

Emptying the House: Impossible Task, or Joyful Rite of Passage?

by Linda Hetzer and Janet Hulstrand

You may be one of America's 76 million baby-boomers, or one of the nearly 35 million Americans over the age of 65. You may be a couple, or a widowed survivor preparing to move from the home in which you raised your children to an apartment or retirement community, or the adult child of parents who are making such a move.

Whatever your situation, the inevitable question for many people facing this task may well be, "What do we do with all that stuff?" Seniors who move out of the family home into smaller quarters typically need to give up 60 to 75 percent of their possessions. You may feel you have the weight of decades of family treasures (and trash!) on your shoulders, but at least you can be assured that you are not alone.

When the time comes to leave the family home behind, what *do* you do with all the things that have accumulated over the years? Where do you begin and in what order do you work? And how do you get through the experience in such a way that everyone in the family is still on speaking terms by the end of it all?

The good news is that, while this job may be a dreaded one, and can be overwhelming at times, it can also be a poignant, meaningful period in your life as a family. It can be a time for making meaningful connections and deepening existing bonds, with plenty of room for laughter, fond memories, even joy, along the way.

Here are a few suggestions for how to make emptying the house a positive experience:

Take your time. This means starting sooner rather than later. (It means, in fact, starting *now*, even if "starting" simply means beginning to think and talk about the move.) Starting early means you'll have plenty of time to talk things over as a family, plan ahead, and leave time for having some fun. The sooner you start, the greater your range of options for places to move to, and the more you'll be able to be actively involved in the process—which means that the changes you're about to make will be on your terms, not someone else's. (Even if you plan to stay in your home, you can at least begin to talk about the eventual disposition of your things so that when the time comes for your family to deal with it all, they'll have had the benefit of your counsel and advice.)

Communicate. Talk over your plans with your family; let them know what your wishes (and your fears) are, and ask them to share their feelings about what is happening with you. If at all possible, have a family meeting where everyone involved is present, before the actual move begins, so that you have a chance to discuss your plans, and agree as a family on how to approach it. Talk to people who have been through the experience of emptying a home to find out what they did right—as well as what they did wrong.

Get help. Nobody can do this job alone, and no one should try. The process can be daunting physically as well as emotionally. Talk about it with your family and friends,

and decide at which junctures you may want help. At certain points, help from others may feel intrusive (when you are sorting through personal mementos or files, for example); but anyone can help with carting things away once you've made your decisions. Be sure to enlist the help of family and friends as well as professionals to help you with the biggest parts of the job—such as holding a moving or estate sale, and the actual move.

Enjoy the process. Given enough time, this can be an ideal opportunity for sharing family stories with your children, getting the chance to hear other versions of the same story from them, and saving them all for posterity—by writing them down, putting them on video or audiotape, or simply making sure the next generation hears the oral tradition. If there's time for the whole family to be together before you leave, there are lots of ways to celebrate your last gathering in the house—from planning one last party for family and friends, to taking pictures in special places, or creating updated versions of favorite old snapshots.

Let go, and move on! Leaving the family home behind is a time for tender sentiments, and maybe even a few tears, but it's neither the end of the world, nor of your life. Many people who have made the move to smaller, more manageable quarters, even those who were reluctant to make the move, find that they miss the old place less, and enjoy the new place more, than they ever could have imagined. It's okay, even healthy and normal, to allow yourself some sadness, and moments of poignant nostalgia as you say goodbye to a place that has been the setting for so many important moments in your life—but it's also a time to look forward to the rest of your life, and to a new home that holds unknown pleasures still to come.

Linda Hetzer and Janet Hulstrand are the authors of *Moving On: A Practical Guide to Downsizing the Family Home* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2004). To learn more, visit their website: www.movingonthebook.com.