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## Faith & Values: Cleaning my mother-in-law's cottage

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**A**s we move into that time of year for spring cleaning, I think back to cleaning out my mother-in-law's cottage in Michigan last fall. Sheila passed last August. It was strange going through all of her things — trying to figure out what to save, what to keep and what to give away.

When we continue to collect stuff in our cupboards or our closets or our drawers, we should ask ourselves, “What will the people close to me think when they find all of this junk when I die?” And more importantly, “What will they want to hold on to? What will lift them up? What will bog them down?”

The things left behind — they speak volumes.

Eight packages of Clairol hair color lining a back shelf, most with the “\$4.99” red sale stickers still on, all the package dates expired. Sheila grew up in England and left at age 18 after getting pregnant (with my husband, her firstborn) at age 17. She married an American Air Force boy who swept her off her feet and brought her to America, leaving the only family she had — mom, dad and sister — behind across the Atlantic.

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She had nothing. They had nothing. They grew up in a time where having nothing was the norm. Of course, one only bought hair color on sale! And of course she dyed her own hair.

In that post-World War II era, giving up any material items gained became really hard after a lifetime struggle of working so hard to be able to “acquire” and then a lifetime struggle of not being able to give up “stuff” one never had before and had worked so hard to get.

When I cleaned out the kitchen cupboards in the cottage, I reminded myself of my mom, who comes to my house and the first thing she does is clean out my refrigerator and cupboards of any and all expired or about-to-expire items. And my husband is the same way.

On the other hand, I am the culprit with the expired goods. Am I just too busy to clean out my cupboards and my drawers? Or do I just have a hard time throwing anything still “usable” out? Why do I keep so much “stuff”? Am I just another Sheila? No wonder we got along so well.

Sheila had olive oil and medications more than 10 years expired, canned goods more than five years expired, and packaged goods seven to 15 years expired. She had magazines and baskets and silk flowers galore.

And yet there also were crayon drawings from the grandchildren, photo albums going back 30 years, and love letters.

I could not toss the peanut butter — per the “sell by” date, it had one more week to go. I found it the next day in the trash. My husband was not going to wait out the week. I thought, “Darn, I still may have wanted to have some of that peanut butter this week.”

As I clean out items in the cottage, I am continually reminded of that paradigm shift. In many ways, we have become a “disposable” society. Tossing everything. And unfortunately that now factors into the divorce rate and the difficulty in staying committed. Isn't it OK to hold on to a few usable things, even if they are beyond the expiration date?

It dawns on me: Isn't the endgame to strike the right balance? Yes, there is freedom in letting go — discarding the things that can no longer be used, tossing out that which weighs us down, the negative thoughts, the hurtful and nagging thoughts that no longer serve any useful purpose, the thoughts and memories that clutter our minds and hold us hostage.

And there is contentment in passing on that which someone else might use and enjoy.

Finally, there is joy in holding on to what should be cherished, and there is pleasure in rediscovering those items that remind us of good times, that make us happy, that remind us of hope for the future.

This year, spring cleaning will involve more than my house. This year, I also will clean out my heart, my soul and my mind. This year, my resurrection is to toss out the unusable, the clutter, the junk, the weight, the expired and negative thoughts, the bad memories and past relationships that weigh me down. My salvation will be to keep only the joyous.

And most importantly, this year I will clear enough room so that there is plenty of space left to collect future happiness.

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