To the Editor:

The article by Marx, Solomon, and Miller, entitled “Gift Wrapping Ourselves: The Final Gift Exchange,” and the article by Ekerdt, Sergeant, Dingel, and Bowen, entitled “Household Disbandment in Later Life,” both appeared in the September 2004 issue of this Journal (59B, 5, 2004), and both articles focus on the decision-making process for those in later life who are downsizing their residences. Such household disbandment in later life requires that the things collected over a lifetime be evaluated to determine what will be retained. This evaluation process is often time intensive, costly, and, indeed, stressful. Valued material “stuff” defines the individual, provides memories, and may even have economic value; but space is limited. Objects that cannot be kept must either be given as gifts, sold, donated, or trashed, depending on the personal value of those objects to the individual and family or their economic value. Giving these valued objects to others becomes extremely important in the process of household disbandment because the giver creates the gift’s legacy for the gift’s recipient. Those disbanding objects find pleasure in achieving a “good fit” with another household for their belongings. Gift rejection in the final gift exchange can be particularly stressful (or hurtful) because it feels like personal rejection. The authors do a fine job of making these points clear.

I would argue that preplanning the exchanges, however, may buffer many of the stressors accompanying household disbandment because proactive adaptations, together with an understanding of an individual’s life course, may delay or minimize stress. (See Kahana and Kahana’s [2003] Preventive and Corrective Proactivity Model of Successful Aging.) One adaptive strategy is for the final gift exchange or disbandment to occur across several years rather than within a few months. Another is to encourage family members to participate in the disbandment process.

An unusual model for proactive household disbandment comes from my mother, an artist and a successfully aging individual. An only child, her childhood was on the road, when her parents became migrant workers during the Great Depression. Mom accumulated much “stuff” that she uses to define herself. Her “stuff” is important to her. Always proactive, she has labeled sentimentally or economically valued objects with the name of the intended recipient and informed the family members. A formal dinner might be set with “Buddy’s silver,” “Janice’s dishes,” and “Joy’s goblets” together with some good banter admonishing each other to “take care” of their respective items. Lately, Mom (aged 78) has begun actually distributing important objects. Ornaments that have hung on her Christmas trees now grace ours. These summers, she is sharing seeds she collected from “her grandmother’s” garden. Objects that are given come complete with their story and their link to the family history. Still living in her home of 50+ years, Mom is increasing her preparation in anticipation of a future household disbandment. This preparation will make the transition less stressful for all parties.

The research on later life household disbandment and gift giving suggests that a high number of decisions are often considered over a short period of time. The household disbandment decision-making process, thus, is ripe for stress. To the extent that gerontologists can determine factors involved in the household disbandment process, decision making can be structured so as to ameliorate stressors involved in moving. The benefits attained will serve not only the older individuals who are transitioning and making decisions but also the other family members who are involved. Rather than serving as a time to disconnect family members, the process of household disbandment could serve as a time to reconnect families and their family history.

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