

# Are we possessed? Legacy or burden?

By Helen Melbourne and Stephanie Deakin

**W**hen we come into the world, we come naked, vulnerable, without memories or needs that have not been met. As we progress through our lives, we acquire more and more objects and become more and more dependent on those objects to meet our needs.

We begin with those that meet our basic needs: food, water, security, and comfort. When these needs are met, we become more aware of our surroundings; objects become a source of learning. The next phase is the accumulation of possessions for the care of our family. As we age, we may inherit the worldly goods of previous generations, as well as the emotional expectations tied to these things.

Along with the benefits of material goods, there are costs. The costs can be financial, emotional, physical, and spiritual. We buy bigger and bigger homes to accommodate our stuff. We work more hours and spend more of our income. We create more trash. We don't allow ourselves uncluttered time and space to be spiritually grounded. We become mired in our things.

There are also environmental and social costs to ownership. The high demand for products creates the incentive for sweatshops, slave labour, and environmental degradation. Clear-cutting, industrial pollution, and the loss of agricultural land are all consequences of our consumerism.

It's time to start letting go. How do we choose what to keep, what to release, and when to acquire something new? At the end of our lives, what do we value most: objects or relationships?

## Queries

1. What do we leave as our legacy for our families, our friends, and in the broader world? What is

truly important for them to remember about our lives? Often, we live mired in the past or treading water in the present. We do not give any time or thought to these questions. Does this come from too much busyness, or avoidance of activities that leave us sad or angry, or that bring up unresolved issues and matters from the past? Are we afraid that we will be forgotten?

2. While we are able to plan and make changes in our own lives, do we do so, or do we leave debts and material burdens for others to shoulder after we are gone? Remember that illness, disability or circumstances beyond our control may arise at any time of our lives. Query #29 of *Advices and Queries* tells us *"As far as possible, make arrangements for your care in good time, so that an undue burden does not fall on others."*

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3. Do we keep things because they may still be useful, or only need repairing? Do we believe that we will use or repair those things, or finish those projects, in a timely manner? Are we willing to take the time to release these things to someone else who may be able to use them? Do we consider this time a part of our

stewardship of the earth's resources?

4. When we make transitions in our housing, do we, in a hurry or overwhelmed, make poorly considered decisions, and either keep everything, or dispose of too much or the wrong things? It may be helpful to meditate or take calm time to center yourself before you begin, or whenever stress overtakes you. If possible, do not make decisions when you are under pressure or fatigued. Allow the still small voice within to guide you.

5. We may hold onto the possessions of our deceased family and friends; is there another way to remind us of their love, and keep alive their memory? Do we keep things because we fear the grief that may still linger? Many of us are tactile, or visual, and in fact, we do need tangible reminders to bring back the sense of life and love, spirit of those who are gone.

6. Do we allow others to help us through the process of letting go? If not, is it because of an underlying sense of shame, or fear of losing control? Are we able to ask for help and accept help graciously? Have we been taught that emotions should be carefully controlled, and so letting go of possessions and memories is too private to share or have witnessed by others?

Let us choose any assistant carefully. Someone who is impartial, and non-judgmental will be more affirming of our emotions than someone who is invested in our process and actions, and who may lead us to make wrong choices.

7. If we are asked to help someone through the process of doing a will or power of attorney, or the process of releasing possessions, can we help them to make the decisions gently and with care, or are we in a hurry and unwilling to take the time to understand the stories and memories attached to their things? Are we too close to the person we have been asked to help? Would it be better for us to suggest an impartial and supportive person to assist? (This could be a friend, a neighbour, or a person who does such work for a living.)

8. Trust is critical in the choice of someone to assist in the process of letting go. There is more to

trust than financial honesty. Emotional support and spiritual generosity is also essential. So also is the practical knowledge of dispersal that honors the social, cultural and natural environments of our world. Can we be trusted to help in this way? Can we learn to trust the process of asking for and receiving help?

### **We've asked yourself the hard questions. Now what?**

As we release ourselves from the burden of our possessions, we create room for our spirit to grow. It is important to be honest with ourselves — admit the need, acknowledge the difficulty, be aware of negative self-talk, and try to look ahead and anticipate the 'bumps in the road.'

We can be practical. Give things to our family and friends now rather than leaving them to be inherited. Sell things of material value. Donate things that are still usable but that we no longer use. Recycle as much as possible.

*If you don't love it and you don't use it, why do you have it? — Peter Owen*

It is necessary to take care of ourselves. Let us not try to do too much at a time or work when we are tired. The task will be less overwhelming if we stay mindful of our emotional reactions and our physical needs. We must also give ourselves permission to meet any changing needs. Can we find the middle ground between excess and deprivation?

Even though letting go is a difficult process, we have a responsibility to shoulder decisions ourselves. Otherwise they may weigh heavily on others who are already grieving. Leave the legacy of memories and example, not the burden of possessions.

### **Let your lives speak.** ☞

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