

*When a loved one dies, they often leave behind more than memories. They leave rooms filled with possessions, full of emotional weight. Here is your much needed companion to help answer the question, “What do I do with all the stuff?”*

## **The Weight of Our Things:**

**Navigating Possessions and Emotions After the Loss of Your Loved One**

By Julie Martella

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# THE *Weight* OF OUR THINGS

REVISED EDITION

NAVIGATING POSSESSIONS AND EMOTIONS  
AFTER THE LOSS OF YOUR LOVED ONE

Julie Martella

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This book provides content related to the topic of death and grieving. As such, the use of this book implies your acceptance of this disclaimer.

## What People Are Saying

Julie's gifts for compassion and realistic advice in organizing and disseminating what was once cherished by someone we cherish and moving into a new reality will be invaluable for anyone tasked with this challenge.

*-Dale Cline, Widower, Pastor*

Julie's book has been an invaluable resource for me. As a professional organizer, I've learned to better understand the needs of clients who have experienced loss. Learning about the brain's response to trauma, the important role that organization plays, and strategies to help my clients move forward has strengthened my professional skills. I'd highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn more about how to move forward after loss.

*-Alisha Pangburn, Professional Organizer*

*The Weight of Our Things* is a heartfelt approach to the challenging journey of managing possessions while navigating the turbulent waters of grief and loss. It is not a book about just tidying up but rather a guide of wisdom, compassion, and practicality for anyone facing the emotional upheaval of loss and the overwhelming task of sorting through belongings. Julie

reminds us that our homes should be sanctuaries, places of healing and comfort, especially when we're grappling with grief. She demonstrates how possessions, often laden with emotions and memories, can be transformed into functional, organized, and nurturing environments that enhance well-being and quality of life. The inclusion of tidying and cleaning checklists, as well as real stories from individuals who have undergone similar journeys, adds a tangible layer of guidance and relatability to the book.

*-Mary Moore Hughes, Camp Widow Program Director,  
Virtual Programs Manager, Soaring Spirits International*

Julie Martella is a widow warrior who has gained much wisdom from her own grief journey. In *The Weight of Our Things*, she breaks down the often overwhelming process of distributing a loved one's possessions as an act of love and honor. Reading her book is like having your best friend at your side, supporting you as you face the daunting task of separating "things" from memories.

*-Edna Teller, Widow,  
Systems Analyst*

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# Introduction

Shall we start at the very beginning?

I'm Julie, and I'm a Home Strategist. My superpower is the ability to break things down into tiny pieces and then put them together again in new and beautiful ways. I find the best and leave the rest.

In the business world, a strategist analyzes difficult situations. They identify opportunities and challenges and create strategies to navigate them and improve outcomes. Successful organizations use this process to create change and find a vision.

I take those same tactics and teach clients how to create meaningful, purposeful change by equipping them to think like a Home Strategist. Then, they can use those new skills to enhance their lives. The fundamental skills include learning to be strategic, purposeful, goal-oriented, and emotionally resilient. They learn to do this first with how they think (mind management) and then apply it to their physical world (their homes).

The title of Home Strategist has evolved as my understanding of home has deepened. I have always loved and respected the transformative power of home, particularly during life transitions and profound loss. Little did I know that having to rebuild my life and relearn my home after an internal brain injury

was just the beginning of this journey. It served as a dress rehearsal for what was to come.

Just as I was utterly unprepared to deal with the sudden death of my husband, I was equally unprepared to deal with the life I was handed and the logistics that came along with it. I realized that the core guiding principles I had developed now had a deeper application. They could help me rebuild my life yet again. And if they could help me, I knew they could help others.

**Can you think of anyone who might need to create change  
and find a new vision more than someone who has  
experienced the profound loss of a loved one?**

It is my highest honor to work with men and women who have suffered the traumatic loss of death and help them re-imagine life and home. I am here for you when you are ready to deal with the new life you've been handed or when you're prepared to let go, and it doesn't matter if it's been three weeks or ten years.

I am here for you as you struggle to find calm in the chaos, manage the overwhelm, and meaningfully and thoughtfully manage your loved one's possessions.

## About You

Now that you know about me, what about you?

You might be at the start of a journey for which you are not prepared, do not want to take, and are not sure of the destination. You've lost your spouse or partner and may be struggling with one of two issues:

1. You have an entire house to empty, or
2. You have a house to sort through and "lighten" because your loved one is gone (lightening is another word for sorting, which you and I will get into later).

Regardless of the circumstance, you may struggle to understand your upcoming task. You may wonder, "Where do I begin?" or "What will I do with all this stuff?" It can be overwhelming.

This book provides a roadmap for moving from where you are to where you want to be. No matter your path, it begins with understanding and managing your mind. That alone will motivate you to get started.

If you are not ready, just read this book and tuck it away; you will know when it's time.

Here's the reality: there are no grief police coming to check on you. There is no rule that says sorting and "lightening" has to take place. If your possessions are at a manageable level and do not create a hazard of any kind, there is NO RUSH. Again, there is no hurry... unless you've been faced with a triggering event, something outside your control that is making you begin this project.

This is where I come in. I can help manage your mind and connect with your purpose so that you can begin and finish this complicated task! I can help you understand why letting go is so hard so that you can tap into your inner resources. I can teach you to think like a Home Strategist.

You can choose to do nothing with the possessions. You can leave your home exactly as it was when your person died. Many people make this choice and never pick up this book. Home, with all its artifacts, becomes either a cozy sanctuary or a functional shrine. Many people are comforted when surrounded by the memories. This choice allows you to do nothing. For some, that is the perfect solution. Others may find it leaves them feeling stuck after a while.

However, dealing with the situation takes on a different meaning for individuals faced with an external force pushing the timeline or seeking peace of mind. It becomes a pathway to a "new normal," a way to move towards their future.

## *The Weight of Our Things*

You can make the decision to sort through the possessions, and make the necessary choices required of each item. Some things you will choose to keep; some you will let go. When it's the right time for you, you will know.

This is the choice to move forward into whatever your future holds. It is how you find your path back to life. It is the choice to say goodbye, whether in tiny increments or in giant sweeping gestures (like emptying a house), so that you may find a new hello.

The fact that you are looking at this book tells me that you are faced with the second choice: to sort and let go of your loved one's possessions, perhaps so you can move into your future, whether figuratively or literally. You are so brave!

For whatever reason you NEED to go through the stuff, this book will help you with that daunting task!

## **1. Meet Your Primitive Brain**

The primitive brain—a term often used to describe the limbic system and brainstem—is the part of your brain responsible for survival. It’s sometimes called the “ancient brain” or the “reptilian brain” because it controls instincts and behaviors that helped our earliest ancestors react to danger and stay alive.

I use the term “primitive brain” throughout this book because it’s relatable and easy to understand, even though it’s not a technical term. This part of your brain operates automatically and includes such functions as:

- Survival instincts such as the fight-or-flight response, habit creation, and instinctive sensory processing.
- Drives such as hunger, thirst, sexual behavior, warmth, and shelter.
- Regulation of essential bodily functions such as breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature.

When your brain enters survival mode, your primitive brain takes the reins, temporarily hijacking the rational prefrontal cortex (PFC). You may find yourself feeling “driven” by the need to survive. You may feel hyper-vigilant and look for threats

where none exist. You may find yourself not wanting to get dressed, leave the house, or engage with others.

## **What Happens Under Stress**

When you are not under stress, your brain has the luxury of time to process information and filter it through the modern parts of your brain (the PFC) to determine whether the input is a fact or a thought—and whether that thought is *actually* true or just *feels* true.

Have you ever seen pieces of candy progressing down a conveyor belt? Imagine you have the job of wrapping each piece in a little paper. When things are slow, you confidently wrap the candies and send them on their way. As the equipment gains speed, you are unable to keep up, and the candies end up everywhere except where they should be.

Your primitive brain works in much the same way. When your brain has too many, or very difficult, thoughts to process, you can lose the ability to analyze them rationally. It doesn't care whether something is true or not; it is just trying to help you survive in the moment. When your brain is in "survival mode," it processes information as fast as possible—*not as efficiently as possible*.

Your primitive brain prioritizes survival strategies, such as seeking comfort or food, over assessing the validity of your thoughts. In survival mode, you may be more likely to make



decisions based on faulty information than on reality. This is the number one reason why it is important to question the stories your brain tells you in difficult or stressful moments.

### **Final Thoughts**

Understanding your primitive brain helps you recognize when it's in control and question the stories it tells you in stressful moments. By acknowledging its role, you can begin to shift from survival mode into a space where rational thinking and intentional choices are possible. This is an essential skill as you navigate the weight of grief, possessions, and life after loss.

## 8. Home Creates Its Own Kind of Overwhelm

It's no wonder that sorting through your loved one's possessions feels so overwhelming. It has the potential to meet every part of the definition of *overwhelm*! The process of organizing your home and doing "the big sort" is more than just a physical task—it's part of the outward, tangible expression of your grief. And that can cut deep.

Letting go of possessions often feels like letting go of a chapter in your life, forcing you to confront the finality of your loss. If their things are gone, then your brain might interpret that as confirmation that they are truly gone too.

Sorting through your loved one's belongings requires focus, determination, and endless decisions: what to keep, donate, repurpose, or let go. Each of these decisions demands your time, energy, and mental focus—resources that grief often depletes. This is why *decision fatigue* becomes a very real challenge during this process.

You might find yourself staring at an item, unable to decide its fate. It's not just about the object—it's about what it represents, the memories it holds, and the emotions it stirs. It's no wonder the process feels exhausting.

***Thought work: Which of these situations, if any, are factors in your current feelings around decluttering or sorting? What are***

*some things you can do to ease the pressure you might be feeling?*

## **When Letting Go Feels Impossible**

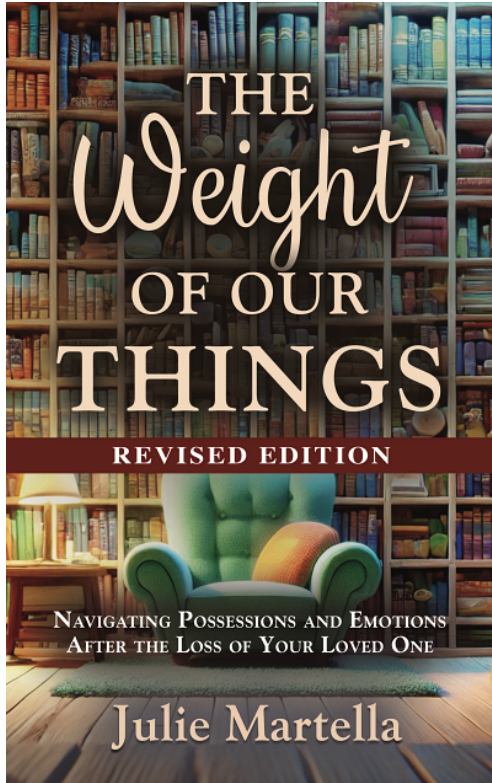
There may be times when you simply aren't ready to part with your loved one's belongings—and that's okay. For many, their possessions provide emotional comfort and connection. You might feel the weight of being the memory holder for children, grandchildren, or other family members, making it even harder to let go.

Remember, there are no hard and fast rules. If your loved one's items don't create clutter or intrude on your daily life, you can keep them.

There is no timeline for grief and no universal rulebook for navigating this process. The right time to let go—or to hold on—is whenever *you* are ready. Trust yourself to know what feels right and give yourself permission to move at your own pace.

## **Final Thoughts**

Sorting through a loved one's belongings is not a task to rush through. It's an emotional journey that is uniquely yours. Allow yourself the grace to move at your own pace, knowing that there is no right or wrong way to handle it. Trust that you will know when the time is right to take the next step and honor your emotions along the way.



*When a loved one dies, they often leave behind more than memories. They leave rooms filled with possessions, full of emotional weight. Here is your much needed companion to help answer the question, “What do I do with all the stuff?”*

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