



## never gonna give you up

We're not supposed to care too much about objects. We have harsh words for people who do: *Materialistic. Acquisitive. Greedy.* But as **LEE WOODRUFF** learned the hard way, maybe we shouldn't sell our stuff—or ourselves—short.

I'm going to feel lighter. Fewer belongings means less clutter and a simplified life. This is what I told myself just before the tag sale my husband and I threw on my 50th birthday. And even as strangers carted away our possessions, I believed it. I looked forward to the relief I thought I'd feel at the end of the day, when the purging was over. But as night fell I didn't feel unburdened. I deeply missed my stuff.

You wouldn't think I could be so easily shaken, given the genuine trauma that my family and I have endured. In 2006 my husband, Bob, was hit by a roadside bomb while covering the war in Iraq for ABC News. He spent five weeks in a coma and the next year in recovery. My priorities were quickly reordered: I had always been tidy; now I learned to leave dishes in the sink. I had always been punctual; now, if I ran late, I just shrugged. IF IT'S NOT FATAL, IT'S NO BIG DEAL, read a little plaque





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that my sister had given me, and it became our family's jokey mantra.

In the aftermath of Bob's amazing comeback (he went back to work in 2007), he decided not to defer his dreams. He wanted to create a home from the ground up—something environmentally responsible using solar and geothermal energy. "Why wait until we retire to do this?" he said. "We know there are no guarantees." We both understood how life can change in an instant.

**W**e ended up building a beautiful, modern, eco-friendly house that also happened to be smaller and more efficient. It's the kind of place people move into after the little chicks have left the nest (our four are still pretty much present, ranging in age from 12 to 21). Initially, I hadn't been daunted by the downsizing. But once we got ready to move in, I realized that the challenge would be greater than I had imagined.

I had spent the first 20 years of our marriage accumulating things. As newlyweds, Bob and I had returned from a year in Beijing with two backpacks, a few inexpensive Chinese knickknacks, and a burning desire to create our first grown-up household. From my parents, I had inherited a love of antiques, and I spent that first summer back in the States happily scouting garage sales, painting and refinishing my finds with my own hands. Over the next few years, as we crisscrossed the globe for Bob's career, we added furniture and art. We would take with us a bit of the places we left—a pine table from Redding, California, a Navajo rug from the Adirondacks, an odd collection of egg cups from London flea markets.

There was joy in amassing these objects: Each thing had a purpose, if only to bring beauty into our home. I think of the chicken-wire pottery hutch from Napa, which housed our first baby's clothes; the ice cream parlor chairs Bob's mother gave us; the baroque mirror from his ribald aunt. These simple pieces helped define us as a family and created the backdrop of our life.

Throughout the year of construction on the new house, I rifled through closets and gave away dozens of items. There would be no room for the giant armoire from London or the bookshelf I had lovingly detailed in swirls of primary colors when we lived in Virginia. My son's paint-stained handprint at



**about the author**

Lee Woodruff is a contributor to *CBS This Morning* and the author of the recently released novel *Those We Love Most*. She is a cofounder of the Bob Woodruff Foundation, which helps injured veterans and their families.

age five was on the side. Still, it would have to go. All the while, I reminded myself that life wasn't about stuff; it was about the people under your roof. Hadn't we learned that when Bob was hit by the bomb? Besides, we would be moving into our new house with a clean slate. Who doesn't want a clean slate?

**ME, THAT'S WHO.** In the two years since we moved into the new house, I've found myself cataloging the missing items in my head. When I shut my eyes, I can see the old desk from Bob's parents, a drop leaf from the 1940s that housed our family documents, medical records, report cards, old photos, and diaries. With the desk gone, I had to find each of these items a new home. I picture the matching King Edward beds that used to be in my twin daughters' room. They were their first big-girl beds and might have been passed down to grandchildren someday.

Reinventing ourselves in a new house with fewer things has been difficult. It's like having long hair for years, then impulsively telling the hairdresser to just lop it off: You end up peering at yourself in the mirror and groping the back of your neck for weeks afterward. Since moving in, we have bought a few new items, but space is tight. There isn't room for much.

Yes, the things I miss are just things. But this experience has made me think differently about my belongings. I'm more aware of how individual pieces fit together to create a whole home. I'm a person who likes older bones, pieces with a history. I understand that part of myself now.

If Bob and I move again someday, I will tell myself to slow down and take a moment before I toss goods away. I will try to keep the items that bring me pleasure or that anchor my family to our past. And I urge my friends who are downsizing or moving to do the same. I remind them that there is no shame in taking comfort in what their beloved objects represent. Sometimes, things do matter. ■