

Downsizing 101

Life Experience

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I stood in the walk-in attic of the 4800-square-foot Dream House George and I had built twelve years earlier; among opened boxes, I held to the light a little ceramic baby shoe. In 1960, someone had sent my mother flowers in that little shoe when I was born; she, in turn, had filled it with flowers in 1981 for me when my oldest son was born. But my son had never married, and it seemed unlikely he would have children.

I wavered. Although that shoe had been stored for well over three decades, it was precious to me. I could donate it, but it wasn't especially beautiful, and without its backstory, who would even want it? I could keep it, but it would be one more little thing crowding the 1500 square feet George and I needed in the Transition House where we would soon be moving.

I could throw it away now, or someone I loved would have to throw it away later.

I knew this lesson firsthand, because as people of a certain (ahem) age, George and I had both dealt in recent years with throwing away things our own mothers held dear.

I took a deep breath and put the little shoe into the garbage bag.

So, here was my **first downsizing lesson: How to make peace with letting go of things that mattered.** I knew that precious shoe existed. I had the memory. I didn't need to keep it in a box where I would never see it again, but it would take up space.

In the frantic five weeks we had to pack and winnow out old treasures, there were many such moments. I became good friends with all of the staff at the local rescue mission, where I took load after load of donations. Okay, it was nineteen loads, but who's counting? We became intimately acquainted with the hours at the local dump, where we also took many loads of garbage and recycling (and we really didn't count those).

Churning through all of the memories in those boxes in the attic was both sweet and heartbreaking. Over and over again, I had to make decisions to let go of things no one would want: old school assignments, artwork from third grade, old baby shoes. They had indeed served their season, but now it was time to let go.

Because the Dream House had been on the market for two years, the fact that it might actually sell had become like *The Impossible Dream*. George and I had perfected the home showing routine: the day or two of cleaning, yardwork, and staging, after which we would vacate with the dogs to the Transition House, only to return and reclaim the Dream House. We went through this process over thirty times. We had street cred with friends who put their homes on the market: “You think you are having a hard time? We’ve been doing this for TWO YEARS! Let me tell you about the people who...”

So when the house did sell, we stalled a couple of weeks about hiring a mover because we weren’t sure it would really happen. These buyers seemed awfully picky. Maybe they were going to back out. I had research papers to grade.

Second downsizing lesson: Do. Not. Procrastinate.

Every move is hard. I knew that. But it had been much easier twelve years ago when we were moving to a larger home, because we could just put boxes out of sight and deal with them later. When we were downsizing from 4800 to 1500 square feet, we had to make decisions about thousands of objects. We gave away fifteen major pieces of furniture, including the beautiful 1914 upright mahogany piano that my grandfather had purchased second hand during the Great Depression. (We found it a loving home.)

We knew our plan was to live in the Transition Home for a few years before retiring out of state somewhere else. We suspected our next home would be a little larger than 1500 square feet, so we had some furniture and possessions that we needed to put into a storage unit.

Third downsizing lesson: it is really hard to estimate how much will fit (or not fit) into a house one third the size of the one in which you have been living.

We made mistakes. The mover wanted us to pack everything up into a pod they would store at their warehouse; we would not be able to get into it. We wisely said no, we would need access. And did we ever need access. We had to haul pieces of furniture over to the storage unit and bring others back. Things kept moving from room to room, from drawer to drawer. Some pieces of furniture had five or more locations in the Transition House.

Fourth downsizing lesson: even when you are in the mode of getting rid of things and living with less, you will still need to purchase more stuff to make the smaller place work.

The modest closets in the 1943 Transition House were not configured for maximum storage. George installed new shelving, and we bought and labeled clear plastic storage bins to help us juggle all the little necessities. We bought organizers for the bathroom and kitchen drawers.

Fifth downsizing lesson: stuff never stops accumulating. Even after all our hard work to fit into our smaller space, over time we added new things, and soon, we were once again feeling their encroachment into our lives and needed to make another trip to the rescue mission to donate again. Downsizing is not a “once and done” experience. It’s an ongoing battle.

In the end, the Transition House phase of our lives was several years longer than we had intended. We got comfortable in our smaller space. We considered living there permanently. But

eventually we realized we wanted more space, not so much in our home as in the yard and land that surrounded it. We wanted a garden, room for our dogs to run, the ability to sit at our breakfast table in our pajamas and look out the window without our neighbors seeing us as they walked by.

So... we upsized to 2500 square feet and a small farm. But with the extra square footage, we were able to eliminate the need for that storage unit.

Although we waffled some along the way, downsizing served us well. For the last five years of our careers, we lived in a small but comfortable home with no mortgage, so we were able to save and plan for what we finally knew with certainty we wanted: the Dream Farm.

And here we are.