What to Save, What to Release?
By: Marge Brokaw, LPC, Grief Counselor

As you look ahead into the New Year, perhaps one of your goals will be to go through and clean out a chest of drawers, a closet or rooms where the personal belongings of your loved one can be found. This task can be one of the most difficult, and for good reason. It is emotionally and physically exhausting. You may open a closest and be overcome with the need to sniff your loved one’s jacket, hoping to still catch a lingering whiff of their cologne or perfume. Or, despite your good intentions, you might suddenly decide to avoid certain drawers or entire rooms, keeping them closed tight, not wanting any reminders to reinforce that they are gone.

It is often at times like these when I hear the familiar question, “Am I crazy?” The answer and good news is no. What you are experiencing is quite normal. In her memoir about losing her best friend, Caroline, to cancer, author Gail Caldwell describes her experience with loss this way:

“The ravages of early grief are such a shock: wild, erratic, disconsolate. If only I could get to sorrow, I thought, I could Do sorrow. I wasn’t ready for the sheer physicality of it, the lead-lined overcoat of dull pain it would take months to shake. Whatever I thought I knew about loss - what I had anticipated about the After Caroline state, when the fear would be over, the worrying ceased - I had no inkling that it would mean deliverance into a new, immutable world. I lived in the reality of Caroline’s absence all the time, it seems, and yet sometimes the fact of it would nearly knock the wind out of me.”

Does her description of grief sound familiar, like something you too have experienced after your loved one died? Perhaps in some unexpected way, you might feel some comfort or reassurance in reading that another person’s grief journey has certain similarities to your own.

Yet, there comes a time, unique to each person, when part of the next step in moving forward on your healing pathway includes a “clearing of the closets”. If you are willing to face this significant task, consider inviting a close friend or certain family members to assist you. Not only is their presence meant to be physically helpful with packing and sorting, but emotionally they will be available to encourage and support you. In addition to sharing some tears, you may also come across some items that bring up fond memories that will feel good to share together.

Again, Gail Caldwell addresses the intense connection she felt to her friend Caroline’s “things”. She writes, “I wanted to claim whatever of her was left. I’d always heard stories about grief-stricken
A Personal Reflection on Grief

This article was first offered as a reflection by Ken Fuquay, Chaplain Intern at the December 4, 2014 Light Up A Light interfaith memorial gathering at the Levine & Dickson Hospice House at Southminster. It is edited and reprinted with permission.

In this moment---in this very second as these words leave my lips, there are persons who are feeling the full measure of grief. In this moment, we stand with them, and they stand with us. They are not alone. And we are not alone.

Three years ago on Palm Sunday, our family pet of 15 years took its last breath as I held it. The following Sunday, Easter Sunday, my mom who had battled multiple myeloma for 11 years, had a mini-stroke, fell and broke her wrist. She was taken to the emergency room, and by 10:00am on Easter Monday, we found ourselves gathered around her bedside in hospice care in Greensboro, North Carolina. The following Saturday, while my mother still lay in hospice care, I walked the aisle at Union Presbyterian Seminary and graduated with a Masters of Arts in Christian Education. My parents, who had supported that endeavor, were unable to witness the graduation. The following Friday at 6:04am, my mom breathed her last breath with me holding her hand. Two days later we celebrated Mother’s Day with my mother’s body lying in state at the funeral home. I wrote in my journal, those three weeks were like the swinging of a pendulum----I moved from deep sadness to extreme joy, from extreme joy to deep sadness, joy to sadness, sadness to joy.

Last year, a bright young 15 year old artist who attends our church asked me a simple yet poignant question. He asked, “What is your favorite emotion?” It was a question I had never been asked. I engaged the young man in conversation and as we talked, I realized in the depth of my spirit that joy and grief come from the same place inside of us. I answered Kyle’s question, “Grief is my favorite emotion.”

I am convinced that without the deepness of our grief, we can never fully understand and appreciate the richness of life. Without tears, our laughter has no value. With no struggle there can be no appreciation for freedom. Without loss there can never truly be any “having.” And, I am convinced without grief, there can never truly be any joy.

In the chapel at the LDHH-Southminster, there is a journal. People who wander into the chapel are invited to share their thoughts. I found these words written in that journal:

How badly it will hurt is dependent solely on how goodly I have loved;
The cut will be only as deep as the measure of joy I experienced.
And the grief? Well, while weighty, I am confident that the grief will be in direct proportion to the measure of the life I mourn. And I would not trade either.

In closing, I give you the gift of these words from White Elk, a Native American sage:
"When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced.
Live your life so that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice !"
What to Save…. (continued from page 1)

families arguing over ugly lamps or cheap coffeemakers; now I understood. The frantic hunger I felt was not trivial or greedy; it was possessive, in the most primal sense. I still have her gym bag and her rain jacket, and for awhile I even tried to wear her winter boots, an entire size too big, which was absurd but comforting. *Memento mori*: reminders of the dead. I think we must long for these signatures of history - the baseballs and ornaments and playing cards left on peoples’ graves - because they take up the space left by the departed. The physical void after she was gone seemed alarmingly like a thing of physics, as if the daylight had shifted or a house on the street had disappeared.”

It is likely you, too, will have a favorite shirt, jacket or trinket that you intentionally wear or keep with you at certain times to feel close to your loved one. What is being described is comfort care; the ultimate need to seek out objects, experiences, or places that provide a sense of connection with your loved one. It might seem strange to some, what you choose to save and what you choose to release, but it is part of your healing process. So, I hope you give yourself permission to wear or gaze upon your “momento mori” for comfort and connection, even if “the boots are a size too large”.

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**In Good Company**

**Event Calendar**

*(All are welcome!)*

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**15th Annual Soup on Sunday**

Sample soups from many Charlotte-area restaurants.  
**Sunday, January 25, 11am - 2pm**

Hosted by: Central Piedmont Community College in the Philip L. Van Every Culinary Arts Center, located at 425 North Kings Drive, Charlotte

*For more information, visit hpccr.org or call Nancy Cole at 704.375.0100*
Grief: The Reluctant Journey

Registration has begun for upcoming “Grief: The Reluctant Journey” support groups. The meetings start early February 2015 at our various HPCCR locations. A pre-group interview with one of our grief counselors is required before registration. To find out more, and to schedule an interview, please email cummingsg@hpccr.org, or call 704.335.4334. For our Lincolnton support groups, email journigan-douglask@hpccr.org, or call 704.887.6437.

Grief: A Work in Progress

The grief experience can turn one’s world upside down. Yet, as you embrace grief and struggle with getting through daily activities often wondering when you will feel better, you may find a new reality emerging and reveal an identity that is uniquely yours and self-affirming. Come join us for a discussion on how tools and strategies for grief healing can help you along and make a difference.

Tuesday, February 3, 2015
2:30p-4p
UTC
1420 East 7th Street
RSVP 704.335.4334 or cummingsg@hpccr.org

Tuesday, February 3, 2015
2:30p-4p
Levine & Dickson Hospice House-Huntersville
11900 Vansstory Drive
RSVP 704.335.4334 or cummingsg@hpccr.org

Thursday, February 5, 2015
6:00-7:30p
SCO
7845 Little Avenue
RSVP 704.335.4334 or cummingsg@hpccr.org

The mission of Hospice & Palliative Care Charlotte Region is to relieve suffering and improve the quality and dignity of life through compassionate hospice care, palliative care, and professional & community education.