

BELONGINGS

People might tell you to get rid of your loved one's belongings right away. They think that her possessions will be painful "reminders". Don't listen to them. Keep them for a long as you need to. If you disposed of her things you may regret it later.

What harm does it do if her toothbrush is still in the bathroom for a while or is you can't bring yourself to wash her pillow case? So what if her clothes are still in her closet or her record player still has her favorite disk on the turntable? Must you give away her favorite sweater—all because somebody says you should?

Keeping your love's clothes undisturbed for a time, can be very comforting. Smelling the cologne that lingers on her pillow case can feel good. If you close your eyes you can pretend, for a second, that she's in the room with you. Wearing her sweater not only keeps you warm but you can feel as though her arms are around you.

Seeing and touching her things allows you to feel like a part of her is still with you as you grapple with reality.

Please note, I have suggested this as a TEMPORARY measure—an important distinction. Although no time limit can be placed on how long keeping her things is appropriate—it differs for each of us—the grieving person who leaves a room untouched for five years is different from one who "can't let go" of her love's belongings for a 12 or 14 months.

Eventually the time will come when you think you can move your loved one's things. If you're not exactly sure what to keep and what to dispose of, box up those things you can't decide on and store them in the basement or attic.

Periodically, you may want to go through these boxes. Each time you may be able to let go of more things. Of course, some of your child's possessions will bring back bittersweet memories, and you'll cry. Let the tears flow.

You might need to keep certain of her things forever. And that's okay too. I know, because there's a special box I've kept in my closet for many years. Most of the time I forget it's there, but every couple of years I open it and look at the "beautiful" drawings Arthur did in kindergarten, or at one small tennis shoe, or at his tee shirt with "Artie" emblazoned across the front.

It feels good, these many years later, to touch what he touched. Sure, it hurts for a moment when I wonder what he'd look like now as an adult, but then I put the lid on the box and slide it back into the closet. And I'm glad I've still got part of him with me.

Margaret H. Gerner, MSW