's a family heirloom, it doesn't

intrinsically remind me of her. I didn't know it existed before she said, 'You need this.'"

But both she and Grace note how heirloom objects can become meaningful. When Vivienne gave Grace a collection of quilt squares, Grace made a pillow for her son rather than pass them down. It might wear out, but for now it has a purpose and reminds her of Vivienne.

Rebecca sees it differently. "My instinct is to squirrel things away. Vivienne gave me some antique tea towels and told me I couldn't use them. But at this point, I might as well. If they get tattered, they're pretty close to tattered anyway. I maybe want to push against how I operate. Enjoy things while I have them and then give them to my kids to enjoy them too."

Of all the siblings, Martin is the one who speaks most directly to how an object can embody identity itself. He inherited a pen-and-ink drawing of a jazz combo, fluidly sketched on a score sheet. "It really speaks to me as a musician," he tells me. He muses that the saxophone player might be his grandfather. As a child, he identified with the piano player as well; his great-grandfather had been a pianist, and something in the way the painted player bends over the keyboard, his torso slightly pitched to the right, seared itself into Martin's brain. He would copy the posture as he practiced. "That painting contributed to my identity. It reminds me of my heritage. It connects me with that musical part of myself and my family and validates me as a musician."

As Martin joyfully puts it, "Older things, they're worth more because of the experience tied to them. And when that object

has a story from your own family? It's like, oh, it's the ultimate, most coolest level of juiciness."

Grace agrees. There's a picture story Bible her father gave her, full-color illustrations of Noah's Ark and David and Goliath throughout. Had he just said it belonged to her grandmother, she would have thought it cool but felt nothing more. Luke invested it with meaning when he told her his parents had read it to him as a boy. Inside there's an inscription: To our sons, who we love so much. Mother and Daddy. "Oh, my gosh, I love it now," says Grace. "I think about that generational aspect every time I see it."

That desire to attach story to create meaning isn't limited to objects. Hank was known for his writing and storytelling, and when he died, Vivienne sent all the kids a packet that included his life story, one of the first sentences being, "I'm getting old. Nobody asks about anything, so I'll just write about it." It was sad for them all. He had been gruff during their childhood—they were a little scared of him and didn't ask questions.

"Damn," says Richard. "I didn't know. I just literally thought he didn't want to talk to me. I was young. I would have approached him differently as an adult."

"I sometimes think grandparents are wasted on kids," Rebecca chimes in. "I didn't think of them as the key to where I've come from or who I am. They were just there, and then, as an adult, you start to put together a narrative about your identity. Where do I come from? Who are my people? But by that time your grandparents are gone, and you're like, 'Well, shoot! I missed it.' Granddad wasn't that guy when we were kids. By the time I figured out he wasn't a scary, prickly grandpa, it was too late."

Recalling Dot, she adds, "She might not have invested a lot of meaning into her possessions, but she was a really good storyteller. I feel very connected to our family history through the stories she told. She was so tied to where she was from and to the things she remembered from her past."

It's the same thing they note about their father, Dot's son, the man who cleared his mother's house without much thought to the things within. "He could rip a childhood story when we were kids," Richard says. "That was one of my favorite things to fall asleep to."

"Yeah," adds Martin. "Tell me the story of making the snowman across the street with Timmy Two Toes."

"Or painting the steps of his grandparents' house with water," Rebecca says with a smile.

Grace joins in. "I liked it when Dad drove us around where Grandma grew up. That's special."

For the Osbournes, stories and objects together suffuse their lives with meaning, serving as vessels for memory and family history. As Gen Z and tail-end Millennials, they place a different value on inheritance than earlier generations, many of whom find meaning simply because something was owned by someone before them. They have taken the best practices from their parents and grandparents and learned the harsher lessons of what happens when things disappear without ceremony and stories go untold. Rebecca and Grace are already passing this sense of rootedness to their children. Richard and Martin, not yet parents, are getting ready—gathering stories and stewarding what they've been given, so that when the moment comes, the next generation

will know those who came before. And when that moment arrives, Rebecca will have her tea towels, Grace her picture story Bible, Richard his guitar, and Martin his pen-and-ink drawing—each one a window for their children to look through to catch a glimpse of their past.

17
Kit

Kit is a therapist who has spent her life in trauma care, guided by the caregiving she was thrust into as a young child. This narrative was written by the participant.

Introduction

In Kit's narrative, stories function as the mechanism through which identity moves across generations. The narrative presents storytelling as inheritance more durable than objects or even place itself. A town burns. Houses disappear. Trees vanish. But the stories remain intact, transmitting meaning when the physical landscape no longer can. Research on oral tradition helps explain this human process, showing how storytelling preserves emotional knowledge and resilience across generations (Vansina, 1985).

Stories for Kit's family are woven into what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) calls habitus: ingrained ways of thinking, feeling, and responding formed, in this family's instance, through generations of hardship and resistance to diminishment. That inheritance is embodied in their everyday life. They are storytellers.

Kit's narrative

Eight years ago, an inferno swept through the northern Sierra Nevada. By the time the conflagration was contained, 85 lives

had been lost and an entire city ravaged. Less than four hours after the burn began, one horrified sister sent out a text, another passed it along, then twice more, until the four of us were glued to our respective TVs, sick with immediate grief.

Paradise. Hell had come to Paradise.

Just one of my sisters, Charlie, had lived there but only as an infant. Even so, Paradise was our town. It held our memories—a treasured place of our childhood and a physical representation of our mother and grandmother.

When the film based on that fire was released, my sisters and I sat in front of our screens watching as a school bus full of children zigzagged its way across the town, struggling to find an escape out of the darkness and flames.

The streets and roads the bus wound its way down—we knew them. We had walked those roads and knew the corner where the bus turned onto its last, most harrowing gauntlet to escape. A purple house stood there on a pie-shaped lot, guarded by three towering ponderosa pines. Once there had been a persimmon tree, a ladder leaning against it, and a woman swallowed by the canopy, nothing visible below the branches but two stocking-covered legs, garters and all, beneath a modest skirt. Cats roamed the yard looking for mice, and chickens pecked at the ground. The air was laden with the resinous dark-sweet scent of duff and humus. If we closed our eyes, we could feel the dry heat of summer on our arms, the dusty red dirt between our toes.

The colors leap out at me whenever I think of it. Hyacinth purple walls devoured by copper flames, standing out against a sky

matte black from ash-laden smoke. As art, the tableau is stunning. As a granddaughter, daughter, and witness, I am bereft.

Oh, Mother. I am so grateful you left us before the fire came. You never knew that the place where you began, where all your stories were born, is gone.

She was quite a storyteller, our mom. Deep, rich veins of memory etched her brain, and all her life she mined them for their gold. But hers was not a poetic mind. Instead, it was no-nonsense, anchored in fact. Her tales were plot-driven, frank, and bittersweet. It wasn't until we were older that we began to see the threads of light and dark, good and bad, woven into their structure. We realized then, like Aesop's fables and fairy tales, Mom had been subtly teaching us about human experience and the courage it takes to stand up to the unjust.

Pippa, one of my sisters, is a journalist, and when our mom told her stories, she listened for the plot—the intrigue, the climax, the resolution. She saw them as chapters in a really juicy book. But one summer day, walking down the road from Grandma's house, Pippa commented that our mother's childhood seemed idyllic. Mom, suddenly serious, stopped in her tracks.

"What kind of childhood do you think I had, being the daughter of the town drunk?"

My sister was stunned. She knew our grandfather had been an alcoholic. Mom was nothing if not frank. But in her stories, my sister saw the role of town drunk being played by Otis of Mayberry, the lush of *The Andy Griffith Show*, who had a bender every Friday and locked himself up in the town jail every Saturday to sleep it

off. Now my mother intimated something dark and dangerous lurked that Pippa had never seen. Decades later, she came across the starkest evidence of what my mother meant—a garish newspaper headline that read "Death Threat for Children Divorce Plea", which, among other things, detailed abuse, drunkenness, and my grandfather's threats to knock his stepsons on the head with an ax.

It was her first lesson in how Mom's dispassionate storytelling could hide a world of hurt, but it wasn't mine. When my mother told stories of my grandmother—the hardscrabble farm life, the marriage at 17, the abuse that followed, the thin children, the buckboard ride back to the family farm, her father standing guard, white as a sheet, rifle in hand—I knew. When she spoke of her own childhood—the Depression, the rabbits raised for other people's meals, their dinners of millet and barley, a five-year-old alone while her mother worked, the little girl whose father placed her on the bar to perform for drunken men—I knew.

But I was also aware of the meanings behind the story of our grandmother's divorces and the courage it must have taken to stand up not once but three times, as a devout woman of faith, and say, "I'm not taking this anymore." A woman who always worked outside the home to earn enough to keep her children housed and fed and who hoarded buttons like a squirrel's winter store so that she could decorate her daughter's dresses. A woman who, despite being mired in poverty, managed to save enough money to build that two-story red house on Castle Drive. No one else we knew had a grandmother who had literally made the space where her children lived.

And this was the woman who raised our mother—the town drunk's daughter.

My mother was brought up to be strong, like our grandmother. She was an equal partner in her brother's wild escapades, a tomboy through and through. Rejecting her mother's religion early on because it diminished her autonomy, she was scrappy and unbowed, becoming a champion for her own worth, and later, the worth of her daughters.

No one in her family had ever finished high school, let alone gone to college. Our mother was the first and a girl. That girl part was a problem.

She had a brilliant mind, a math whiz. Spelling was hopeless, but numbers were her language. Her insistence on a math degree was an uphill battle. For her living expenses and tuition, she took in ironing and babysat, rarely visiting close-by Paradise because she couldn't afford the bus fare. Professors looked askance at her and students scorned her. A woman didn't belong in mathematics. Denied admission into physics class, she went straight up the chain of command, changed the rule, enrolled, and earned the highest grade.

If life had been different, her career path would have led to engineering. She manipulated mechanical things like she manipulated numbers. Our father told her she was wasting her brain with housewifely matters, so she built her own TV. And, when the glorious, ingenious PCs arrived on the market, who became the expert on them but our mom.

Like our grandmother, she was mismatched in her marriage. Our father fell in love with our mother at first conversation. He was

fascinated with her mind and respected her strength. But he was a troubled man, and although the exact opposite of her father regarding temperance, he was filled with self-doubt and anger, which warped him into a person my mother would not have chosen to marry if she had known.

But even though she contemplated divorce, she never left. He had lifted her out of poverty, and the alternative—being reduced to a divorcee and losing her place in middle-income, suburban America during the 1970s—was beyond the pale.

She stood up to our dad, though, refusing to be diminished. And she was a fabulous mother in our younger years. Our homemade clothes were more haute couture than simply functional. Colors, lace, flounces—we had them all. She was a dedicated Betty Crocker cook and made us three meals a day. We read early on, learned to swim, played the piano. Our father, an angry atheist, hated every holiday that was remotely attached to a religion. My mother, who shared his belief without the anger, defied him and made them all rich in texture and tradition. Any time her kids' rights were being violated, she marched to the offending party. Still, she didn't hover. She let us fight our own fights unless they weren't fair.

But then tragedy struck, and our lives would never remotely resemble what we had for her first eight years as a mother. She fell ill—so ill that to this day all of us have vivid memories of hospitals, sick beds, endless operations, and finally, prescription medicine addiction.

Mom's illness lasted for eight years. My youngest sister, Bridget, was a baby when it began, and she became my responsibility.

At six years old, I was her caregiver, changing her diapers, giving her a bottle, being responsible for her well-being. And then, Charlie and I became Mom's caregivers as well. We were the ones who had oversight of her, making sure she didn't overdose on her medication or step into a scalding bath when she was high.

This caregiving role was a brand seared into my psyche, perhaps more than any role I have ever had except that of wife and mother. When my children were very young, we took in my mother-in-law, who had Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, and managed her care until her journey ended. As my parents grew older and their needs stronger, I tended to them when time and distance allowed. And I have never gotten over the conviction that it was my responsibility to keep my three sisters—strong, capable women—safe from harm.

Mom lived with undiagnosed depression, spending much of her time in bed. Housekeeping had never been a strength, and she had always collected things, perhaps because of childhood deprivation. Over the years, her house filled up, and we became caretakers of it as well, endeavoring to make sure that Mom didn't become lost among her possessions. She let things go to the point that when her grandchildren visited from out of state, they could no longer sleep there. On one visit, I cleared out the guest room, made it functional and welcoming, and it speaks to my mother's love for her grandchildren that it remained so until she died.

My mother did not age well. An autoimmune disease that had been left untreated for too long wreaked havoc on her body, and pain became a reality she couldn't change. Bridget, my little

sister who had once been my responsibility to safeguard, now watched over our mother. The tables had turned, and it broke my heart that I didn't live close by.

Mom lost her ability to function almost day by day, this amazing woman who had, in her retirement, toured around the United States and Canada on her motorcycle. But her stories continued, and by the time she passed, even her grandchildren knew some of them by heart.

I tell my children they stand on my shoulders, as I stood on my mother's, and she on hers. We received from our mother better than she got. We have her creative instinct and her math brain. But most of all, we have her storytelling nature, and we can pass the stories on. They reinforce what an unbreakable line of women we come from, what capable women we are, and what formidable daughters we have raised.

The purple house on Foster Road is gone. The persimmon tree, the chickens, the deep, rich smell—gone. But the woman on the ladder, the one swallowed by the canopy with her stocking-covered legs and her modest skirt, made something that no fire could touch. She made our mother. And our mother made us.

18
Alyson

Alyson is a speaker and writer from a five-generation ranching family, dedicated to stewardship, conservation, and preserving women's stories in ranching culture.

Introduction

Like Kit's mother, Alyson's father was also a storyteller, but his stories were of a wider sort, centered around a community of people who adopted an ethic of stoicism, endurance, and self-reliance—and the land that forged them all. He expressed sentiment not through emotional expression but through stewardship of that land, and Alyson experiences the cost of that inheritance. Even while she longs for emotional engagement and mutual vulnerability, the ethic her father embodied often prevents those forms of connection.

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus helps explain why. Alyson's father's cowboy ethic is an embodied social pattern formed through repetition until it feels natural—not a conscious set of rules but reality itself, shaping how love, grief, caregiving, and dignity can be expressed. Erikson's (1963) concept of generativity can be seen transmitting this habitus. In the end, Alyson inherits both the attachment to place and the burden of interpreting

which parts of that ethos she wishes to keep. Her legacy is an ongoing process of reinterpretation.

Alyson's narrative

There is a photograph I keep coming back to. It is so vivid, so alive, it fairly crackles. It's dusk, and smoke from a solid jagged line of brilliant yellow flame billows into a dusty plum sky. If I touch it, it might burn.

A crowd drawn by the spectacle stands silhouetted in front. Behind them, a dozen or so feet back, a man sits easily on his horse, reins loosely held, wearing a cowboy hat as familiar to him as his own hair.

Although it might seem that the fire is the subject of the picture, it is not, or not entirely. This man, this cowboy, stakes a claim. He and the fire are one—a symbiotic pair that renders the awestruck onlookers invisible to me.

The man in the photograph was my father, Carl Turner, and that fire was his. He owned it, literally. It wasn't a mistake or a disaster. It was a controlled burn—a time-honored practice valued by many farmers, ranchers, and conservationists, and my father was one of its most vocal proponents.

So when Dad burned the pasture at his ranch, years after that photograph was taken, it was business as usual. Until it wasn't. The fire got away from him and the fire department had to be called, and that's when our world flip-flopped. My brother, Lathan, a rancher himself with an eye for public perception, saw it immediately. Once our father's safety was accounted for, Lathan's next thought was how it would look to the outside world. A burn

had gotten away from Carl Turner, of all people. What would people think?

Image means a lot to my family. And Dad's? It was paramount. A reporter once wrote that my father was the unofficial ambassador of this region. Whether it be with ranchers, historians, or academics, my dad had a presence.

His family had owned their ranch for over 150 years. Except for a short stint when he got his PhD, my dad stayed rooted to his piece of the world—a wide-open range under a big blue sky where the winds could be relentless and the winters cruel. He was a professor, but he remained in the saddle and ranched until his very last decade.

My mother and father had a loving marriage. He saw the world through rose-colored glasses, but that did not always sit well with her. At times he seemed complacent, and she didn't want complacency; she wanted engagement. I'm not sure he was capable of giving that to her, though. The cowboy ethic, the legacy handed down to him by his father, ensured that wouldn't happen.

You've seen that code reenacted on the big screen. Hard work, self-reliance, loyalty, directness. All those are great. But then there's the stoicism. You don't complain. You endure. My grandfather, Dad's dad, was the standard to live up to. He rarely spoke and wasn't really affectionate, a perfect model of the ethic.

The men were allowed their outlets. They poked fun at each other to work off steam, or even got angry and fought, but they were never, ever allowed to be sentimental. It was one of the worst things you could do in our family. It was scorned as a false

emotion. If your dog no longer served you? You got rid of it. If your horses were fidgety, you certainly weren't going to take any time to horse-whisper.

And, by the way, who were sentimental? The women. Did you want to be soft like them?

For my dad, I think he channeled what would be seen as sentimental into what was historical. He took his cowboy ethic, mixed it with a devotion that ran deeper than sentiment, and created portraits of the land he loved. His written words were his legacy.

When my mother died, I think the shock accelerated his decline, and we all began to see what hadn't been clear before. The day after she passed, he backed out of the garage and into my car with absolutely no awareness of what he'd done. Later, he had no memory of the fact that my brother's house had burned down a few months before.

He denied his decline with every bit of his being, willing it not to be so. His executive function was still intact before he died—he was still solving *New York Times* crosswords—and that push to keep his mind strong seemed to protect him for a long time. But his body was less cooperative. He had a number of dangerous falls, and eventually, Lathan laid down the law and decided we needed to sit down with Dad and tell him he had to move. So that's what we did. And our father was very mad, very sad, and horribly embarrassed.

We got him a place in a senior living community. It had an external door, so friends could come visit without going through the care residence itself. He loved that. But he refused to participate in the resident community. I think he didn't want to admit that something had taken charge of his agency, and the path his

legacy took was no longer under his control. In one of his last columns, he used the one weapon he had left—his words—to steer his story in the way he wanted it to go and said he was going to be moving into an apartment in town.

To me he was performing happiness. He told me many times that within two minutes of moving into his residence, he never felt a moment of homesickness, as Lathan and his family had done such a good job of setting his place up. Every time I heard him say it, it stung. Somehow Dad's reiteration negated the caretaking I had done for him for five years. I guess that's not too much of a surprise. My brother and Dad not only had a father-son connection but shared that cowboy ethos as well, and their bonds were stronger than any of us realized.

One morning I was having a rough day. I hadn't been able to reach him the night before and had had to call Lathan to get someone to check on him. Dad had lost his appetite, and we had to force him to eat. Usually, he would go shopping by himself, but that morning, he sent me out. He was very particular about what things came from which grocery store, so there were three stops on my list. I was at Walmart when I got the call from my niece. Lathan had had a heart attack and died before the paramedics arrived.

Everything got blurry as my niece spoke. When I hung up, I continued shopping. I bought a notebook and pen. I made a few calls. I managed to write some things down and went back to Dad's place.

Enough time had passed for him to grow concerned, and he asked me where I'd been. Was everything okay? Was there a flat tire?

I said, "No, Dad, not that."

"What happened? Were you robbed? Was there a wreck?"

"No, Dad. It's much worse than that. Lathan had a heart attack this morning, and he died."

Of course, my father couldn't process it at first. I had to say it a few times, and then he cried. And I cried. He asked why the hell would Lathan go before him. Lathan? Just typical. Typical, typical. Exactly like him.

Relatives came that evening and brought food. Dad ate more than I'd seen him eat in years and was lucid in a way that he hadn't been for a long, long time. Some family members called, and we talked on speakerphone.

The two of us watched a whole bunch of *Judge Judy* episodes that night. As he was going to bed, he brought up how he wanted his end of life to look. Practical things like who should tend to his body and what funeral home he wanted used. There wasn't much more to say, really, so we hugged, and he went to sleep. When I crawled into bed, I thought, "Oh, Lathan, why? What am I going to do? How am I going to handle this on my own?"

I woke up at seven, and Dad wasn't in his bed. I looked toward the bathroom, and there he was, face down, gone.

People say my dad died of heartbreak. He certainly died of shock. There's no question in my mind. He was so frail, and I think he said, "Why bother?" But I think for both my father and brother it's more complicated than that. It goes back to that cowboy ethic.

The stoicism it demanded didn't spare me simply because I was a female. Even though my sex brought me some latitude, the

expectations it encoded in Dad and Lathan still spilled over on me. I was embarrassed to show my emotions, and sometimes I just needed to let them rip. I wanted to be sentimental. And I wanted someone to honor and understand that need. My mom did, when she was there, but then suddenly—she was not.

Five years after her death, my brother and father were still not mourning her openly. I tried to get through to their grief, suggesting we get together on the anniversary of her death or her birthday. I'd send a text and say, "Thinking of Mom today." I wanted somebody to commiserate with, but neither one of them seemed to understand my pain and how much their silence compounded my hurt.

I was angry, furious, really, at them for failing to honor Mom by grieving with me. Instead, they left me abandoned and isolated with a huge void inside. Part of that behavior I know my dad couldn't help. His dementia made it harder for him to connect.

However, I give less latitude to Lathan. Unlike our father, whose generation expected men to keep their emotions in check, Lathan grew up in a more psychologically aware culture. He had the capacity to transcend the rigid demands of the cowboy code, but he didn't. But I know it's not a two-dimensional story. Some parts of us are harder to outrun than others.

Not too long ago, after attending yet another funeral, an image came to me. The four of us—my parents, brother, and I—are in a group. We hug, pull apart, and I walk away, waving to them as I go. It was a reminder to honor my grief for the family I no longer have but to go forward with what I still retain.

Both Dad and Lathan wanted their love for this land and their way of life to be sustained. That's part of my heritage too. I feel it in my bones. When people say close your eyes and think of somewhere peaceful, that's where I go. I want to honor my piece of that legacy, but I'm still working out what that looks like. What I do know is that the ending is now mine to write.

19
Legacy and inheritance conclusion

Summary

Older adults quite often want something of themselves—a legacy of sorts—to persist after they die, but their stories, values, and ways of moving through the world require someone willing to receive them. The narrators in this section are that someone—the ones who remained open to what could be received, whether storied objects that carry accumulated family meaning, narratives passed across generations, or an ethos expressed through story, books, and daily life until it becomes a way of being.

Hunter and Rowles (2005) identified three distinct but overlapping forms that legacy takes: biological legacy, passed through bloodline and genetic continuity; material legacy—the objects, the homes, the land; and a legacy of values, transmitted through story, relationship, and ways of being. Of the three, participants in their research consistently ranked the legacy of values as the most important and the most durable. That openness carries benefits. Nelson and Fivush (2020) highlight the vital role stories

play both inside our minds and in our interactions with others. They argue that narratives are essential to human consciousness, shaped through everyday social communication using language. McAdams (1993) and Duke, Lazarus and Fivush (2008) together establish that the stories people inherit become the raw material from which identity is constructed and that those who know their family stories demonstrate a stronger sense of self, greater resilience, and measurable well-being than those who do not.

The five accounts in this section are the evidence—each narrator influenced by what they choose to receive, whether tussles on a mahogany bed reinforcing the lasting bond of siblings, a house sustained across generations anchoring a family's continuity, the curve of a back in a drawing tracing the roots of an inherited gift, a vision of legs disappearing into a tree's canopy recalling a self-sufficiency that shaped the women who followed, or land holding the tangible weight of an inherited ethos.

There is worry beneath some of these accounts that the value of storied objects and the stories and history themselves won't survive into the next generation. For Catherine, the legacy is secure among the siblings who lived it together, but its forward passage is less certain. Will the bed and the memory of rambunctious children be safeguarded? Can a necklace find its way to a daughter who can appreciate it? She has come to understand inheritance as stewardship—valuing a piece for its legacy and stories and sharing that history with others—but stewardship without a willing recipient stops there. The question for Lisa is different. Her mother's investment was deliberate and visible even on her walls. Lisa has duplicated it, but her children have yet to pick it up. Alyson faces a different version of that uncertainty, wondering

how she can mold the ethos passed down to her into something that serves her own life, its meaning for the next generation still unresolved. Weststrate, McLean and Fivush (2024) give the worry its weight. When intergenerational transmission fails, subsequent generations do not simply miss out on family history. They experience a diminished framework for understanding who they are and where they came from. The stakes are not just sentimental.

Yet the Osbourne siblings stand as evidence of what becomes possible when the space is made. Tail-end Millennials and Gen Zers, they are not going to let the transmission of family identity stop with them and are already passing rootedness to their own children. Kit's account removes all doubt. By the time her mother died, even the grandchildren knew the stories by heart. They know they stand on the shoulders of those who came before. The transmission has lasted across four generations because someone in each made space for the stories. The unspoken question that closes these narratives is not whether legacy can survive into the future—the Osbourne siblings and Kit have answered that—but what is required in each generation to keep the transmission unbroken.

Engaging the material

Discussion questions

Personal

1. Which storied objects/possessions exist in your own family, and who currently holds their stories? What would be lost if the object survived but the story did not?
2. Generativity names the desire to leave something of oneself behind. What do you hope will continue after you—an

object, a story, a value, a way of being—and what have you done to secure its passage?

3. The idea of the second death holds that a person dies again when no longer remembered. Whose memory do you actively keep, and through what practices—stories, rituals, objects—do you keep it?

Theoretical

1. Hunter and Rowles's legacy of values is framed as the most durable of three legacy forms. Test this claim against two or more narratives: where does a legacy of values outlast material legacy, and where do the two depend on each other?
2. Compare habitus in two narratives from this section. How does an embodied, inherited way of being both transmit family identity and constrain the inheritor's emotional life?
3. Using collective memory and materialized identity, analyze how at least two families in this section store memory outside individual minds. What happens to identity when the artifacts or storytellers that hold it are lost?

Professional

1. Safe passage depends on a willing recipient. When a professional encounters an older adult whose descendants do not want the objects that matter to them, what interventions can honor the elder's need for continuity without coercing the family?
2. How might practitioners incorporate stewardship—framing possessions as held in trust for a family rather than owned—into mediation when siblings or generations conflict over inheritance?

3. Research links knowledge of family stories to stronger identity and resilience. How could professionals working with families in transition—social workers, care managers, estate professionals—build oral tradition and story capture into the disbandment process itself?

Further activities

1. Reflect on one object in your own family that has been passed down or is expected to be passed down. Write a brief account of what meaning it contains, who understands that meaning, and whether that understanding is likely to survive into the next generation.
2. Compare how two narratives in this section approach the transmission of legacy differently—one through objects or property, one through story, ethos, or cultural practice. Identify what each method preserves, what each risks losing, and how the narrator understands the difference.
3. Interview a family member or close community elder about one object, tradition, or way of being they hope to pass forward. Draft a brief written record of that legacy—its origins, its meaning, and the conditions that might allow it to survive or cause it to disappear.

Voices in the conversation

- Broom, Sarah M. *The Yellow House*. Grove Press, 2019. A memoir of a Black family's struggle against a house's slow deterioration.
- de Waal, Edmund. *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. Chatto & Windus (UK) / Farrar, Straus and Giroux (US), 2010. A ceramicist traces an inherited collection through five generations of family.

- Elmore, Phyllis Biffle. *Quilt of Souls*. Restless Books, 2022. A grandmother's story quilts preserve Black family history across generations.
- Johnson, Lizzie. *Paradise: One Town's Struggle to Survive an American Wildfire*. Crown, 2021. The 2018 Camp Fire that destroyed Paradise, told through survivors and first responders.
- Spragg, Mark. *Where Rivers Change Direction*. University of Utah Press, 1999. A spare, unsentimental memoir of growing up on a Wyoming dude ranch.

Section 4
Navigating the sort

Learning objectives

After engaging with this section, the reader will:

1. Describe how procedural labor—sorting, sequencing, coordinating—functions as a form of care rather than its absence.
2. Apply the Competence-Press Model to explain why intervening in the environment can restore well-being when competence declines.
3. Question where their own instinct toward efficiency might override an older adult's need to set the pace.

Introduction

While we have discussed caregiving and household disbandment as emotional experiences, they also involve extensive procedural labor. Families must work with health-care systems, coordinate appointments, manage medications, organize finances, and

make countless other decisions. The narratives within this section illuminate this procedural dimension.

Research on coping styles distinguishes between those who respond to stress by managing its emotional impact and those who respond by taking direct action to address it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Although these participants experience the full range of emotional complexity, they frequently respond through systematic coordination. This orientation is a notable thread in the five narratives, though it is weighted differently in each. The participants' central question is: how do I practically move a family through this?

Activities of daily living (ADLs), the routine self-care tasks necessary for independent function first systematized by Katz et al. (1963), provide one lens for understanding what these participants are responding to. As older adults experience diminishing ADL function, environments that were once manageable become increasingly overwhelming.

The Competence-Press Model, developed by Lawton and Nahemow (1973), describes this dynamic: well-being depends on the balance between an individual's competence and the demands of their environment. When that balance tips, someone has to act. In these narratives, that someone is the helper. Karl Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory is useful here. Sorting, categorizing, sequencing, scheduling, and coordinating become methods for translating overwhelming circumstances into manageable processes.

In caregiving contexts, these methods help narrators manage their older adults' declining function and daily safety. The same

is true of household disbandment, when decisions have to be made regarding objects that have accumulated relational and symbolic meaning over a lifetime. Organizational systems do not eliminate the tension that can arise, but they can help families move through experiences that might otherwise seem unmanageable.

The five narratives that follow demonstrate how caregiving and household disbandment, as forms of adaptive, interpretive, and procedural labor, are navigated in practice. Each contributor brings a practical orientation to the work of helping older adults and families move through daunting transitions. That orientation ranges from the instinctive and relational to the deliberate and systematic.

20
Lucy

Lucy is an engraver and painter who has drawn inspiration from the landscapes of the ranching world she inherited from her grandfather.

Introduction

As her grandfather's health declines, Lucy moves into the family home to provide daily support and reduce the demands he faces living alone. She is among the emerging young adult population that balances caregiving responsibilities alongside developmental, educational, relational, and career demands associated with this life stage (Fingerman et al., 2025).

She and her mother take on the invisible labor that her family's world does not acknowledge, a pattern research shows falls disproportionately on women. Borgi et al. (2025) found that women caregivers report higher psychological stress, greater depressive symptoms, and poorer perceived health than men, despite a similar caregiving burden. Lucy and her mother navigate both the caregiving and the sorting of her grandparents' possessions, developing a process centered on emotional connection, holding onto objects that have meaning and discarding those that do not. In negotiating both together, Lucy finds that the bond between her and her mother deepens.

Lucy's narrative

The smells in the tack room remind me of Granddad. Leather and manure, dust and hay. The clothes I took smell like him. Pancakes, too. He wasn't a good cook. He made white beans with a big piece of ham, no seasoning. Hash with whatever mystery meat and vegetables happened to be in the fridge. But his pancakes—they were the best in the entire world. Nothing compares to them.

A few years before I moved in, Granny died suddenly. After she passed, it was just a lot of grief and loneliness for Granddad. He wasn't coping well. He started talking about selling this house where my mom had grown up. I learned how to fish and ride a horse here. It's where we spent our holidays and summers. It holds all the good memories a kid could have, and neither my mom nor I wanted to let go of it.

My mom had been coming down every weekend for years, but Granddad was needing a little more daily help than she could provide, so instead of selling, we made a deal. I would live in the basement, and we would look after each other.

I've always been the bridge in my family. That was my coping mechanism as a kid, trying to keep us all together. Taking care of others is kind of an instinct in me. So when the need arose with Granddad, I was already on the path.

The London trip Granddad took with my brother, my cousin, and me, just before I moved in, might have been the beginning of that walk. We were in front of the Globe Theatre, waiting to watch a play, when Granddad fell and hit his head. I watched it bounce

off a stone, and then there was blood, and I was screaming for my cousin and brother, who had gone on ahead of us, to come back. The ambulance came, and because I had already designated myself as his person in health matters, I rode with him.

After he got stitched up, we tried to get back to the hotel, but it was the weekend of the Platinum Jubilee, and there wasn't a taxi to be found. We had to take the subway, and when we got off, the doors almost closed between us. It was just comically terrible. Anything that could go ridiculously wrong went ridiculously wrong.

After I moved in, Granddad's health continued slipping. There were some bad falls. I called the paramedics several times, and physical therapy became part of our routine. It was my mom and me who provided comfort and care. My uncle did the heavy labor—moving furniture and the bigger physical work—and his contributions were viewed as meaningful. Ours were invisible. He and Granddad were really well known, and there's a lingering sadness about how our efforts were received versus his. The focus was always on the ranching and cowboy world they shared. But if my brother, say, had done what we did, I think there would have been recognition, simply because he is a man.

I don't regret being there and wouldn't have changed my mind if I had known what was coming. But it was really, really hard. It makes me wonder if we set ourselves up to do too much. It's not my job to see to everyone's well-being just because I'm a woman or because I'm me.

Granny had her challenges with over-giving too. She did the cleaning and housekeeping and the cooking. She made

incredible food. But none of it felt like important work to her. It was just woman's work, and she lived in a hyper-masculine world. She had her own job and did a lot of community stuff. People liked her. But she had that kind of self-doubt. I think part of that comes from stepping aside for her husband. She always thought of herself as just there because Granddad was this huge public figure. But no one else thought she was a nobody.

She would be very proud of many aspects of my life and heartily disapproving of others—like my boyfriend living here before we're married. And the inside cat. She didn't like inside cats. But I can see in me her inclination toward tending to people and holding things together.

I loved the time I spent with my grandfather in this house. In the winter, we'd sit in the living room with a wood fire in the stove and do our thing. Even my cat would join in. By the time Granddad died, we'd gotten closer than we had been when I was a child. I never got to that point with Granny. She passed when I was a teenager, before I had the chance to appreciate her as an adult. But I did with my grandfather. It enabled me to see the depth of who he was and to look for that in others. It left me wanting more.

Our time together lasted about two years, but after a number of incidents, it became clear that he needed more care than I could provide at home. So, my uncle stepped into his bad-cop role—he was always bad-cop and my mom good-cop—and after having a shouting match with Granddad, they got him an apartment in a senior living community.

I stayed in the house so it wouldn't be empty and there would be someone around for any remodeling. My boyfriend moved

in. We got the lawnmower working and figured out what things needed to be done. There was a lot of upkeep. But we enjoyed making it nice. We visited Granddad at his apartment in town, and things got a lot better for a while. He was there for a couple of years, but then he started slipping again. He got frail, and when my uncle died of a sudden, unexpected heart attack, the shock was too much. Granddad was gone the next day.

His absence felt really present. It was different after my grandma died, because he was still in the house and there was a six-year delay before we began going through her things. After Granddad died, it was immediate. We had to clear out his apartment right away; otherwise it was going to cost us a lot of money. It was like he hadn't left yet. We could still feel him in his things.

He was a well-known writer and professor. He had a lot of paper stuff. My mom had to go through that, especially the notes and scribbled things. She knew what needed to be kept. I sorted through his clothes and personal items like his dad's wallet and a bunch of coins he had collected.

He had several pairs of glasses, many more than he needed because he could never find them when he wanted them. Of course, we found them all. And there were his baseball caps and cowboy hats.

I took the ties I liked, and I've been turning them into hairband scarves. They're like a little hug. I kept several of his button-up shirts, the ones that really made me think of him. Some were threadbare, but they were warm. Now one of them is my favorite pajama shirt and the softest one I've ever had.

There was also the difficult physical stuff. A pipe had burst in his closet where he stored his books. That was a nightmare of love. The bottom two or three books in each stack were caked in mold. I had to go in with a mask and gloves and sort through every single one to see which we could save. My mom and I took the ruined ones to the dump, but it felt so wrong to be throwing away perfectly good books.

The house was next, and we'd gotten our process down by then. If an item had no emotional attachment, it went straight in the trash. We also had a heap of things that would eventually have to go, but we couldn't bear to part with them right then. And of course, there was the pile of stuff we were definitely going to keep.

Sorting through things sparked a lot of our memories. That was important because when you have a memory attached to something, or discover its story, it makes it harder to let go. But if something existed without a story, if my mom or I didn't know where it came from or why it mattered, it didn't need to be kept. That was the test.

The house is like that on a grander scale. We fought for it to stay in the family. My mom wanted to come live here, and I moved in to make sure that happened. It's her house now, but still, a lot of hard work remains. There are decades' worth of things that someone still needs to go through. We feel there is always, always, always more to do, not just home maintenance but trying to get to a zero point that never quite arrives.

There will be an end to it all, I know. When it is finished and my boyfriend and I move away, it will be weird not living here. As a

young couple it would be better to be on our own, but it's hard for our generation to save enough to buy a house. It's nice to know we have a safety net, a place I love and where my mom will once again call home. She deserves that.

Before any of this happened, she and I already had a very strong bond, but this solidified something deeper, an understanding of what we've gone through together and how we've taken care of each other. The work brought us close in a way that nothing else could.

If I had been going through this with somebody I didn't love or get along with, I don't think I would have been able to have those vulnerable, sad moments, like finding Granddad's glasses and sitting there and taking a minute, like I did. There was a lot of just getting through it but also times when we could just feel our feelings together.

I remember on the hardest day, we stopped for pizza on the way back from the apartment, just my mom, my boyfriend, and me. We sat together, tired and quiet. It was the three of us united against this huge task. It isn't a glamorous memory. It's not the thunderous roar my granddad or uncle would have made. It's quiet like Granny's work was quiet, but it's enough for me.

21
Marina

Marina is a former actress and pianist who now teaches music lessons and works as an organizational manager.

Introduction

Within the Competence-Press Model, Marina's mother's falls, isolation, and difficulty managing a large home contribute to the decision to move into a retirement community. As Marina helps, she repeatedly slows the timeline to allow her mother to emotionally process. She patiently reviews objects with her, allowing her mother to tell the story behind each item before another decision is made. This approach aligns with Butler's concept of life review, the naturally occurring process through which older adults recall and evaluate past experience, which research suggests is most effective when another person is present and listening (Butler, 1963; Jiang et al., 2024). In Marina's hands, procedural work—letting her mother set the pace, listening even when her own instinct is to move faster—helps her mother begin again and find firmer feet in her new place.

Marina's narrative

One of the things my mother misses most about her life before she moved to her retirement community is her country club. She

had been part of that world for decades. The club of my childhood was nothing too special, but the country club of Mom's later years was something much different.

But it wasn't the amenities that mattered most to Mom. Following her husband Ian's death, she kept her membership so she could stay in touch with her friends. Each Friday night she met with a group of widows. The gatherings helped keep everyone anchored. But by the time my mom disbanded her home, many of the women had passed or were too feeble to attend. So, that life was given up, but she grieved leaving the club as much as she did selling her home.

My mother and Ian had been incredible hosts. There had been decades of laughter and companionship, but for a little while after she moved, it seemed that chapter had closed. However, it didn't take long before Mom's entertaining itch needed to be scratched. Once she settled into her new place, she decided to have a small luncheon. She had to scale down to a sandwich tray, fruit, and soda, but the occasion was just as satisfying. As it turns out, you can take the hostess out of the country club, but you can't take the country club out of the hostess.

Mom is in her early 80s and a strong, resilient woman. Her first dream home was the one I grew up in. It was a gorgeous English Tudor, and she spent our early childhood transforming it into a showplace that was featured in *Architectural Digest*. I have good memories from there, but when I was in fifth grade, my dad stepped away from the marriage, although they didn't divorce for years. They made it official when I was 14, and he married my stepmother when I was a freshman in high school. Those years

were a hot, elongated mess, and after the dust settled, we had to leave the place Mom had worked so hard to create.

None of the houses she had after that lived up to that first one until she met and married Ian. With him, she built her second dream home, a house they designed together, and it was stunning: floor-to-ceiling custom-made draperies, antique furniture, kitchen cabinets with glass doors on the upper portion with a curated Hummel display, which never tipped over into kitsch. They had eight good years there before Ian passed away.

The year 2020 was pivotal for her, like it was for us all. She was isolated, and the house felt too big. We came and saw her every week for a cautious, pandemic-style "lunch on the patio." After that COVID season, things got to be too much. She'd fallen a few times, and there were a couple of scares for us when we couldn't get a hold of her. She would forget to charge her phone, or her hearing aids wouldn't link.

Friends of hers were considering retirement communities, and that planted a seed. One day over lunch, Mom tentatively brought it up—maybe it's time, maybe the house is too big. But she still wasn't quite ready. When she turned 80, her resistance looked like it might be softening. There was a new community she got excited about, and we went to do a looky-loo, saw the floor plans, and thankfully, she decided to buy.

I don't know how older people manage without a child nearby. Proximity really is everything, and since I live close, it naturally fell to me to be the most involved in the disbandment. My siblings are supportive in their own ways. My sister, Olivia, isn't near, and with her, it's mostly emotional support. Jared, my brother, is

around. He does my mother's paperwork and taxes, but I handle the day-to-day.

The whole process took a good year and a half from the day we visited the center to the day she moved. There was much to manage in that time, and I did a lot of listening and reassuring. Construction on the new place wasn't finished when she closed on her old house, and Mom was worried about how long the new owners were going to let her stay. I tried to calm her fears—it was going to be fine, everything would work out—but the reality was, I didn't really know.

It was an exhausting time. When I visited, we would get bits and pieces done, but not nearly enough. It wasn't until I committed to two separate three-day stays that we were finally able to make a dent.

A few areas mattered more than others. In the decades when she was doing her design work, it was dress to impress. She invested a lot of money in her wardrobe, and the sheer mass of it was a challenge. It became a process of keep and discard, start over on the keep pile, discard a little more, repeat. She would tell me where she got each item, and where she wore it.

We spent the most time on photos. She had thousands. Near the beginning of the disbandment, I set up a system of separate boxes, one for each family member, so she could sort photos into them as she went, but she never did, not once. I could have gone through it all by myself, but things would have gone south if a wrong decision was made. So, on one of my stays, we got down to it together.

She was paralyzed at first, but I had her sit in her favorite chair and I sat next to her on the floor, and we went through picture

after picture after picture. We looked at every one, and if we needed to go down memory lane, we did. It was tempting to tell her what she needed or didn't, but going through this whole process, I have come to understand that she had to get there on her own. When I was tired, it was difficult, but in the end, the letting go was hers to do and not mine.

And there were fun moments. When we first started, one of my sons was about to move into a new apartment. It was incredible timing. My mother called him one day and said she had some things for him. She'd gone through the kitchen and pulled out the stuff she was no longer going to use. They were both thrilled. He got a completely furnished kitchen, and maybe more importantly, the kitchen pig. It was a figurine that Mom had had for as long as my three sons could remember. It was quite a steal, and Zachary didn't waste any time claiming bragging rights.

And then the not so fun moments. When it came to the disbandment, my siblings didn't provide a lot of practical help. Jared assisted in other ways, but dispersing objects can get complicated, and he's not going to wade into anything difficult. Olivia was another story.

Her first visit started out well—things were relaxed and comfortable—but it didn't stay that way. A print I coveted ended up going to her. I did have it briefly; I took it home and put it on my wall, but Mom called and told me she'd promised it to Olivia. I thought, "Seriously? I just spent three days at your house sorting through stuff. I worked for that." Then there was the china. Olivia was a little upset that she didn't get any, but she doesn't have the room. I do. What helped resolve that was my promise that

I wasn't going to hand it down to a future daughter-in-law. When we downsize, I'll pass some along to her.

It was moments like that—give and take. But we were all so on board with the move that we were willing to bend. It might have caused damage in some families, but luckily, not in ours.

Working through a disbandment takes you through a spectrum of feeling. I expected to be frustrated and just want to get it done. But I didn't expect to go on the emotional ride with my mother—her grief, her life, which is my life. I thought I'd worked through a lot, but it's one thing to process your unfinished business from a distance—sitting with someone in the midst of it was hard. The absolute physical toll it took on her caught me completely off guard. I thought downsizing was going to lighten her load, but I think Mom got old doing this.

There was one moment that brought that home. On moving day, my mother backed into one of the moving trucks with her car. After it happened, she had to sit on the couch to collect herself. I'd never seen her like that before when she simply couldn't function for a moment. She didn't break, but she came to that point. It was just one tiny window, but it showed me how difficult it really was.

I'm more in the parental role now, and Mom is more dependent—not childlike but a bit helpless at times. She fell recently in her living room, and it took a long time before she could make it to the bathroom and pull the cord for help. When we went to lunch the following week, I found out she hadn't been eating in the afternoon. Nobody she knew went to the dining hall then, and there

was no food in the apartment. Breakfast was coffee and toast, no lunch, then down to the hall for dinner.

My son took her to Whole Foods recently so she could get the chicken she liked. When they were about ready to leave, he realized she had two bags of cookies and some peanut butter cups. He told me it was like taking a kid to the candy store.

I keep going back to the weekend we went through the pictures. I was grumpy at first, but it turned out that every second of sharing memories was worth it. While Mom and I were sorting, we found a carton full of my dad's old photos. We cried a lot as we went through them. Mom said she didn't know why she'd kept any of it, and I told her I thought Dad should have them and took them home with me.

In divorce, decisions get complicated. At the time they separated, returning my dad's belongings was probably the furthest thing from Mom's mind. But when my dad came over for his birthday, we spread the pictures out. Going through them unlocked his memories, just like it had with my mother. I got to hear stories I'd never heard before. It was a gift from her disbandment: a domino effect. After 40 years, stuff just fell back into place.

22
Debbie

Debbie, an interior designer and accessibility specialist, utilizes her personal caregiving experience to create healthy, empathetic spaces that nurture human well-being. This narrative was developed in collaboration with the book's author.

Introduction

Debbie's narrative demonstrates how even small environmental changes can become emotionally overwhelming when layered onto cumulative loss. The Competence-Press Model is especially visible in her story, where a well-intentioned change represents one more disruption in a life already destabilized.

Working incrementally, Debbie and her uncle adjust to her grandmother's emotional capacity as they negotiate among safety, autonomy, and emotional regulation. Debbie's background in interior design explicitly connects environmental change to well-being, a relationship research confirms: adaptive coping and psychological well-being are strengthened when people maintain emotional connection, continuity, and a sense of identity (Fernández-Fernández et al., 2020).

Debbie's narrative

"It's too much. It's too much." I don't think my Grandma Faye's words will ever leave me. A television set. That was all it took to break her.

Her son and grandkids were irritated by that TV. Grandma loved watching Westerns, and when we came to visit, that's what we did. But the television was a really old one and had lost its brightness and definition. So dark scenes went almost black.

My uncle knew that his Mom would say no if he brought up buying a new one. To her, there was no reason. She had one that worked fine in her opinion. So he devised a scheme to fix the situation and purchased a new one on his own. When the timing was right, he brought it in saying, "Guess what, Mom? You were the 100th customer yesterday at Walmart, and you won a new TV!"

I set it up for her, unhooking the old TV and connecting the cables to the new one, my grandmother watching wordlessly the whole time. When I turned it on, she looked at it and started crying, saying, "I can't. It's too much. It's too much." I immediately unhooked everything and put the old one back. It was horrible to see this once strong, independent woman crumble over a new TV.

That television was the straw that broke the camel's back. It represented more change in a life that had seen too much of it already. In the previous months, her husband had gone to a nursing home and then died. Health-care workers had been hired to help with daily activities. And my uncle, aunt, and I had become

weekly guests. She had gone from decades of independent life with her husband to living with people in her home every day. We had infringed on her routine and how she did things.

My maternal grandparents also had difficulties when their lives changed from the familiar to unfamiliar. My grandmother, Virginia, had an accident when I was young and spent 12 years in a wheelchair. They needed to be closer to my mom so she could help them more readily, so we moved them to assisted living 10 minutes from our house.

They were there for three months, complaining the entire time. "We don't like this," and "The food isn't good." Clearly, they weren't going to be happy, and another solution needed to be found. The only place that felt right to them was a retirement community their church was associated with and one my grandmother, a designer, had helped remodel. It was 30 minutes away from us, but they had a connection to it and the people who lived there. My grandmother had always been social and outgoing, but being wheelchair-bound before the ADA meant the freedom she'd always known was no longer available to her. Here, surrounded by what was familiar, she felt restored.

Grandma Faye's situation had its own kind of complexity. She'd never lived without a husband. She was from a generation that married young, and although she was incredibly independent and strong-willed, she'd been married three times and widowed twice. It had taken a real toll on her when her last husband went into a nursing home. He was only there a short while before he passed, but she visited him every day and had exhausted herself in the process.

After he died, she did okay for a while, but one day the man who took care of her property called me. "You should come down," he said. "Something is off. She just doesn't seem like herself." She was going to need us around and not just for occasional visits.

My uncle and I started taking turns with the caregiving. Aside from the assistance she needed for her health and daily activities, she needed companionship, and I wanted to be there for her.

When we were at her house, we tried to be respectful of her space and thoughtful of where she was emotionally. She and her husband had lived there for about 20 years. Things were dated and needed repair. But I knew that anything beyond cleaning would be too stressful for Grandma. It would be like the TV all over again. It wasn't as clean as we would have liked, and it wasn't the environment I would want for my home, but it was sanitary. We just made sure it was tidy, the rugs were removed so her walker wouldn't catch, and everything was dusted so she wouldn't get sick.

We tried to be thoughtful and help her hold onto what control she had left, for as long as possible. Even something as routine as the mail required sensitivity. She wanted to see every piece that came in. She'd look it over, organize it, put it out of sight, then take it out again. It was an almost daily ritual. If I asked if there was anything in it that I needed to take care of, she'd say "No, everything's fine," and I'd have to let it go.

If we started to go through paperwork, she wanted to know what we were doing. On occasion, my uncle and I would divide and conquer, one of us distracting her while the other did necessary business in the other room. We felt like spies at times, but it

created a real camaraderie between us. He took the primary role, especially with administrative matters, which routinely put him in hot water. If he said something to upset her, I would step in and she was more receptive. Sometimes it just takes another voice.

Eventually, we knew she had to move to assisted living, and the house needed to be cleared out. We began going through cabinets and boxes, but she would get upset if we moved too fast, so we did it over a period of weeks, stopping whenever she became overwhelmed.

There was so much to go through that we asked my cousins and siblings to participate. While work was going on in the kitchen and garage, Grandma sat in the living room, clearly stressed about what was happening. I tried to ease her anxiety, reminding her that everything was okay and we were just doing things that needed to be done. It was a hard day for her.

We hired an estate sale agent to sell everything in the house that wouldn't be moving with her to the facility. The agent created an inventory of the furniture and accessories and sent it to all the grandchildren, giving us the opportunity to take anything we wanted before it was included in the sale.

I was surprised that most of the grandchildren didn't want anything. My sister and I were probably closer to her than my brothers and cousins. We had known our grandfather, who passed before they were born, and had heard more of the family stories. Without that history and connection, I think it was harder for them to find value in her things.

One item I had always admired was a beautiful platter that had hung on the dining room wall. Since my brothers and cousins

all have families with children, I thought they would like it for their gatherings. To my surprise, no one did. I thought, "Seriously? No one wants this?" My great-grandmother had given it to my grandmother for her first Thanksgiving after she married my grandfather. That history, and the value Grandma had placed on it, made it a priceless treasure in my opinion. It now holds a place of prominence in my house and reminds me of her every day. I know she would have been happy that it stayed in the family.

When it was time to move her permanently to an assisted living facility, we chose one close to my uncle and aunt so they could visit her daily. Grandma was not happy about having to leave her house. She got upset, sulked, and made snide comments under her breath. But in the end, we had to do what was safest and healthiest for her.

We brought objects that were meaningful, things that would give her comfort and a sense of grounding. Her family photos came with her, along with her framed rooster puzzle and a little rooster table—little touches that made her simple room feel more like home.

More than that, she still had her relationships, and those were really the glue that held everything together. When it comes down to it, stuff doesn't really matter. Sure, it holds memories, but at a certain point, an object or a photo doesn't have the same weight it once did. A familiar face at the bedside, a familial bond—those are what matter.

And for my grandmother, we were present. It gave her a sense of stability. She saw my uncle, aunt, and me and knew she wasn't alone. I will always be grateful for the hours we shared watching

old Westerns and eating ice cream for dinner. It was a difficult time in all our lives, but we have happy memories, and ones I know she treasured.

As an interior designer, I have experience with life transitions. For years I've helped clients navigate life stages in their home environments. Even with younger couples, I pay attention to accessibility in spaces and plan ahead so that changes that aging brings can be easier. When a move needs to be made to downsize or to go to an assisted living facility, I focus on creating familiarity, designing the environment to address existing habits and routines.

There is also an emotional aspect to life transitions that needs to be acknowledged. Those going through change need time to acclimate to the idea of something new, and that can be especially challenging when the reason for the change is health. They need to understand how they are going to function in this new phase of life in a way that still reflects who they are.

I always tell my clients to display items that connect them to people and that bring happy memories and make them feel good. It helps them stay grounded in who they are, even if their body or environment is changing. Nurturing relationships is equally important. And then there is the simple but crucial aspect of companionship in the present. I have clients who just need interaction. The design part of my appointment may be an hour, but we may sit and talk about life for another hour after that.

I worry about the younger generations. As a society, we're changing so much. There's less in-person interaction and even less time spent cultivating deep bonds. We're losing our capacity for

communication and compassion. It's unfortunate, because we need that, especially as we age. Creating trust and helping others in times of isolation and uncertainty is a natural human thing. We must design environments that support the nurturing of true connections and demonstrate empathy for others.

23
Sandra

A retired professional with a distinguished career in risk management and planning, Sandra reflects on the challenges and rewards so many navigate on the caregiving journey. This narrative was developed in collaboration with the book's author.

Introduction

As her parents' cognitive and physical abilities change, Sandra steps in, coordinating care across five aging parents. She guides the ongoing negotiation between assistance and autonomy as new crises emerge. Research is clear that caregiving for a single aging parent carries physical, emotional, and psychological burden (Berner et al., 2026); caring for five compounds that load. Sandra meets these demands with a lifetime of professional credentials, including business continuity training and a faith-based caregiving model. She is the only contributor in this section who addresses self-care as a deliberate and necessary part of the caregiving equation, a perspective supported by research suggesting that neglect of self-care practices is a barrier to sustained caregiving and that problem-based coping strategies help caregivers regain a sense of control (Ahn et al., 2025). Sandra applies these frameworks with discipline but arrives at a conclusion none of them provide: that presence, not planning, is what caregiving requires.

Sandra's narrative

My story is one of a remote caretaker and the transformation associated with supporting five aging parents as they experience declining health. Throughout half a decade, I learned that caregiving requires planning but that it also requires making space to be present because the people you love don't move through change according to plan.

My mom, now 87, started a process of duress and decline after a heart event during her move to a new home. Neither I nor my three siblings were in close enough proximity to make daily visits. We all contributed in different ways to ensure her heart meds were sorted and that she had fresh groceries and in-home assistance. As Mom recovered, we worked with her to define caregiver roles and to establish an irrevocable trust.

Meanwhile, Mom had become very vocal that some of her things were stolen during the move. These accusations were not a new phenomenon but were especially painful after we had given time and money to assist in the relocation. Two years later, her paranoia had evolved into anger. She thought a transition to a community with a more vibrant downtown and senior population would help. As she refused to move anywhere close to family, we found her a home in a town where she had lived earlier in life.

It seemed like the perfect fit, but a few months later, we realized that Mom's best friend had been managing her mail and bill paying since her husband had passed. Her house and vehicle were uninsured and every service was in collections. Signs of

short-term memory loss and dementia were now clearly visible. We added bill paying to our growing list of responsibilities.

Mom taught me how quickly a plan can become irrelevant when paranoia and memory loss enter the room and how much "making space" sometimes means stepping in before you feel ready.

Around the same time, my father-in-law's Parkinson's was progressing and they wanted to be closer to family, so my in-laws moved back to where my husband and I live. My 80-year-old mother-in-law orchestrated the entire relocation.

Within a week of their arrival, my mother-in-law fell and broke her hip. While they both received excellent care, it was not the way they thought they would be spending their first few months after relocating. For us, the time was priceless. They were surrounded by a care team, which meant we could enjoy getting together for dinners, having them over to watch football, and celebrating anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays.

With my in-laws, I saw the other side of caregiving: when a support system is in place, space opens up for moments you'll cherish.

Mom's paranoia continued to escalate. Even after locating many of the items she claimed were stolen, she constantly came up with a new list. She often visited the local police department wanting them to watch her house and open an investigation. We installed a doorbell and camera to show her no one was entering her house or stealing from her. Eventually the chief of police was calling daily, asking when we would take her keys.

My siblings accompanied Mom to a doctor visit and convinced her to tour senior living communities while they were out. That fall we moved Mom to independent living in a retirement community, leaving her house to handle at a later time.

Mom's relocation was a family effort. We placed each item in her new space in roughly the same position it had occupied before, and with her ongoing care, there continue to be four of us jumping in.

And then came the hardest version of the question: my 92-year-old dad and 85-year-old stepmom—how do you provide for someone who equates caregiving with losing independence?

My dad and his wife still live in their home with no plan to leave. Dad is a veteran and the most positive person I know. His mantra: "It's not the age, it's the attitude." He has 20 rental properties, has established a trust, and is actively in the process of portioning off and retiring from his home improvement business of 40 years.

They had just returned from a trip to Florida when Dad was diagnosed with COVID and hospitalized due to an infection. He recovered with the help of serious antibiotics, but the infection returned in full force four months later. He was hospitalized for 10 days with C. diff. However, when he was moved out of ICU, the antibiotic caused his ears and throat to swell, and he began to aspirate. He chose to have a feeding tube inserted into his navel just so he could go home.

My stepmom is Dad's primary caregiver, and she has nursed him back to health on numerous occasions. In their 54-year history, they have seen a lot, but this was a whole different level. Home

health and occupational health professionals were there to take vitals and establish a baseline but did not provide relief from the rigorous feeding schedule. My stepsister and I commuted from our respective cities to help my stepmom as much as possible until the infection resolved.

Stephen Ministry, a faith-based caregiving program, uses the image of a pit—a place of crisis you can't climb out of—to describe the experience of those who are suffering. My years as a Stephen Minister taught me that I can't solve everything and to resist getting pulled into the other person's pit. Instead, I offer a ladder of active listening and assistance so those who are in pain can climb out of the pit themselves and onto solid ground.

Dad was about to show me what climbing out of his pit looked like. With the feeding tube, he had to be fed every three hours; he did not swallow anything for over six months. There were tough days where I could see him fighting for his life. Then things started to improve. He started physical therapy and gained weight but was still putting a lot on my stepmom. He wasn't owning his exercises or his personal hygiene. She told him, "Something has to give here. You have to take ownership of a piece of it because this isn't physically possible for me." Her demand landed on someone who's a fighter. During that six-month period, Dad gained 25 pounds and built strength in his throat muscles to ensure he could swallow without aspirating.

It was grueling, but that summer I finally had space to step back, breathe, and take in what was happening. Unfortunately, my own "crisis pit" had developed due to the stress associated with

those intense and emotional days. At times, the tempo slowed, but it picked up again.

I found peace of mind in the book *Jesus Calling* by Sarah Young. Her daily reminders of faith and gratitude were my ladder. They gave me the strength and assurance to be thankful rather than burdened, appreciative of the lessons learned from this new, ever-shifting rhythm in my life. They also helped me see that I needed to make space for me.

When do I step in and when do I step back? Resolving that question became central to adapting the templates I rely on as a caregiver. My mom is at a place where she will accept help. She knows she needs it. There's not a day she can get through without assistance. My dad and stepmom, they are fiercely independent people who still have plans for the future.

In a perfect world, my dad and stepmom would be receptive to more assistance. Their way matters. We have to respect that. They're not going to do it how my mother-in-law did nor in the manner my siblings and I deal with my mom. I'm here to support my parents in the way they want to be supported. And I've had to fine-tune what my support role means. It requires more than just respect. What's just as important is how I show up. I don't think of my efforts as an energy-draining toll. I see caregiving as a gift, an opportunity to connect.

At first, making space meant setting aside my growing to-do list and taking a short trip. That inspired weekend getaways for experiences like concerts, food, and scenery that we could not get at home. We celebrated my oldest sister's and her husband's 40th wedding anniversary just months before she passed. We

also brought family together to honor my dad's and stepmom's 52 years of marriage and Dad's 90th birthday. And to fulfill one of my mother-in-law's bucket-list items, my husband and I traveled with her to Ireland.

The more we marked milestones, the more we saw a theme emerge. We were always grateful for having taken the trip or having celebrated the milestone when we did. Inevitably, things changed that would have washed those moments away had we not created them. Caregiving is not about dying; it is about living—making space in your life to care for yourself and others, both physically and emotionally.

I felt prepared, but caregiving goes far beyond having a toolbox or frameworks. Having served in leadership roles for over 30 years, I was used to being on call 24/7, constantly planning, visioning, researching, always trying to answer the question, "What does the future look like?" Caregiving can benefit from that kind of forward thinking but only up to a point. Something was missing.

And then I got it. "Be here." You can't live solely with the anticipation of what's coming next without missing what's right in front of you. Not that planning isn't important. Certainly, I understand its power. But when it's the only way you orient yourself, you're losing the gift that caregiving is handing you: a precious place in the moment with those you love.

So what will actually endure when everything begins to shift again and this set of norms goes out the window? Moments like these, when I'm authentically present and connected with my parents. That's what I'll remember when they're no longer

here—that their final years were cherished and that I helped them find joy. Despite downturns and disappointments, I'm not letting the weight of caregiving take me to a place where we lose our connection. I'll always plan, but what I'm protecting now is space, the kind that lets me show up, stay connected, and turn caregiving back into living.

24
Christine

Christine is a retired visual merchandiser. She now freelances, helping clients organize their lives.

Introduction

Of the five contributors, Christine is the most process-centered. Unlike the others, whose methods are rooted in family history and personal stake, Christine enters as a trusted outsider. That distance is not detachment; it is the condition that makes her effective. Christine's organizational and staging work supports her clients' ability to continue living independently, intervening to reduce environmental press before more significant functional decline occurs.

Research suggests that older adults commonly respond more positively to non-family support than to direct family intervention, as neutral assistants can provide practical help while reducing defensiveness and preserving autonomy (Keefe, Nizza and Muroff, 2024; Ryninks et al., 2019). Christine adapts her approach to her clients' emotional responses by pacing the work, redirecting attention toward future possibilities, and helping them tolerate discomfort, balancing procedural momentum with emotional sensitivity.

Christine's narrative

I know what it feels like to leave a house you love. The home where a child was born. Where a parent came to live. The heart of all your family memories.

We had to sell fast. I had gotten sick, not just under the weather but gravely ill—two induced comas, 18 surgeries, and twice I died and came back. Once I pulled through, our finances were drained, and we had to give up the place that had been our anchor for decades.

The housing market was horrendous, but biding our time to find something perfect wasn't an option. We had to buy fast. It was brutal, but looking back now, I think the urgency was a mercy. It would have been heart-wrenching to watch what I cherished slip in slow motion from my life.

Long before I went through this, I'd helped my dad disband and my sister-in-law downsize, and living through the pain they experienced opened my eyes to what people in these situations face. After my own loss, that understanding became even deeper.

This career was never part of the plan. My first was as a buyer in the fashion industry—color theory, visual merchandising, that whole world. But people liked the way I decorated and organized my own house, so I just kind of fell into doing it for them as well. Staging houses for sale came first; after that, decorating and then helping downsize. I didn't see myself making money at it, but here I am, standing at someone's door, trying to help figure out what actually deserves a place in their next chapter.

I don't take on people I don't know as clients. There needs to be an acquaintance or a referral. Homes are very personal. People's

most important belongings are in there. And if I'm helping a client downsize, they're standing in front of me naked, vulnerable, and threatened. But they aren't able to tackle it themselves, and a lot of times family can't help either. There's too much history, too much emotion on both sides. So they turn to an outsider and a neutral party.

For me, the sweet spot is not being family, not being a close friend, but being someone clients know, at least a little, and feel they can trust. That trust makes negotiation easier. It also opens the door to honest conversations about why letting go of their emotionally loaded things is so hard.

Two of my more recent clients were Sasha and Bernice.

Sasha and I have worked together for 15 years. She understands I may be pushy at times but knows the outcome will be what she and her husband want. If she tells me a room needs to be cleaned out, she knows to hang on—there's going to be a whirlwind, and it will be done by the time I leave.

I met Bernice through her family. My closest friend came with me to break the ice, having already told Bernice I was unassuming and quiet—but that once work started, she'd see a different side. I would get bossy and demanding. My friend laughed after she said it, but the idea was to make me sound as intimidating as possible, so when the real me showed up, Bernice would feel she was getting off easy.

Bernice was a recent widow, living inside decades of someone else's choices. Newly retired and in their 70s, Sasha and her husband came with a lifetime of quality items. Both were in different seasons of life, with different kinds of stuff and different

relationships with what filled their homes. But the need was the same: someone willing to push them through a system of significant change.

My process starts at a home's threshold. When I step into a house for the first time, the smell tells me a lot. It has to do with whether the house has been opened, renovated, the old materials replaced. Sasha's was like that. Bernice's, however, smelled like years of sitting on stuff, and I could tell before I got through the door it was going to be tough. A huge weight sat on this lady's shoulders.

With Sasha and her husband, the weight was different. They were looking for houses, and as soon as one was found, they were going to make an offer, so they no longer had the option of putting off the work.

Most people misunderstand my intentions, even if they've asked me to come. At some point in the process, they begin to think I'm going to make them get rid of anything that matters. I think there are two reasons for this—shame and fear. Clients are exposed and feeling judged. They think the sheer volume of their belongings reflects who they are as a person. Some believe I see them as lazy or undisciplined. And then there's the fear of losing control, and suddenly, items become linked to retaining it. It's my job to assure them that they aren't seen as less-than and will always have the final say.

For the first hour, they're happy and helpful. Things go into boxes and out the door. Then it becomes more emotional. Progress slows. I become a cheerleader and revisit what we set out to do.

It's not too much. We can get it done. We'll go section by section, a little at a time.

About two hours in, there's a major shift. They go into fight-or-flight mode or become immobile. Work stops.

I always take snacks. I break for a rest and offer them some chocolate or chips, a Coke. We sit down and start talking. I keep the conversation light, focused on the future. After a bit, their motivation returns. The harder it gets, the more determined I am to get them to a point where they can see the possibilities. It's like carrying a huge backpack of rocks. We're just going to take out a few pebbles. Then maybe a stone or two. Finally, the largest rock. Gradually, the process will get much easier.

Then we pick up where we left off.

Of course, if there's a struggle over a particular object, I suggest setting it aside and returning later. I make sure we accomplish a lot before circling back, and by then, whatever emotion or memory was invested in the object has loosened its grip. Usually it's given away. Once in a while a different decision is made, but enough room has been made to find it its own place.

The biggest difference between Sasha and Bernice was what they'd collected and why. For both, their belongings told a story about who they'd been or what they'd meant to be.

Sasha liked her objects and felt they all had value. They were quality items and in multiples. It's harder to let go when you've bought the best. She had every kitchen gadget imaginable, from a cheese maker to a restaurant-equivalent waffle iron. She'd

collected quilting material and stained-glass supplies. The dream of "getting to it someday" was still alive in a lot of her things, especially in the attic.

With Bernice, it was different. Like Sasha, she had a lot of stuff—I had to have a real discussion with her about Tupperware—but above all, we focused on her husband's collections. The living room had dishes from the floor to the ceiling and pig figurines scattered throughout. For decades she hadn't been able to enjoy the space for its original purpose. Her dream of a room meant for family and company had not been possible, but she had resigned herself to that reality.

Still, getting rid of the collections felt like giving her husband away again. Even though Bernice was in a good place and knew the time had arrived, parting with his belongings made her feel like she didn't value or love him. There were tears, not because of anything I did but because she was processing a deep loss in real time.

She broke down once, and I asked her to tell me the story—why her husband collected the pigs, how it started, why she had been willing to let him stockpile the dishes. She talked about being old school, when wives were submissive to their husbands, and you didn't question it.

I sympathized with her, but later, when she talked about how her dreams of celebrating holidays or family gatherings had never materialized because of his collections, I got angry. He'd been so self-focused, disregarding her feelings and needs.

On the drive home, I'm a hamster on a wheel. The feelings come first, and I need to process what's happened. It takes a lot out of me, even more so if we have a long relationship. Often, I just eat

and go to bed. But the next day I'm energized again, ready to go back and finish what we started.

Sometimes I start thinking about my own house. There's a mason jar in my laundry room full of buttons just like my grandmother's. It makes me smile when I look at it. But will my son want it? No. So how long do I want to enjoy it before I give it up?

At the end of my life, it will be just me. Time here is fleeting, and I can't take my belongings with me. If I'm lucky enough, I'll have a loved one holding my hand. And knowing that is what keeps me focused on what my clients are going through. They're not alone in this. I'm right there with them.

That's what this work is at its best. People start lifting the complicated layers of why they need their stuff. Slowly the realization comes that memories can still be kept without a physical object to center them on. And if someone else can benefit from the things they give away, that's even better.

Sasha called me the other day to say she'd continued getting rid of her stuff. Our work together had motivated her, and she was in the mood to keep going. That's what I want clients to feel—the ability to accomplish it on their own when I walk away.

With Bernice, once we had the living room done and she could actually sit down for the first time, she called her kids, her brother and his wife, and a niece and told them they needed to come over. She started making plans—how she would have some ladies over for tea, how she wanted to teach someone to crochet.

When I was working in the entryway, I looked back to where she sat. She smiled as she looked at a curio cabinet with a selection

of items she'd chosen to keep. I could tell she was going back in time with all her memories.

I felt such happiness and peace that I could give that to her. She had lived in a house dominated by a husband who took away a dream. Now she had it back. It was like seeing somebody who was paralyzed beginning to move again.

25
Navigating the sort conclusion

Summary

As with the other sections, these five narratives share the theme of making space. Where earlier narrators concentrated on emotional and relational dimensions, these participants focus on the practical acts through which it takes shape. Sorting, clearing, staying, and rebuilding a familiar room create the conditions that allow the older adult to remain connected to home and self. The introduction to this section established Lawton and Nahemow's (1973) Competence-Press Model, which describes adaptation as a function of the balance between an individual's competence and the environmental demands—or environmental press—placed upon it.

One of the most significant sources of that environmental press is the home itself and the possessions that fill it. Our material convoy, the dynamic accumulation of possessions that supports everyday life, identity, and role performance throughout our lives, can become a potential burden in later life (Smith and Ekerdt, 2011). Roster, Ferrari and Jurkat (2016) found that accumulated possessions, when they render a home chaotic and

unmanageable, erode the psychological experience of home itself, which is a sense of place that underlies identity and well-being. Swanson and Ferrari (2022) showed that this disruption is significantly stronger for those aged 65 and older than for younger adults, a finding that reflects how deeply the bond between person and place has rooted itself by that stage of life.

Marina's mother's emotional attachment to a lifetime of curated possessions, including a wardrobe, thousands of photographs, and the hallmark of a dream home, makes it difficult for her to release anything without someone beside her. Marina sits with her mother, helps her sort the objects, and hears their stories before the decision to discard or keep. That process makes letting go possible and opens the door to what follows: her mother settled in her new place, hosting a small luncheon, scaling down to a sandwich tray but no less herself for it.

Christine's account of Sasha illustrates a journey similar to Marina's mother's. Sasha has accumulated a lifetime of quality possessions throughout the house—kitchen gadgets, quilting material, stained-glass supplies—and the attic holds still more, with the dream of "getting to it someday" still intact. The whole of it has grown beyond what she can move through alone. Christine's account of Bernice shows another side. Rather than being unable to release objects meaningful to her, Bernice is stalled by the sheer mass of her husband's collections: pig figurines and dishes that have denied her use of her own living room for decades. His attachment to them has become a barricade because releasing them feels like giving him away. When Christine helps her clear, Bernice reclaims space that Christine feels should have been allowed her in the first place.

Together, Marina's and Christine's accounts illustrate how physical mass alone can overwhelm the older adult's capacity to manage their environment, but it gets more complicated still when cognitive decline is present. Debbie's and Sandra's accounts show that selfhood endures despite cognitive decline—a personhood that Kitwood (1997) establishes is sustained through relationships that honor the individual rather than the disease—and that the environment itself becomes critical to that sustenance. Graham Rowles' (1983, 2000) seminal concept of being in place grounds this: well-being in later life arises from deep identification with one's environment through physical familiarity, social engagement, and autobiographical attachment, a foundation Chaudhury (2008) applies specifically to dementia, demonstrating that familiar surroundings and cherished possessions help sustain a sense of self by supporting autobiographical memory as cognitive decline progresses. Rhodus and Rowles (2023) extend that into a situational model of care, one shaped by the evolving interactions among the aging person, their care partners, and the place where care occurs.

When someone has already taken in as much change as they can bear, preserving their familiar environment is not accommodation to whims or personality. Debbie understands this when she uninstalls the television that severs her grandmother's anchor to place and, like Marina, patiently works through the house to lessen the shock of the disbandment. When her grandmother eventually moves to assisted living, her framed rooster puzzle and little rooster table go with her, small touches that make a simple room feel like hers.

By moving their mother to a new place and taking what was hers and rearranging it in much the same position it had occupied before, Sandra's family acts on the same understanding. What the family provides is not a perfect restoration but something close enough to be recognizable. They cannot restore what cognitive decline has taken away, but they can ensure the environment does not compound the loss.

Lucy's account is somewhat separated from the others. She sees early that the family home itself must be retained. Without someone present to hold it together, it will be sold and lost. One of the reasons she moves in is to ensure its continuity. When her grandfather eventually moves to a retirement home, Lucy stays on, keeping the house intact for her mother, for whom it holds a lifetime of meaning. Later, after his death, she and her mother work through the disbandment together, finding a pace and process that makes sense to both of them. It is her mother's space she helps make, not her grandfather's.

Across all five accounts, what is restored is not only a livable environment. It is a home that provides a continued sense of self, reflecting identity in some essential way.

Engaging the material

Discussion questions

Personal

1. Consider your own material convoy. Which possessions currently support your identity and daily life, and which have already begun to shift from support to burden?

2. When facing a stressful demand, do you reach first for problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping? What does a recent difficult experience reveal about your default, and what did that default cost or gain you?
3. "Being in place" describes well-being rooted in deep familiarity with one's environment. What environment holds that role in your life, and what of it would you need to carry forward if you had to leave it?

Theoretical

1. Apply the Competence-Press Model across two or more narratives. How does each helper intervene on the environmental side of the equation rather than the competence side, and why does that direction of intervention matter?
2. Using sensemaking, analyze how sorting, sequencing, and scheduling function in these narratives as more than logistics. What do organizational systems accomplish emotionally that direct emotional support cannot?
3. Compare the role of life review in one narrative with the preservation of personhood in another. How do listening and environmental continuity each sustain selfhood through decline, and where do the two mechanisms converge?

Professional

1. Declining activities of daily living often trigger family intervention, yet ADL assessment alone misses environmental press. What would a fuller assessment of the person-environment fit look like in practice, and what disciplines would it draw on?
2. One contributor's effectiveness rests partly on being a trusted outsider. What does research on non-family support suggest about when professionals should position

themselves between an older adult and their family—and what boundaries protect that neutral role?

3. When cognitive decline is present, environmental continuity becomes clinical rather than sentimental. How can practitioners operationalize "being in place" during a move to assisted living or memory care—what should be preserved, replicated, or relinquished, and who decides?

Further activities

1. Reflect on a time you responded to stress by building systems rather than processing it emotionally. Identify whether your approach was problem-focused, emotion-focused, or both, and connect it to one contributor in this section.
2. Compare how two contributors responded to declining ADL function. Identify what their organizational choices reveal about how a helper's role and relationship determine available strategies.
3. Using the Competence-Press Model, draft a brief environmental assessment of a real or hypothetical space, identify two sources of environmental demand, and propose one organizational adjustment for each.

Voices in the conversation

- Borrie, Cathie. *The Long Hello: Memory, My Mother, and Me*. Simon & Schuster (Canada), 2015. A lyrical account of seven years caring for a mother with dementia.
- Chast, Roz. *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* Bloomsbury, 2014. A cartoonist's funny, unflinching account of her parents' final years.

- Gross, Jane. *A Bittersweet Season*. Knopf, 2011. A journalist becomes sole caregiver for her mother while navigating an absent sibling.
- Renkl, Margaret. *Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss*. Milkweed Editions, 2019. An essay collection tracing caregiving and the dissolution of a parent's household.
- Staebler, Gretchen. *Mother Lode: Confessions of a Reluctant Caregiver*. She Writes Press, 2022. A woman moves home to care for her 96-year-old mother, navigating sibling imbalance.

Conclusion

The people whose voices fill this book came to caregiving and household disbandment from vastly different families and circumstances, yet taken together their accounts trace the full arc of what this work asks of people: practically, emotionally, and relationally.

The pragmatic work of caregiving and household disbandment rarely stays solely logistical for long. It opens into something much larger. The narratives of the participants illuminate how two lives, the aging person's and the caregiver's, can collide in ways neither anticipates, playing out through the grueling, complicated, and nonsensical demands of decline, the reckoning of complex relationships, and the hidden meanings behind what will be materially and emotionally passed down.

The caregiver's scope is double. They are attending to a person and to the physical world that person has built, and both command a kind of attention the caregiver never anticipates having to give. Although caregiving is obviously relational, across the narrators' stories it becomes clear that disbandment is as well. For the carergivers, disbandment was not purely clearing a house. It was the negotiation of legacy, deciding what would endure and what would be released, and discovering that the stories attached to objects mattered more than the things themselves.

The contributors did not simply sort possessions. They sorted versions of the aging person and caregiver. Belongings became containers for memory, identity, and sometimes reminders of pain that was never fully spoken. What endured most powerfully was not necessarily the object but the human meaning attached to it.

This granular parsing did not occur in isolation. Every decision about what to keep, release, or pass down was driven by the aging person's attachments, the participant's exhaustion, the sheer mass of accumulated things, the fatigue of assigning value, and the competing claims of others who had a stake in what remained.

The physical and emotional work of the narrators exposes the broader social realities surrounding disbandment and caregiving. The American cultural ideal of successful aging as independence and self-sufficiency is challenged at every turn in these accounts. As the population lives longer, quality of life is not keeping pace with longevity. The narratives evince a gap that society has yet to reckon with: the years that follow a life well lived, when independence recedes and decline becomes the daily reality. Informal caregiving, hidden, unpaid, and mostly unrecognized by the institutions and prevailing cultural expectations that surround it, is what is used to close that gap. Unfortunately, there are comparatively few cultural frameworks for helping families navigate years-long caring, dementia-related decline, the dispersal of a lifetime of belongings, or the aftermath that follows.

The geographic mobility prevalent in the United States complicates this further. The idealized assumption that aging relatives

will always have family nearby to provide sustained care does not hold. Modern families are frequently dispersed, creating tensions between emotional closeness and physical absence. The accounts here display guilt and frustration over unequal caregiving burdens and the limitations imposed by careers and obligations that reside elsewhere.

Beneath all of this lies an emotional labor that is seldom named or measured. For the contributors, every practical decision carried an emotional cost. Many moved through these experiences in survival mode, postponing emotional processing until much later, some only beginning to reflect on what they had experienced through the interviews themselves.

Even if a caregiver's orientation was chiefly logistical and the emotional labor less onerous, their stories show that it was the complexity of entrenched relationships that intensified both. As the narratives attest, caregiving and household disbandment rarely create new family dynamics as much as expose the ones already present. Among the carergivers, pervasive patterns became more visible under pressure. Some families moved through these transitions collaboratively, while others struggled under the weight of unresolved wounds and competing understandings of responsibility. Even in loving relationships, ambivalent emotions were common, reflecting not a lack of love but the emotional dimensions of caring for another person while managing increasing responsibility and loss.

Underpinning all their journeys was the caregiver's own balancing act. For many participants, the rigors of caregiving created a perceived dichotomy: between subordinating their needs in the

service of their aging person and dealing with their own psychological and physical well-being. They became saturated with the demands asked of them, which made self-care or saying "no" feel like a luxury or even a betrayal. That tension between being fully present for another and protecting themselves ran through every account, regardless of whether a narrator's primary orientation was more emotional or more pragmatic. They all dealt with it differently. Some became protectors and advocates of autonomy and dignity at the cost of their own. Many slowed their pace not because the practical work asked it of them but because the older adult needed time to emotionally process what the changes represented, even when the contributor's reserves were running low. Others, although anchored to the aging person, had to separate themselves for a time to reevaluate inherited emotional patterns and question long-standing assumptions.

What these stories reveal, taken together, is that making space is never only about the material. The title of this book names something larger than the clearing of a house or the sorting of a lifetime's worth of possessions. Making space, as these narratives demonstrate, is emotional and relational work as much as it is pragmatic. Throughout the accounts, making space emerges as a layered human process. Many caregivers entered the work believing it was primarily a logistical task. They might have begun in the physical—clearing rooms, sorting belongings, disbanding a household—but they never stayed there. The tangible act of moving through someone's things forced proximity to the person and to their history. Clearing space in a house turned out to open space for everything that followed.

The carergivers made space emotionally by allowing contradictory feelings to simultaneously exist. They expanded their capacity to accommodate love and indifference, grief and relief, duty and resentment, sustaining the ambiguity rather than collapsing it into a single truth and closing off the space again. Those who moved through that expanded emotional terrain rather than retreating from it emerged with a fuller understanding of themselves and of what the experience had asked of them.

Perhaps most importantly, making space meant the participants opened up new pathways with the people they knew. Through empathy, patience, listening, or forgiveness, behaviors initially experienced as stubbornness, compulsive accumulating, need for control, or erraticism were gradually understood within larger histories. These realizations did not erase pain or repair every relationship, but they created space for greater depth, compassion, and honesty.

In the end, across all its dimensions, making space is about this: creating room for one another—for the full complexity of the people we love and tend and for the caregivers themselves, whose own needs, losses, and transformations are equally part of the journey.

Terms

Activities of daily living (ADLs): Routine self-care tasks necessary for independent function.

Aging in place: Older adults remaining in their own homes as long as possible.

Ambiguous loss: Loss that resists resolution because its source remains unclear or unacknowledged.

Being in place: Well-being arising from deep identification with one's environment through familiarity, social engagement, and autobiographical attachment.

Caregiver burden: Cumulative physical, emotional, and social strain of providing informal care.

Caregiving trajectory: Changing path or course of caregiving over time.

Collecting: Organized, intentional, and targeted acquisition of objects whose selectivity distinguishes collecting from hoarding.

Collective memory: Memories a family, community, or culture carries together through shared stories, traditions, relationships, and meaningful objects.

Competence-press model: Framework describing the relationship between an individual's functional capacity and the demands of their environment.

Continuing bonds: Framework in which relationships with the deceased endure through ongoing action.

Cumulative stress: Stress that builds gradually over time from ongoing responsibilities or difficult experiences.

Ekerdt, David J.: Sociologist and gerontologist whose scholarship reframed household disbandment as a process of transition, meaning-making, and identity.

Emotionally ambivalent experience: Experience where conflicting emotions exist together.

Emotion-focused coping: Response to stress that targets its emotional impact rather than its source.

Environmental press: Demands, physical and psychological, that an environment places on the person living within it.

Family systems theory: Theory that relational dynamics surfacing in a crisis originate in patterns present in the family long before the crisis arrived.

Filial maturity: Psychological renegotiation through which adult children come to see parents as complex, imperfect individuals.

Framework: Way of looking at an experience that helps in understanding why people think, feel, or behave as they do.

Gen Z: Generational cohort born approximately 1997–2012, following Millennials; the first generation to grow up with smartphones and social media as ubiquitous features of daily life.

Generativity: Desire to leave something of oneself behind.

Habitus: Ingrained ways of thinking, feeling, and responding formed through repetition until they feel natural.

Historical/intergenerational trauma: Emotional pain or harmful patterns, cumulative and collective, passed from one generation of a family to the next.

Hoarding disorder: Persistent difficulty discarding possessions, regardless of their value, resulting in clutter that disrupts living spaces and causes significant distress or impairment; recognized as its own diagnosis in the DSM-5 in 2013.

Household disbandment: Comprehensive process of dismantling an entire household when an older adult moves to supportive living or dies; distinct from routine decluttering in requiring decisions about nearly every possession and reflecting a significant life transition that affects identity, family relationships, and legacy.

Informal caregiver: Unpaid family member, friend, or neighbor who provides care outside the professional care system.

Intergenerational ambivalence: Having mixed feelings about family relationships across generations, such as feeling love, frustration, obligation, and resentment toward a parent at the same time.

Intergenerational patterns: Relational behaviors and loyalties passed down through families and reenacted across generations.

Invisible labor: Caregiving and household work performed without acknowledgment or recognition.

Legacy of values: Most durable of three legacy forms—biological, material, and values—transmitted through story, relationship, and ways of being.

Life review: Naturally occurring process through which older adults recall and evaluate past experience.

Liminality: Threshold state between a former identity and one not yet formed.

Material convoy: David J. Ekerdt's term for the dynamic accumulation of possessions that supports everyday life, identity, and role performance across the life course.

Materialized identity: Identity stored in meaningful artifacts.

Maternal enmeshment: Family pattern in which emotional boundaries between mother and child become blurred.

Millennials: Generational cohort born approximately 1981–1996, also known as Generation Y; the first generation to come of age alongside the internet and digital technology.

Mortal liminality: Threshold in later-life disbandment marked by increasing restriction and the recognition that time and future choices are finite.

Oral tradition: Transmission of knowledge, emotion, and resilience across generations through storytelling.

Personhood: Selfhood that endures through cognitive decline, sustained by relationships that honor the individual rather than the disease.

Poetics of space: Gaston Bachelard's view that homes are lived experiences rather than simply physical places, in which rooms, corners, cupboards, attics, basements, and objects become woven into memory, identity, imagination, and sense of belonging.

Posttraumatic growth: Transformation that can emerge through prolonged emotional struggle and reflection, coexisting with suffering rather than replacing it.

Primary territory: Personalized space so bound up with identity that intrusion registers as a violation of the person.

Problem-focused coping: Response to stress that targets the source directly.

Relational dialectics theory: Theory that relational tensions are ongoing contradictions people negotiate throughout their lives rather than signs of pathology.

Relational dysfunction: Relational foundation too damaged or unstable for ordinary negotiation to repair.

Safe passage: Hope that meaningful objects reach those who will honor them.

Second death: Idea that a person dies a second time when no longer remembered by others.

Sensemaking: Process of translating overwhelming circumstances into manageable ones through sorting, sequencing, and coordinating.

Stewardship: Understanding of inherited objects as belonging to the family unit, kept in trust rather than owned.

Storied objects/possessions: Objects that carry accumulated meaning across generations.

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Index

accumulation 7, 10, 63, 109, 219, 235

activities of daily living 176, 223, 232

aging in place 6, 232

ambiguous loss 61, 107, 119, 232, 238

ambivalence 9, 10, 29, 54, 56, 234, 242, 245, 247

autonomy 1, 115–118, 157, 195, 203, 211, 230

being in place 221, 223, 224, 232, 247, 248

Boss 61, 107, 238

Bourdieu 153, 161, 238

caregiving trajectory 10, 55, 232

cognitive decline vii, viii, 221, 222, 224, 235

collecting vii, viii, 7, 64, 71, 232

collective memory 125, 172, 232, 242, 243

competence-press model 175, 176, 187, 195, 219, 223, 224, 232

continuing bonds 143, 232, 244

coping 176, 180, 195, 203, 223, 233, 236, 239, 242, 243, 245

cumulative stress 10, 55, 56, 233

dementia vii, viii, 4, 5, 11, 12, 14, 35, 36, 39, 43, 52, 74, 75, 77, 86, 92, 93, 111, 130, 144, 167, 205, 221, 224, 228, 238, 239, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247

downsizing vii, viii, 5, 6, 43, 192, 241

Ekerdt 6, 51, 124, 219, 233, 235, 241, 248

eldercare 2, 249

emotional ambivalence 56

emotional labor 11, 229

emotionally ambivalent experience 9, 55, 233

emotion-focused coping 223, 233

environmental press 211, 219, 223, 233

Erikson 125, 161, 241

family dynamics 5, 11, 56, 60, 229

family systems theory 61, 119, 233, 239

filial maturity 71, 119, 233, 246

generativity 125, 161, 171, 233

habitus 153, 161, 172, 233

historical trauma 43, 135, 239

hoarding disorder vii, viii, 7, 234, 240

household disbandment vii, viii, 1, 4–6, 51, 60, 115, 175, 177, 227, 229, 233, 234, 239, 243, 250

informal caregiving viii, xii, 228

inherited ethos 125, 170

intergenerational trauma 10, 43, 55, 57, 233

invisible labor 120, 179, 234

Lawton and Nahemow 176, 219

legacy of values 123, 169, 172, 234

life review 187, 223, 234, 239, 243

liminality 9, 51, 52, 55, 234, 235

lived experience viii, xii, xiii, 1, 8, 115, 235

Lüscher and Pillemer 10

material convoy 219, 222, 235, 241, 248

materialized identity 125, 172, 235

maternal enmeshment 35, 55, 235, 243

mortal liminality 51, 55, 235

oral tradition 153, 173, 235, 249

personhood 115, 116, 118, 120, 221, 223, 235

Poetics of Space 52, 55, 235, 237

possessions 1, 5, 7, 13, 14, 24, 35, 36, 49, 52–54, 63, 73, 76, 77, 82, 83, 91, 115, 120, 123, 124, 143, 150, 159, 171, 172, 179, 219–222, 228, 230, 234, 235, 236, 239, 241

posttraumatic growth 27, 235, 248

primary territory 59, 116, 119, 120, 235

problem-focused coping 223, 236

relational dialectics theory 60, 119, 236

relocation 6, 144, 204–206, 241

second death 172, 236

sensemaking 176, 223, 236, 249

stewardship 127, 132, 143, 161, 170, 172, 236

storied objects vii, 123, 169–171, 236