

Making Life Easier for Those We Leave Behind



By Cynthia Bryant, LCSW

When I was a child visiting my grandmother's home, I would often make a game of looking at all the items in her house, examining the underside of each one. A curious kid, I discovered that without fail, my grandmother would write someone's name on *absolutely everything* that she bought or received as a gift. Like karma, if you gave the gift, you could expect to get it back.

When I asked my mother about this strange habit, she explained that my grandmother was one of 8 siblings. She had also grown up with other large families in Appalachia. She had personally witnessed how painful and destructive it can be to a family when the adult children are left to divide a parent's possessions during a time of Loss. Inevitably, someone will be hurt, offended or even jealous. Petty grievances always try to compete with real grief.

With this insight, she decided to be proactive in an effort to spare her own 7 children from any future division or strife.

To this end:

1. She and my grandfather always sought to live within their means and leave no debt behind.
2. She always made an effort to avoid filling her home with clutter that would be a hazard to her mobility or a burden to clean.
3. She would mark the furniture and household items to set a precedent that was understood by all. Whoever's name was on the item was the recipient. She sought equity in amount and value.
4. She had a system that was visible to all and open to discussion while she was alive to discuss it. This helped to prevent feelings from being hurt or grievances held.
5. **She wanted to take the responsibility of making choices while she had the luxury of time and a sound mind, neither of which come with a guarantee.**

When my grandmother was 95 and home care was no longer feasible, my family followed a transition plan for her to enter a nursing home. It was at that time that everyone quietly received their "family heirlooms." Each gift was valued more for my grandmother's handwriting and consideration than for the object itself. Now at 102, my Grandmother enjoys receiving visitors, singing and saying prayers for each person in her five-generation family. She no longer receives gifts (clutter!) but has been known to accept a small box of chocolate-covered cherries.

Among the many gifts I received from my grandmother was the example she set in how we manage our "things". In counseling with older adults and their families, sibling resentment, debt and clutter are common issues – issues that my grandmother, through her wise planning, has been able to avoid.

The licensed clinical social workers of CJFS provide professional counseling and case management for families in individuals of all ages.

For more information or to make an appointment, please contact CJFS Clinical Director Tammy Peacock, tammy@cjfsbham.org or 205.879.3438.