



Cleaning Out Your Closets

by Rachel Blythe Kodanaz

With the longer days of summer upon us it might be the right time to tackle organizing your spouse/partner's personal belongings. "Cleaning out your closets" presents a significant challenge for most widows – the overwhelming thought of going through your deceased loved ones belongings and trying to decide what do with the items is by far one of the hardest pieces of widowhood. "Cleaning out the closets" is more than just the bedroom – it includes the home office, the work office, the garage, the basement and the pile of papers that have accumulated since the loss. For many, it is so overwhelming that it is easier to just leave everything as is, for others, it is the sad realization that your spouse is not returning and their belongings are now your belongings.

While many may choose to leave the possessions alone for years, others feel a sense of accomplishment in organizing the items. It is a personal decision of what works best for you. Many friends and family members will have their opinions about what is right or wrong when it comes to cleaning out your closets, but the true right or wrong is in the eyes and the heart of the widow.

When discussing cleaning and organizing personal belongings in our widow support group, the members are often disturbed by the

reaction from friends and family who are insistent that this task should have already occurred. It is truly impossible for a non-widow to comprehend what it really means to go through the personal items and decide what to do with them. You want life to be the way it was before your spouse passed away so why would you want to clean out their belongings?

For some widows, an immediate reaction to the loss, especially if it was a sudden death, is to quickly clean out everything. The thought behind this approach is that you will feel better if you do not see the personal belongings. The real truth for most widows is that you will not feel better, in fact as time goes by you may have regrets that you cleaned out and gave away the items so quickly. As the realization of the loss slowly finds its way to your heart you will want to savor every minute with each belonging. There are many ways of approaching the cleaning and organizing when you are ready to tackle it.

The magic question is: "*When* do I start to clean and organize my spouses personal belongings?" The answer is very simple – when you are ready! For many the task is so emotionally and physically overwhelming that it often takes a nudge from someone you trust to help with a plan. Many people start the process when they

are looking for something special or when the clutter becomes too much to handle. For others, it begins when they figure out what to do with the items. A recent fundraiser became home to some of the sports memorabilia collected by one of our widow's husband. While she was not sure how she would feel about donating the items, she felt that others could benefit from the sale of them and they would go to a good home. Others start the process when they decide to sell their home and some wake up one morning and say, "Today is the day".

Before you begin, think of family members and friends who may enjoy a special item from your spouse's belongings – maybe a coffee mug for a desk at the office, tools for the handy person, a runner's watch for the running buddy, books for the reader, etc. Also think about not-for-profit groups in your community that can benefit from donations – coats for the homeless and business suits for workforce initiatives.

The best way to get started is to tackle one corner, one drawer or one file at a time. Create three piles; the save pile, the donation/trash pile and the "not-sure-what-I-want-to-do-with-it" pile. If you start this way you have "an out". If you do not know what to do with some of the personal items you can place it in the third pile.

This is the box of possessions I could not discard – my memorial of Rod's personal belongings that mean the world to me, as simple as it may seem. When I open the box I can touch him, I can smell him and I can see him. The box contains his drivers license, passport, the last phone book that included his name, the Wall Street Journal and the local newspaper on the day he passed away, the shoes my daughter was wearing when we went to the hospital, his running logs, his business card, a pine cone from when we scattered his ashes, letters he wrote, papers he wrote in college and so much more. I call it my treasures of Rod!!



Be sure to take the time to savor memories of each item. If it is overwhelming, take a few items to a different room and go through them at your leisure. Once you start, you will find that you will develop a rhythm and a balance – that you are accomplishing the task and taking pleasure in reminiscing your time with your spouse.

What I learned through my own “cleaning of the closets” is not to give anything away too quickly. My heart went out to my husbands’ friends and family after he passed so I quickly gathered mementos to give away – whether it was a tie, his running watch, guitar, favorite jacket or cufflinks, I found a special home. As my daughter grew older, I quickly found myself regretting my rapid delivery of his personal items although it served a purpose at the time. I wished I had saved more items.

Another frequent question among widows is: “What happens if I find an item that upsets me—such as an unexpected financial document, a picture, a journal or letter?” There is no doubt that it will disturb the process but how you react to the situation will determine how you will recover. Since you can not confront your spouse and you are already in an emotional state, my recommendation is to find someone you can trust that will be more logical and that will help you work through the situation.

Whether you are cleaning out your closets or you are helping a friend or family member, consider what items could be included in a memorial or can become a family heirloom. For example, creating a quilt with your spouse’s clothing can provide comfort and can be saved for generations. You may decide that some items can be framed or just placed in a box for future grandchildren to honor your spouse. When in doubt—include them in your “not-sure-what-I-want-to-do-with-it” pile for future decision making. You can always partake in another round of organizing but you can never get the items back if you give them away.

Rachel

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Rachel RECOMMENDS:

The First Ever National Conference on Widowhood

“Anyone who has experienced the loss of a spouse, no matter how long ago, is invited to attend the **National Conference on Widowhood** at the San Diego Marriott Hotel and Marina scheduled for **July 17-19, 2009**. This event will be an inspiring weekend intended to help us celebrate all we have accomplished as we look to the future with hope and purpose. Death is not reduced to tragedy alone if we can find a way to rise from the ashes. Join us as we honor the loved ones we have lost by learning how to fly once more. For conference information please visit www.sslf.org. “



Rachel Blythe Kodanaz entered the grief world in 1992 when her husband suddenly passed away leaving her with a two-year-old daughter. She spent several years trying to find her path through grief and as part of her recovery became active in supporting others who were suffering a loss. Currently, Rachel is the Executive Director of HeartLight Grief and Loss Center located in Denver, Colorado. She facilitates numerous groups including a Baby Boomer Widow Support Group (5 years), multi-day workshops, keynote addresses and training classes. In addition, her experience in large corporations led her to develop and publish material to support the workplace when dealing with a grieving employee or workgroup, with emphasis in educating managers and co-workers. Rachel presents to corporations, communities, not-for-profit organizations, funeral directors, and conferences. Rachel has published numerous articles and participated in a grief segment on Good Morning America.

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