

EDITORIAL

We went into the house thinking we were there to clean it out. Instead, we found ourselves rediscovering our family and getting to know our mother, mother-in-law and grandmother better.

Her final gift

By Mable Hastings

On July 1, our family said goodbye to my mother-in-law, the Reverend Deacon Judith Ball.

Her battle with cancer meant months spent swimming in an illness that seemed to grow more wicked with each passing week. During that time, it often felt as though time had frozen and each day was simply a repeat of the one before. We talked, we cried, we laughed and we worried. And, selfishly, we clung to her, knowing that she would continue to guide us as she always had. And she did.

Her funeral was a celebration of her life, but what we discovered in the weeks that followed was that we were celebrating something much bigger.

There was, of course, the dreaded task of sorting, cleaning and dispersing the belongings in her home. The family home became our gathering place, bringing us together for days at a time, from morning until evening. There was a tremendous amount of work to be done, but somehow the work became something much more profound.

It was as though every box opened, every drawer emptied and every memory uncovered became another dab of glue, slowly binding us together. In the awkwardness of grief, surrounded by clumsy words and complicated emotions, we found ourselves growing closer.

There were the church items, the books, movies and music. The dishes and knick-knacks. Closets filled with clothing and shoes. And then there were the photographs, home movies, creations born from hobbies and talents, and gifts from family members collected over the years and displayed on shelves and bookcases. Every item seemed to have a story. Every item had a connection. And almost every item triggered a memory.

The large wooden chest that had remained in the same corner of her bedroom for as long as anyone could remember was assumed to contain blankets. Instead, we discovered something much more precious—a true treasure chest.

Inside were old Boy Scout and Brownie uniforms worn by her children, school projects, mementos from family trips, birthday cards her two children had given and received, wedding keepsakes and countless other pieces of our family history. Things that had perhaps seemed insignificant when they were tucked away years ago suddenly became priceless.

And then there were the hats. Fifteen or more!

My mother-in-law rarely wore a hat unless she needed one for warmth in the winter, yet her closet revealed an impressive collection. My sister-in-law, the family fashionista, took on the role of model, trying on each one while the rest of us gave our thumbs-up or thumbs-down. There was laughter, teasing and a little bit of silliness—exactly the kind of

moments that make grief a little easier to carry.

Clothing from her closet was divided among family and friends, with other items donated. Each piece left the house carrying a little bit of Judy with it. Calls and messages of thanks followed the items being gifted to others. Almost like she was a designer, we'd get a message saying, "I'm wearing my Judy today."

Her grandchildren—three boys and a girl—were invited to choose something they wanted to keep as a memory of their grandmother. Perhaps not surprisingly, their choices reflected some of the things they most closely associated with her; food being a big one! The Ball table often found guests circled around it and a barrage of foods being served.

One of the grandchildren, the youngest, chose her bread-making machine. Another selected the ice cream maker. The eldest chose her cookbooks. In the end, these were not simply things being removed from a house. They were pieces of a life being passed along.

And perhaps that is what surprised me most about those weeks following Judy's death. We went into the house thinking we were there to clean it out. Instead, we found ourselves rediscovering our family and getting to know our mother, mother-in-law and grandmother better.

We told stories we hadn't heard before. We remembered people and places. We laughed at things Judy had done and cried over things we would never experience with her again. We learned things about her life that had been tucked away in drawers and cupboards, waiting patiently to be found.

The house was slowly becoming emptier, but somehow our family was becoming fuller. Judy's belongings were finding new homes, but her stories, her humour, her faith, her talents and her love were finding their way into the next generation.

The sorting continued, but the grieving has changed and morphed as it likely will as we pass through the process that is far from over.

What began as a sad and necessary task became an unexpected gift—a few more weeks of being together, of remembering together and of discovering that even in loss, there can be connection. We thought we were saying goodbye to a house full of memories. Instead, we discovered that the memories were never really in the house at all. They were in us. And they are now ours to carry forward.

In life, one of the most important things to Judy was family—and, above all, that it remained strong, connected, and intact. In death, it feels as though she has left us a map, guiding us through the memories she gave us and reminding us of the love, strength, and bonds that hold us together. Perhaps that is her final gift: a reminder not only to cherish the memories she left behind, but to continue creating our own—to leave something of ourselves for those we love to carry with them one day.

