

2022 Short Story & Essay Contest: Third Place, Adult Essay Contest

Senior Losses

By Louis Siegel, Rockville

My daughter subscribed to a service that each week sent me a question I was to answer. They will publish the collected answers as a book. Here is my response to: “What are your favorite possessions, and why?”

Turns out the question is profound and much deeper when you are 81 and have lost, and are steadily losing, most of your possessions.

I interpret the word “possession” in the broad sense as anything I acquired, have or had, as a fixed and dependable part of my life, but not necessarily only something I own as you would own or possess an object or a thing.

I lived the ascendant “accumulating things” arc of my life from my youth until I peaked acquiring and accumulating things at around 70 when age, life, health and circumstance intervened and I slipped into the descendant “relinquishing possessions” arc of my life.

Possessions come in different kinds and forms. Some aren't “things” or “objects” at all but are the relationships you acquired with people, like friends, family or romantic relationships—past or present. My most treasured relationship was with my wife, Ruth. That ended when she passed away in 2011 and became my most profound loss.

You may say that relationships are not possessions but they are, just not inanimate ones.

There is my family, of course, and then there are the innumerable people and friends I met and made along my way, maybe hundreds or more, virtually none of whom are in my life now.

I often wonder why that is so? Is it the result of my not staying in touch? Maybe, but what is there to say to someone you met 50, 20 or 10 years ago and still remember and miss and they, likely, have forgotten you?

Some losses are the result of “downsizing” moves that leave massive black-memory holes where the now gone possessions once were.

These losses linger in my memory, jogged only by those few remaining, hanging-on possessions that are still with me.

Downsizing is the standard “go-to” euphemism for the very negative process of seniors ridding themselves of memories by the reluctant, often forced, disposal of those very possessions that formed the substance of their ascendant existence. They sell, give away or trash things that tell the very story of their life. They are the unwritten obituary of their life told by their things, not words.

What's left for me now are the last trickle of my possessions, all that can be crammed into my small apartment. They are the last remnants of my prior life and serve not as possessions as much as lingering reminders of fading memories of my life once lived.

What are my most favorite possessions? They would be the 300 letters from my former patients given to me upon my retirement telling me I made a difference in their lives and, mostly, because they remind me I was once needed, important, relevant and worthy.