

**Treasures in the Basement: Precious Objects, Inherited Narratives,
and Bonds Across Generations**

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A door in the main floor hallway of my house leads down red carpet stairs to the basement, passing walls papered in red and gold brocade. At the bottom of the stairs is a short passageway lined with black and white photographs. Some of them are people (my grandmother and great aunt as babies, circa 1922) and places (St. Mary's church in rural Victoria) that I recognize, many others I don't.

Beneath the stairs are a half dozen plastic bins with labels: "Kay's journals," "Letters and journals," "Winter family photos," et cetera. I sorted and attempted to organize these materials when I cleared out the basement in preparation for a renovation a few years ago. When I inherited and moved into the house, the basement was in a state of chaos after its original owner, my great aunt, known to everyone as Auntie Kay, died at age 97. As her capacity diminished and care needs increased, the precious family heirlooms that she had lovingly stewarded for decades were haphazardly stashed in the basement.

This is the legacy I've inherited and am now tasked with stewarding. I spent two long cold pandemic winters sorting through the stuff, discerning the detritus (magazines, workshop tools, craft supplies) from the treasures (ancestors' artwork, notebooks, letters). And there's more: beyond the storage under the stairs is a room which has been mostly cleared out but still holds random boxes, shelving with more memorabilia, and a crammed dresser. There is another room that leads out to the garden, with a wall that I pass every day holding framed photos of my ancestors. My great grandparents, Marjorie and Lee, watch over everything, alongside a framed certificate recognizing Lee's parents' journey over the Oregon Trail in the 1870s.

My basement is full of treasures, and during my first couple of years in the house I had no idea what to do with them. But I made a decision during a state of acute grief, shortly after my mom died. I read somewhere (I don't remember where so I can't cite it, which I know is not good academic practice but it was before I entered academia) that it is not wise to make big life decisions within one year of a major loss. I did it anyway.

Overwhelmed by loss and burdened by the new responsibility of stewarding the precious family heirlooms on my own, I stood in my backyard on an early spring evening, surrounded by rhododendrons planted in the 1950s by Auntie Kay. I made a decision that I felt through my whole body: clear out the basement, build an office in which to work, and do a master's degree to figure out the stuff. Make it the basis of my research. Honour my maternal lineage.

This seemed like the best thing I could do with my life, but I didn't realize that it was the best thing I could do for my grief. I spent the following two pandemic winters in the basement, digging through and organizing the stuff. I cleared away the detritus until only the significant pieces of my family story – the basement treasures – remained. My work now is to make sense of and find meaning in these materials.

In this autoethnographic paper, I will reflect on this journey and examine the sociocultural interaction of the impact of previous generations' belongings on the bereaved. I will attempt to answer questions about the impact of these belongings on me. The literature I encountered in my research focused on personal belongings right after the death of a loved one (Guillard, 2017), but I found myself wondering about the impact of the belongings of previous generations. In the basement treasures, I could see some of this impact on Auntie Kay, through what she chose to keep.

While it's been five years since my mom died and I am no longer in a state of acute grief, bereavement is still a part of my life. I have also experienced a steady succession of other major losses: my dad, the family home where I grew up (which I packed up and sold), my partner's mom, my best friend, and, as I finished researching this paper, another old dear friend.

I have chosen an autoethnography approach for this paper because I find it to be an appropriate method for "researching complex emotional experiences such as grief" (ter Haar and Smid, 2025, p. 156). I bolster my personal inquiry and reflection with research on contemporary approaches to grief, continuing bonds, reconstruction, linking objects, and narrative inheritance. I also think about the role of grief in my own life, and how interacting with previous generations' belongings both heals and re-opens my grieving process.

Contemporary Approaches to Grief

To understand what I am supposed to do with these basement treasures, I must first understand my grief and situate it in contemporary theories and practices. After my mom died five years ago, I experienced a range of emotions that were beyond anything I had ever felt and I had no idea how to process them. The funeral home had given me a pamphlet that summarized Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This linear list did not reflect my experience, and I instantly rejected it.

I instead found comfort in Megan Devine's (2017) book *It's OK That You're Not OK*, which affirmed my intuitive sense that Western culture is grief and death illiterate. It was not only that I was individually unprepared for the magnitude of this loss, but the dominant culture had cast a veil of silence around death and grief. I had no language to express what I was going through. I didn't understand why, in addition to my enormous sadness, my body ached and I couldn't sleep or eat.

Devine's mass-market self-help book and social media accounts are based in her clinical and personal experiences. But I did not realize that her work also reflects scholarship and research over the past three decades, which has moved away from Kübler-Ross's model as the dominant paradigm of grief understanding and therapy.

Robert A. Neimeyer (2014) is a leader in the evolving understanding and treatment of grief in recent years. His work in the growth of theory and research on bereavement since the 1990s challenges the existing paradigm with evidence-informed grief therapy. Among these many findings include insights into the nature of grief as cyclical rather than linear, which reflected my own experience.

Current grief theories and therapies also include a greater acceptance of continuing bonds (Neimeyer & Cacciatore, 2016). Contemporary treatments encourage maintaining connection with deceased loved ones, moving away from idea that successful mourning involves letting go of emotional attachment to deceased (Klass & Steffen, 2018). Continuing bonds are now accepted as a normal part of the grieving process.

Neimeyer (2014) also posits a meaning reconstruction approach to grief, noting that bereavement challenges one's "self-narrative." This narrative is the organization of life events and themes to interpret and understand one's past, present and future. Edith Maria Steffen (2017) builds on Neiyermeyer's work on meaning reconstruction, stating that reconstruction is a way of forming continuing bonds with the deceased by maintaining an ongoing relationship and connection.

Continuing bonds help the bereaved make sense of death and their life without the deceased (Klass & Steffen, 2018). In so doing, grief becomes an "interaction between interior, interpersonal, communal and cultural narratives" (p. 9) that individuals and communities seek to

make meaning of a person's life and death. Christine Valentine (2008) calls this a "bereavement narrative" around the loss of loved ones that supports how they retain a significant social presence in survivors' lives and shape their identity.

Continuing bonds can take many forms. What I am interested in are material objects such as possessions and photos to keep memories alive and foster continuing bonds (Hewson et al, 2024). What is even more interesting to the life project I have found for myself is how the emotional weight of material objects can cross generations and continue bonds between people who have never met.

Reorganizing Objects and Reconstructing the Self

The process of cleaning out the basement was lonely and emotional. Auntie Kay had lived in the post-war builder in Victoria for almost 70 years, which gives a person a lot of time to fill a home. Her first husband had built the house where he and Auntie Kay raised their daughter, living as a simple, working class family until his death in the late 1980s. In addition to running the home and managing her garden, Auntie Kay had become the steward of her family archives, which had been transported from the house she grew up in Metchosin, a rural area 30 minutes from downtown Victoria. I remember visiting her when I was a kid and getting a tour through the installations she had set up in her basement, her careful arrangements of her family's objects and heirlooms, little shrines through which she remembered her beloved dead.

These objects were still in the basement when I started the clean-out project, although they had become disheveled and disorderly over the years. And among these precious items were the standard things that end up in a family's basement. I removed the detritus and isolated what seemed important (photos, anything with any kind of handwriting, et cetera). Many of my discoveries were not precious but caused me to burst into tears, such as the dresser drawer with

her first husband's ties, belts, and wallet, and a calendar from 1976 with a notation on the day of my birth, Sunday, February 29.

I find some comfort in knowing that I am not the only person who has cleaned out the home of my beloved deceased and wrestles with what to do with their belongings. Valerie Guillard's (2017) work examines how grief guides what people do with the possessions of the deceased and ultimately concludes that dispossession, the decisions of what to do with objects, depends on the survivor's relationship with the deceased. Guillard conducted a study of white Christians in France and identified four periods of grief during the dispossession process: numbness, yearning, disorganization and disrepair, and reorganization/reconstruction. This final period involves "preserving the memory of the deceased by forging a different relationship to his objects and redefining the meaning of the consumption of objects" (p. 478).

I am in a prolonged period of reorganization/reconstruction, and I may possibly be here for the rest of my life. I am working towards understanding and honouring the objects left behind, preserving memories of the people I knew, and unearthing (at times, constructing) stories of the people I did not know.

The role of reconstruction is reinforced by Arnout ter Haar and Geert Smid (2025) who observe that the creation of a "personal biography" (p. 158) is a means of maintaining a social bond with the deceased. Another way is through linking objects, which become physical symbols of the deceased person, providing comfort and reducing fear. Researcher Linita Eapen Mathew (2022) notes, "Objects hold meaning for us, which is why we link them to our living milestones. Now we must learn to link them in death also" (p. 37).

In addition to holding meaning, objects can hold memories and help in recalling stories. Hallam and Hockey (2001) assert that objects play a role in the material dimensions of memory

making. Objects hold significance in “the social and cultural processes through which lives are remembered and futures are imagined” (p. 20).

While Hallam and Hockey do not make explicit reference to linking objects, their thoughts on object relationships in *Death, Memory, and Material Culture* resonate with me. They explore how material objects acquire meanings and resonances through memory and embodied practice. Hallam and Hockey look at memory-making practices that appeal to continuity and the use of visual images to invoke the deceased. Their work examines how domestic settings can be spaces of “dying, mourning, and remembrance” (p. 1).

My home has become a site of ongoing grief and memories. In addition to the archives in the basement, little pop-up shrines are sprinkled throughout the living spaces of the house. The ashes of my mom and our cat, Whiskers, sit on the mantle; my partner has arranged photos of his deceased mother in his office; I have filled the guest room with furniture from my family home. These objects have a place in our daily lives.

Objects are, of course, more than objects. There is a relationship between possessions and sense of self (Belk, 1988), particularly in the way possessions are treated ritually and after death. Possessions have the potential to create or maintain a sense of the past, and they can function as an extension of self beyond death. Accumulated possessions “provide a sense of past and tell us who we are, where we have come from, and perhaps where we are going” (Belk, p. 160). They have the potential to link across generations.

The relationship between possessions and self can create a sense of legacy, “the process of passing one’s self through generations, creating continuity from the past through the present to the future” (Hunter, 2007, p. 314). Engaging with previous generations’ possessions is a way to make meaning of life and create a coherent life story. Possessions “live on” through heirs or

museums, and people can solidify their identity after death by leaving behind journals, letters, artwork, to people willing to care for, honour, and remember them (Belk, p. 148).

In my family, it appears I am the person who has been designated to do this. I approach it as a form of reverence for my ancestors. I have become a conduit for family history, and I take this responsibility seriously.

Inherited Narratives to Build and Understand Life

I have come to see that organizing and honouring the materials in my basement from previous generations is an act of reconstruction that allows me to build and understand my life. They are more than linking objects or extensions of my ancestors – they are my narrative inheritance (Goodall, 2009), holding the life stories of those who came before me. Family archives can function as a form of meaning making, and narrative inheritance offers an opportunity for intergenerational research into personal identity and family stories (Herrmann, 2014).

In his inquiry into family secrets and impact on the family of his father's double life as a CIA agent, H.L. Goodall reflects on his narrative inheritance:

What we inherit narratively from our forebears provides us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs. It helps us see our life grammar and working logic as an extension of, or a rebellion against, the way we story how they lived and thought about things, and it allows us to explain to others where we come from and how we were raised in the continuing context of what it all means. We are fundamentally *homo narrans*—humans as storytellers—and a well-told story brings with it a sense of fulfillment and of completion. (p. 497)

Of course, there is a risk in digging into family materials and narratives. I run the possibility of encountering unfinished business and incomplete narratives. Who knows what long-buried secrets I may come across. Sometimes things are swept under the rug for a reason, but Goodall asserts that all families have secrets and they are not necessarily harmful. What I do not discover is almost as significant as what I may find. Inherited narratives can have gaps. The silence that surrounds stories that are not passed down is known as absent memories (McKay, 2009).

I think about the absent memories around my great-grandmother's mysterious illness that led to her early death at age 48, when my grandmother and her sisters were in their early 20s. Marjorie was bedridden for two years, then she recovered enough to retreat to her artist's studio on the farm property and spend her time writing poetry before she died. Auntie Kay had shared with me the collection of poetry that she and her sisters edited and published two decades after Marjorie's death, and somewhere along the way I came to believe that her illness was depression. Nobody told me this diagnosis; it was a conclusion that I came to on my own, based on what I was not told. I have no idea if this diagnosis was real or a figment of my overactive adolescent imagination.

Husband and wife research team Robert Ballard and Sarah Ballard (2011) remind me that a narrative inheritance is not just one story but a collection of a family's known stories. They write, "that which has come before influences what is to come next. We inherit the stories, experiences, and identities of our fathers, mothers, grandmothers, and grandfathers" (p. 73).

What I find fascinating about the Ballard's analysis is that they place narrative inheritance on a continuum. Following narrative inheritance is narrative momentum as they observe that "family identity is a narrative of both the past and present that contains within it a

sense of movement and force that carries us into the future” (p. 80). While I am inspired by this reminder of the continuum between past and future generations, I also feel concern and sadness about the next generation, as I do not have children and am not in close contact with my cousins and their children.

Generative Gifts to the Future

My basement is full of precious family treasures that have landed in my care. They are more than objects – these family photographs and albums sustain collective memory, the “social circulation of material objects” (Hallam and Hockey, 2011). In addition to these archives are inherited objects that I have incorporated into daily household use. These include random bits of furniture from Auntie Kay, practical things like appliances that I use and will continue to use until they fall apart, and cute vintage dishware that I charm my friends with on special occasions. I was even entrusted with caring for Auntie Kay’s cat, Whiskers, and how I grieved when she died because it was the loss of another connection to my ancestors.

Digging into the archives and stories in my basement is not only an act of reconstruction and meaning making. It is a form of generativity, an act “on behalf of future generations” (Guillard, 2017). Even if I do not know what the future will hold or have a direct connection to successive generations. This work is a legacy that I am in the process of defining, even though I am still far (hopefully) from the final stage of my life. Hunter’s study (2007) on legacy creation and meaning making notes the forms that legacy can take: genetic, material (personal belongings), historical (family rituals and stories), intergenerational, symbolic, and values. Legacies can be transmitted through actions, belongings, and artifacts, and they require a reliance on all forms of relationships to “create legacy, transform it, and allow it to be passed along” (Hunter, 2007, p. 318).

The treasures in my basement and the questions about what to do with them have had a profound impact on my life. At this point, the objects in the basement have been whittled down to what matters. I work every day in my beautiful office. I am in the final stretch of my master's degree.

Although I have felt overwhelmed by the responsibility and volume, the basement treasures ultimately give me a sense of purpose and fulfillment. I have enough materials here to keep me busy for the rest of my life. I have so far started a trilogy of essays, a series of poems in response to my great-grandmother Marjorie's poems, and an exploratory inquiry into cataloguing and engaging with the materials of her life. Marjorie has come forward as the main character in my research thus far, with her nicely packaged poems and carefully packed gifts that her daughters held on to for decades.

I intend on placing as many objects as possible in the public domain, where they can be appreciated by future generations who may not necessarily be kin. I have connected with a photography studio in Derby, England, a business that Marjorie's father started 175 years ago before relocating his family to the west coast of Canada. The studio owners are interested in adding some of the family pieces to their heritage collection.

This life project involves just one branch of the tree that roots my place in the world, the lineage of my mother's mother. There's also my mother's paternal line, and then my father's mother's lineage (which is also rich and complicated, with its overt settler-colonialism and deep relationship with the Secwepemc territorial land in the BC Interior) and my father's father's lineage (of which my dad never spoke and I subsequently know very little). So many branches and paths! But I also want to stay grounded in the present, to engage with and explore the world. I can't spend the rest of my life in my basement.

This autoethnography is an evolving exploration of myself and where I come from. My personal inquiry and reflection are enriched by the concepts I have explored here, including a greater understanding of grief, continuing bonds, reconstruction, linking objects, and narrative inheritance. Grief has been a catalyzing force in my life, and it gives me reason to pause and carefully consider how I honour and preserve the treasures left behind by previous generations.

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