

Dance to the music of time

By Ruth Ostrow

"WHAT is a life?" the old woman asks, pointing around the small apartment. Surrounding us are the trinkets of a whole existence collected over a lifetime - the remnants of the life she must now let go of.

For we have come to take her away from her beloved home. It is that much feared time of transition we all have to face - time to put a parent in a nursing home. Having resisted coming to live with us and the alternative of home-care, my mother-in-law has left us with no other option.

She mutters, stares down at her tapping foot and twists a hanky this way and that. "My whole life ... how can it be packed up in one day!" she berates. "It should take ... it should take ..."

But she runs out of puff and sits silently. I know what she is trying to express. The time it takes to let go a life of possessions, the dreams, stories, memories, should be proportional to the time it took to accrue these precious things. "It should at least take a week," she says, thumping the coffee table with her fist. Dust rises from the doilies.

"You must keep this!" she says, putting another tray on the table. This one is shaped like a fish. Its eye ogles at us pitifully. So far we have done our best to make her feel that her possessions won't just be pawned. That anything of sentimental value will go with her, or come with us. We are keeping the crystal, the special antiques from Germany. But there are only so many wine decanters, trays and watches won at bingo we can accommodate.

It's about value. Making her feel her treasures are of value, therefore that she is of value. But facts are facts. She is going from five rooms to one. The little shelf space there is will house her precious photos, not the tapestries, figurines and vases that occupy every inch of her flat.

"Mum, there is only so much we can take," says my husband. "Only what is important."

"It's all important," she says, starting to cry. "It's all my life."

"This is from Munich. A German lady who liked me gave it to me after the war," she says, handing me a large diamante brooch. "It's very valuable, from a famous actress. Real diamonds." Were it real, it would be worth millions.

"Mum, it's worthless," my husband says, and I grab his arm to silence him. "Of course the diamonds are real!" I say, understanding what she wants. She lived through the Holocaust and a time in history that so devalued human life. As a teenage girl in Poland, she was sent away by train to Russia by her mother. The next day the Nazis came in and slaughtered her parents and sisters.

And how devaluing now, to be sent away to a nursing home. How soothing to remember a time when one was so valued that a stranger gave you an expensive brooch.

"They all appreciated me, people. I was a very loved woman," she says, glaring at us, the enemy. "Everyone said I made the best sandwiches of all when I first came to Australia. That vase was given to me by a Greek woman who loved my sandwiches."

And through the fog of emotion I see clearly. She can let go of these things, but first she needs a custodian. Someone to whom she can entrust the sacred stories each object contains. For each has a tale, a memory, that makes it meaningful, in which her identity is entwined.

Before the objects are released to dust the stories must be heard, acknowledged, passed on. Each photo album must be looked through, the boxes lovingly explored, each record played - in homage to a life well lived, a life of value.

And so we sit with the old woman, my daughter and I, and open the secret treasure boxes, looking at each of the "ancients", as she calls antiques.

"This is from Russia, this my husband gave me on our first date, and this is an old Yiddish record from after the war," she says, putting on her record-player. As the crackling vinyl begins to sing, the tears start falling from her eyes. But they are tears of joy. She is dancing, clapping, she is 18 years old. And between songs, the pile of things she's prepared to bid farewell to grows bigger.

"What is a life?" she repeats, but this time she is more philosophical. Because over the hours she has passed the baton of authority on from woman to woman.

My daughter stands in old high-heels, laden with diamonds. Laden with her grandmother's precious past. I carry the stories in my heart to retell when my child is older.

The old lady's journey has a sense of sacredness and completion. For by bearing witness, we have symbolically told her: "Your life was of great value to us." And more importantly we are letting her know, while she is still alive: "Mumma, nanna, we have all loved you well."

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