



What to Keep

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Things are different now. I'm viewing the world with longer-term eyes, through a lens of generations. I lost my parents a couple of years ago—both of them in the span of six months. Both of them passed away in their home, the one they lived together in for more than half a century. Now the torch has passed to a new generation, mine, and I am starting to see things the way they did when I talk to my children.

It was up to us, my brother and I, to straighten things out, to sort their lives into piles—what to sell, what to give away and what to keep...ah yes, what to keep? Now there is a question. My parents, as many of their generation, were very, very good at keeping things. There were things like little rolls of string all neatly wound and tied. Glass jars and their lids, carefully washed and ready to be re-used. Camping gear from the 1950's, canvas tents neatly rolled and mildewed, air mattresses so old they were brittle and fell apart when you tried to unfold them. Things like that were easy to sort through and throw away or recycle, the same with household goods.

The hardest questions were with those little personal items, like my Dad's little pocket diaries going back to 1956 (and his father's going back even further). They didn't contain any highly personal details, but were a daily snapshot of his life, who he had lunch with on September 16, 1965. Who my brother's hockey team played on January 23, 1972 and the score. Here is a time capsule of the quotidian. Nothing too important, no events that

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Tip of the Month

ACTION LEARNING

Action Learning is a deliberately organized method for developing attitudes, knowledge, skills developed by Revan (1987).

- 1) Project/Problem
—a real world problem selected in consultation with the family business.
- 2) Action Learning Teams
— both an individual and interac-

tive process—advisory councils, boards of directors, family management team, business management organization, professional business support groups.

- 3) Learning cycle
—steps: act, observe & reflect, generalize, plan.
- 4) Reflection Tools
—learning logs, journals, PDAs, tape recorders, talking with friends.

5) Learning Equation
— learning occurs most effectively when questions flowing from experiences combine with attained knowledge from various sources.

6) Mentor
—learning in the real world often requires professional as well as emotional support.



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changed the world, just the daily life of someone I knew very well for half a century. What do you do with that?

Then there were my mother’s beloved family photo albums. I’m not talking just one or two, but boxes and boxes of them going back to the 1940’s for her, but even further for her mother and grandmother and my father’s parents and grandparents. I found one photo on metal plate of a woman in what looks like 1860’s fashion. No name, no identification...who is she? By looking at some photos from the turn of the (20th) century, I think she might be my great, great grandmother but I’ll probably never know for sure.

The case of the photos and diaries is emblematic of the issue. Photographs have been around for about 150 years now. They started to be common in the 1850’s and really took off for the masses in the early 1900’s with the Kodak “Brownie”. I have some photos from one of my grandfather’s albums of his bedroom as a boy, circa 1910. The technology has been around long enough that the “stuff” of it is starting to catch up with us.

That’s the case for all of our modern technology. It’s now possible to save virtually all of our emails for perpetuity. That may make sense for the White House, but for us average folks? I’m not so sure. The same thing is now happening with video. It may be possible that a hundred years from now our great, great grandchildren will be able to see not just your vacation videos, but your video blog, still online. How valuable are these?

Value, aye, there’s the rub...value to whom and how much? How do we assign value to the personal items of our loved ones? Someone who had value to us and who valued these items, but now it is our turn to assign these things value. Of course value is a subjective thing with personal belongings. And the question is, is our value the same as theirs and should it be? The answer is probably not. The truth is more likely that many of these items had more value for their original owners than to us and will likely have less value to the next generation and so on. The context of personal items will likely be lost and/or diminished with each passing generation. So value becomes a question of personal judgment: Is this really valuable to me and will it be to future generations?

Then there are the costs. The cost of keeping all the boxes, of finding a place to store them where they won’t get wet or mold or attacked by vermin or burned in a house fire. The cost of time in organizing and boxing up and putting them in a safe place. The cost of using that space, which could be used for something else, like unused skis or my kid’s stroller that I’m hoping will be used again.

One option is to scan these things to make an electronic record. That way they are easier to store and can potentially ex-



tend the lives of older, deteriorating media. After all, nothing lasts forever. This is certainly a good choice for important documents and photos that you want to share with family members. But beware, electronic formats change. Yesterday's CD's are today's DVD's and are tomorrow's something new. Unless you keep up with the formats, you can become like me with a box full of family videos on VHS trying to find the time and equipment to convert them.

Then there is the organization of all this. It's kind of like the 'garbage in garbage out' principle. If you have 5,000 photos with no caption, and you scan them, then you still have 5,000 photos without captions or context. Then is it worth your time to scan them in the first place? My recommendation is to sort and scan judiciously and add captions and file names that will allow someone down the road to understand the context, the who, what and where of the photos.

It all begs the question how much do we really need? How much should be kept? What really matters? Of course, that depends on how much you value them. But in general I think many of us have much more than we really need or ought to keep. Before all the technology, before general literacy, you might know your grandparents or your great grandparents, if you were lucky. But people did not have a lot of stuff to pass down and most of the written records were stored in the church (births, deaths, weddings). So most people might have an oral tradition of a few generations, but little physical connection beyond those two or three generations. People just moved on. They did not have much choice. But like I said at the beginning of this column, things have changed for us now and we can have a record that goes back three or four generations and may be stored for longer, if time allows going forward. So we might someday have pictures, letters, things that go back quite a number of generations.

At some point someone has to say 'enough' we cannot (or do not want) to keep everything from every one that went before us. This is going to be a different amount for everyone based on your relationship with those who have gone before you. And it may be that you keep things of your parents that your children or grandchildren will have to sort and decide to throw away. That is the nature of things.

We have reached that point in my family. I shredded the daily diaries. The memories of my father have value to me and I have kept things that remind me of him in the way I want to remember him. But the daily details of his life are now irrelevant.

I will keep my mother's photos for a while. But I am going to sit down with them one of these days and take a hard look at what is there and ask myself: how valuable these are to me versus the next generation? And probably throw out a lot of them.

My goal is to have a unified package where my children and hopefully grandchildren and so on can look back and get an idea of who their ancestors were. Something that they can store and share that will not be a burden for them, but will preserve the images and memories of those who have come before them. Now to me, that is a gift worth passing on.

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