

BEYOND WILLS AND ARRANGEMENTS

by Margaret Hofmann

I enjoy browsing at garage sales, for the unexpected, inexpensive items I may discover. But I find estate sales even more fascinating, because here the whole life of a recently deceased person, (or of someone who has been moved into a nursing home,) lies spread out before me. Yet, at such sales, I can't escape a deep sadness: the comb, the bed spread, the mug, the spoon, the picture taken from a wall, a handful of shells, a certain book, a sweater, a pair of slippers – all these items were once important to these persons. And now, strangers are walking through their houses, handling and examining their very personal belongings.

Sometimes I get into a conversation with the grown children who are putting on the sale. They will usually say something like: "Mom (or Dad) had so much stuff! None of us can find the time to sort through it all. And the old letters, receipts and magazines! We have already selected everything we want. Whatever does not sell today, goes to the Salvation Army."

Making a will and preparing all the other documents which have become essential is certainly of the greatest importance, as are the prearrangements for one's funeral (or cremation). AMBIS has helped us with both of these tasks. But having completed them does not automatically assure that we have done everything that can and should be done to make it as easy as possible for our children, other relatives or friends.

To me, as undoubtedly to most thoughtful people, it is of primary importance that my passing will not in some way lead to disharmony among my children. While this might seem incomprehensible to me at present, I have read and heard of such unhappy developments often enough to consider this possibility seriously, to warn my friends of it, and to offer here a few suggestions as to how some pitfalls might be avoided.

Food for Thought #1: *Approval of the selection of the Executor.*

If we designated one of our kids to be the executor of our will, we should see to it that the others don't feel slighted. They should express in so many words that they have faith in that particular sibling's honesty and competence.

Food for Thought #2: *Keeping parents' generosity from backfiring.*

If there is money to be divided among our children, we should take into account any amounts that may have been spent earlier on one or the other child. "Dad paid for your college!" "Yes, but he paid for your wedding!" "And did the folks not help you with your new car?" "Well, that is different." Etc., etc. If such exchanges seem unlikely, the possibility of potential friction among one's children nevertheless exists.

This can, obviously, best be avoided, if a clear understanding (perhaps in the presence of a disinterested third party,) regarding the amount of money (including interest!) which

may be owed by a child to the estate, can be achieved. Of course, we are convinced that “we can trust our children to work things out among themselves,” but this is not necessarily realistic. Relationships between children have been known to disintegrate over little trinkets to which each felt entitled, let alone large sums of money. We need only read Ann Landers’ column to know that this is true.

Food for Thought #3: *Who will inherit which vase?*

There are probably many items in our possession which we would like our children, grandchildren, other relatives or friends to have. But who is to receive what? And what is the history behind each piece? We are looking here at a lot of work! For example explanatory tags might have to be attached to this figurine or to that handmade apron. If this job gets too tedious, there are at least two ways to make it easier:

- a. Present as much to the intended recipients as you can possibly spare. Do it now! This allows you to be the giver of your gifts, and not have someone else do it for you, later on. You are able to rejoice as you witness the pleasure you are creating!
- b. With tape recorder in hand, walk around the house or the apartment and make comments on various things you own. Relate their origins, describe their special meanings and declare to whom you would like to give them.

Once you are comfortable talking into a microphone, keep on using the tape recorder to speak to your children about whatever topic occurs to you! Tell the grandkids how great-grandpa came from the “old country.” Talk about your childhood. Relate family anecdotes. Consider creating individual tapes for each child or grandchild. Express personal thoughts to them. Read a bedtime story! Make a take for a special friend in another city. Such tapes, as they also preserve your voice, will become priceless heirlooms!

Food for Thought #4: *Reducing the clutter.*

Visualize your children someday being faced with having to decide what to do with all you have left behind, and try to resolve right now to adopt as a mantra: “Simplify!” Try to simplify every aspect of your life. Systematically, examine each item in your household, while asking yourself: Will I definitely use this again? What will happen to it when I am no longer here? Is there someone who might benefit from this item more than I ever will?

This need not be a depressing way of spending a few days or weeks. Especially if this job is tackled with the help of a friend, (who must be an objective, thoughtful, well-organized person,) it can even be a lot of fun!

In this way, you yourself will remain the boss of everything you own, and you will determine what is to be done with it. Things which may be important to you or for which you had very special plans, will not perhaps wind up in an estate sale or, worse, in the

garbage. Your grandmother's embroidery will some day be admired by your great-granddaughter, and not be used as a rag.

Food for Thought #5: *Photographs, a wonderful legacy!*

Photos, once they have been sifted through and, preferably, put into some kind of order, should at least have date, name of individuals and description of location written on their backs. Better yet, they should be placed into albums and provided with captions. Here, again, someone's help with this tedious job will make it fun and go faster. Few gifts to future generations will be of greater value than albums filled with neatly captioned photographs! Any books, by the way, which should be kept in the family, need to be inscribed, explaining their origin and importance.

Food for Thought #6: *Papers, papers everywhere.*

What to do with all the old letters, clippings, magazines and grandchildren's artwork? This is almost a science in itself, and space does not permit me to go into details. But here are some guidelines to keep in mind: Destroy everything that could be embarrassing or hurtful if someone were to read it. Preserve what is of true sentimental value, and, of course, save papers which might be important for your executor.

If you have collected boxes of recipes, make a scrapbook of the best ones and pass it on to someone who loves to cook. Collections of political cartoons, articles on child rearing, descriptions of far-away places or lists of favorite jokes and "little wisdoms" lend themselves to similar projects.

Food for Thought #7: *The check-off list.*

AMBIS has available a very detailed, professionally compiled list on its website at www.corridor.net/ambis. Our executors will surely appreciate if we fill these out conscientiously! I would, however, like to tell you about some personal suggestions I made to my kids: I indicated what music might be played during the memorial service. (I even attached audio tapes of some favorite pieces!) I expressed my hope that the service will be a joyful celebration of my life. Perhaps a potluck dinner afterwards might bring family and friends even closer together? I also asked that everyone in my address book be notified. (This request necessitated making certain that it is up to date!) I prepared a German text to pass on to my friends abroad.

These suggestions are intended to make it easier for my children, at a time when they will need this help the most, when they may be overwhelmed with too many details to which they want to give their attention.

One of my goals is to do all that is in my power to make the disposition of my property as easy, as meaningful and as pleasant for my children as possible, while, and this is most important to me, the love and harmony which prevails among them will not be jeopardized by my own negligence!

Margaret Hofmann is a former member of the Austin City Council and is still known as the “Tree Lady” for her efforts to protect our city’s trees. She has five grown children, one of whom is the executor of her will. Margaret has published several books and numerous articles, occasionally accepts public speaking engagements but, since becoming a great-grandmother several times over, only rarely finds the time or musters the strength to do what she did for many years and still loves to do: Help people simplify their lives.