

Things Of This World

By Melinda Blau

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My father died on Thanksgiving night. As I sat with family and friends over the next few days, my grief and sense of disbelief barely lessened.

Finally, to stave off my sadness, I got busy. My sister had helped my father move into his last apartment, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, when his health began to fail; now, we agreed, I would move his possessions out. I made more than a dozen phone calls to charities. "My father died," I said, each time holding back my tears, "and I know he would have wanted the contents of his apartment donated to someone who needs them."

I discovered, however, that giving things away in New York City is tricky — finding the right organization, speaking with the right person, offering the right donation. Indeed, most charities, tired of receiving loads of pure junk, wanted to inspect

My father's possessions find a life after his death.

the items before they would agree to pick them up. They could not use anything chipped, scratched or stained.

I wandered around my father's apartment, looking critically at things hadn't really seen in years. I was

shocked by the sparseness of the place, the threadbare couch, the cracks in the mirrored coffee table. I saw no vestiges of the well-appointed co-op on East End Avenue where he had lived with my mother, nor of the several penthouses where, divorced, he played as hard as he lived. Here, instead, were the trappings of old age and poor health — oxygen tank, wheelchair, portable toilet, walker, handrails.

"I'm really sorry," said Blanche at Housing Works, an AIDS thrift shop, regretting that the group wasn't allowed to re-use the medical supplies. But she promised to send someone the next day to check out the furnishings, except the bed. I had viewed my father's nearly new king-sized Craftmatic as one of the few valuable pieces, but the woman explained that only a few scattered halfway houses and shelters could use beds.

Worried that my other offerings would fail the inspection, I imagined my father's sofa piled on the street, like so many discarded couches I'd walked past before. I saw his clothing in garbage bags along with his Pottery Barn dishes — a Father's Day present when we, his children, realized that this once meticulous man had ceased to notice, or care about, cracks and chips.

A half-hour later, Blanche called again. "Jim from God's Love We Deliver just told me about a family that lost everything in a flood," she said. "The mother and father both have AIDS and they have two little children. They've all been sleeping on the floor. Can I give him your number?"

Jim called minutes later. He offered details about the family. The mother, in her early 30's, was a nurse, but was now ravaged with disease. Her husband was not as sick but had lost his job as a home health aide. Neither the 4-year-old nor the 5-year-old had H.I.V., but I winced as I imagined how devastated their young lives must be. Jim said they had nothing — they needed everything.

The next day he called back to say he had spoken to the parents. "The family couldn't be happier," Jim said. "The mother thinks it's some kind of Christmas miracle."

In less than 24 hours, he met me at the apartment with movers who had

donated their time. Harvey, the father with AIDS, arrived with them. He leaned on a cane as he made his way through my father's apartment, apologizing because his wife was too sick to be there to thank me in person.

When Harvey stood in the doorway to the bedroom, his mouth dropped. "This is perfect," he said, looking at the large bed. "My wife and I can sleep up there," he said, nodding toward the head of the bed, "and the babies down below." I told him there was also a pullout bed in the couch. He was overwhelmed. "That means the babies can have their own bed," he said.

Harvey's eyes brightened as he continued his slow walk throughout the apartment. The desk, the dining set, the lamps, the dresser, the 31-inch Sony Trinitron, the sheets and towels, the pots and pans, the Pottery Barn dishes, even the mirrored tissue boxes in the bathroom — Harvey was grateful for all of it. He declined only the sharp-edged coffee table out of fear for his children's safety.

Harvey was exactly my father's size — a slender 5 feet 8 inches tall. And, he pointed out, his wife, with whom he could share clothes, could also fit into the custom-made suits, jogging outfits, shirts, sweaters, pants and robes, which we gladly folded into cartons.

As the door closed behind Harvey and the last of the boxes, the emptiness of my father's apartment felt different from the way I had imagined it would. What one man left behind became another man's holiday miracle.

But Harvey's blessing was no less a blessing for me. He had rescued the last remnants of my father's life from obscurity. And for me a terrible ordeal was transformed into unexpected grace. □

Melinda Blau is the author of "Families Apart: Ten Keys to Successful Co-Parenting."