

APPRAISING

The Existential Dimension

The professional who guides clients through the end of their material life

by Barbara Pickett MCA

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE OCCUPATION OF APPRAISER or Estate Sale Facilitator appears cut and dried. The Appraiser takes a scientific inventory, researches values, compiles a report and submits it to the client. In an Estate Sale the terms are agreed on, items are prepared for sale, sold in an appropriate manner and the monies disbursed. However, there is a dimension to this work that even professionals in the antique and collectible field do not consider which emerges when dealing with individuals, families and groups of people who are going through an emotionally difficult and often stressful life passage.

There are many reasons for seeking out an Appraiser or Estate Sale Facilitator which may include facing the recent or **impending death of a loved one**, coming to terms with **one's own mortality** and needing to tend to personal belongings, a move into an assisted living facility, dealing with the loss of a home after a severe financial reversal or simply a need to convert household belongings into cash.

The reasons one decides to become an Appraiser or Estate Sale Facilitator are also many. Some find it enables them to **fulfill a desire to help people** or they may have had a negative experience with their own family and choose to support others in the decision making processes so they will avoid

similar pitfalls. There are those individuals who come from trained religious, psychology or law enforcement backgrounds and who **wish to see clients treated fairly** after becoming familiar with the market, while others enter the profession simply because they envision the potential profit.

The connecting link between the individuals and professionals in this business is things. Personal belongings, furniture, artwork or special collections are the things which the client needs valued, distributed or sold and the things for which the professional trains themselves to be of service for through their acquired knowledge, training and skill.



The accumulation of things may be deliberate or happenstance. When we are younger the ownership of certain things appears to signify success, so we attempt to cultivate a particular lifestyle and then collect things which reflect success in this chosen lifestyle. We are all given things as gifts which seem "too special" for every day and end up stored in the back of the closet waiting for a suitable occasion. Or, we may develop an interest in art, period furniture, toys, figurines, musical instruments or other types of items which have historic or personal importance to us and we begin collecting things connected to this interest.

Correspondingly, we may choose to surround ourselves with material things in an effort to **alleviate loneliness**, elevate feelings of **self-worth**, remind us of people or events, or to serve a specific purpose. Often we are unable to dispose of the item after this purpose is accomplished "just in case" we need it again. Countless numbers of us have lived through periods of material or financial need and we feel comforted when surrounded by things.

The recurring theme here is that the

connections people hold to physical things are emotional and irrational. These things are no longer objects but receptacles overflowing with feelings of happiness or a reminder of a special time in their lives such as love that was bestowed upon them or the triumph in an embittered rivalry. Being forced to dispose of these things causes anxiety, dredges up old hurts and may trigger surprising and unexpected behavior.

Unexpected skills required

Over time, the Appraiser or Estate Sale Facilitator devises their own means for handling the various client situations which arise. It may be as simple as lending **a shoulder to cry on** for a **faceless voice sobbing** on the other end of the telephone line. Some of us see the various needs our clients have and compile a referral list of attorneys, real estate agents, psychologists, animal adoption groups, or medical and religious aid organizations. And of course, there are those who choose not to get involved in the interpersonal details, preferring to carry out a clean, professional business transaction. Whatever methods are chosen, as long as the client is treated as fairly as possible under the prevailing circumstances, one is free to take the path best suited to their individual temperament.

The most extreme estate sale case I have experienced was of the client who was nearing **death from pancreatic cancer**. She had amassed a designer clothing collection which spanned three decades, filling all the bedrooms and empty spaces in her home. She refused to succumb to her condition until she felt confident that her collection was going to the right place. It was arranged for the majority of the things to become part of the permanent collection in a local museum. The museum staff was upstairs packing the items they had chosen while I sat at her bedside, brushing her

hair out of her eyes and holding her hand, reassuring her that her things would be appreciated by the museum, students and the public and that it was OK for her to let go. She allowed herself to leave her body a few hours later, assured that her beloved collection was in the proper hands.

Problems with families

However, not all assignments go this smoothly, just ask the person running the next estate sale you attend! Families may sweep in the night before a sale and empty the house of the most valuable or in some cases, all of the items contracted to be sold, without paying the Estate Sale Facilitator. Clients have lain in wait outside their estate sale, chasing down customers as they leave with purchases and bought them back! Appraisal clients argue that their item is museum quality and the value needs to be increased or that the value needs to be decreased because it is the one thing they want out of the estate. There are countless possible combinations of these scenarios when grief, loss or simple greed colors the judgment of those involved.

What the job does to the appraiser

This profession changes all those who enter it in some manner. One person may decide it is too emotionally charged and return to a past profession, another may choose to start an auction company or consignment store in an effort to best serve their clients. Many find they are pointed in the direction of volunteering or seeking employment with Hospice or other organizations. Some, such as myself, after seeing the pain and confusion surrounding major health and life changes in their clients' lives choose to enter the field of Alternative Healing. The desire here is to provide a complement to allopathic care which often does not address mental/emotional or spiritual needs and to offer some respite from the real-world events surrounding the client.

Our clients and their things often have a great impact on us. Years ago, I had an appraisal client who raised Bonsai trees, loved falcons and was an artist who created and collected painted and sculpted birds. He was a very wise man and wanted his most valuable things appraised because he knew he did not have much time left. He enthusiastically gave an educational tour of his Bonsai, telling the life story of each plant. About a year later, his family called as they needed to hold his estate sale. This gentle man's persona stayed with me through the duration of the sale and even now I feel his spirit when I am walking in a garden or admiring a falcon hovering in the sky.

In addition to emotions, Legacy is another quality with which things are imbued. Personal Legacy is the foremost reason for accumulating things along with Family, Social, Cultural and Historic Legacy. Many envision themselves as caretakers of the past, preserving a precious thing, idea or event for future generations. A significant document or unique invention may be rescued from the dust bin, finding a safe haven until the one who will best appreciate it can be located.

The Legacy many of our clients leave us by means of their things is Strength of Spirit, Courage to face our mortality, a deeper appreciation of life, a desire to preserve part of the past for future generations and an appreciation of things as more than what they appear to be.

The Legacy that Appraisers and Estate Sale Facilitators can hope to leave behind when helping our clients value or dispose of their things is Compassion, Trust and the alleviation of some degree of suffering for those we came into contact with as they navigated through a difficult life passage.

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