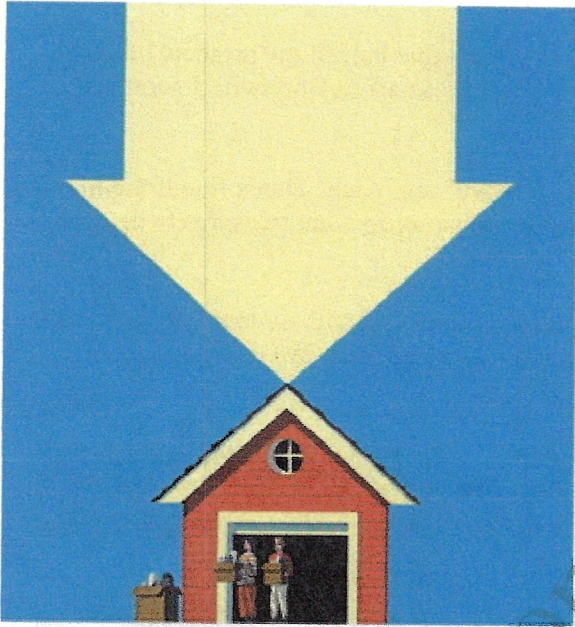


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We eventually will need to move to a smaller living space.



PAUL BLOW FOR WSJ

Unexpected Joys Come Alongside Downsizing

A slow and steady approach allows for basking in memories

BY KAREN KREIDER YODER AND STEPHEN KREIDER YODER

Stephen Kreider Yoder, 68 years old, a longtime Wall Street Journal editor, joined his wife, Karen Kreider Yoder, 69, in retirement in 2022. In their Retirement Rookies column, they chronicle some of the issues they are dealing with early in retirement.

Karen

“Do you know where this came from?” I asked Steve after pulling an electric juicer from the back of a kitchen cabinet.

He didn’t. “Do you need it?” He didn’t. We ask these questions a lot these days. The answer to the second one is most frequently, “Nope, don’t need it.”

Since retiring, we have settled into a slow and steady approach to downsizing, habitually scrutinizing drawers and closets and storage boxes anytime we open them, looking around rooms for little things to pass along.

I put the juicer on the sidewalk at the bottom of our stoop with a “Free” sign. It was gone in an hour. Same with a set of ice-cube trays, a ceramic bowl, a hand-thrown mug and a vaporizer. Each departure left behind a little puff of joy, as if it had lifted a tiny burden.

We have a big house, so there isn’t urgent pressure to pitch things. But we eventually will need to move to smaller quarters, so why not start now, take our time?

The juicer met its fate because we are repainting our kitchen cabinets this summer. Rather than empty the contents only to return them, I thought, “downsizing opportunity!” I took the small appliances from the cupboards, then mugs and bowls. Several ended on the sidewalk. I pulled out the hot pads and discarded half. Now the drawer closes easily.

My doctor told me not to bike early this summer while recovering from elbow surgery. Rather than bemoan the hours of cycling I was missing, I again thought “downsizing opportunity!” I poked in drawers, filing cabinets and closets. From the bathroom, I pulled out a ceramic planter and a mini rubber ducky. Off to the curb. Gone in minutes.

A pile of mending projects in my sewing room filled a shelf. So I started in—until I realized that half of the projects I didn’t want anymore. I repaired Steve’s bicycle knickers for a coming tour but sent a little black dress off to Goodwill. I soon had cleared a shelf and was back to sewing happily.

Gradual downsizing isn’t for everyone. Some acquaintances take the “I’ll wait until I move” approach. That’s fine if the move is methodical, not fine if a health crisis turns it into a fire drill, forcing quick and painful decisions on what treasures to discard without a proper farewell.

Others use a campaign model, attacking the kitchen one week, clothes another, holiday decorations still another. We’ve tried a downsizing-surge approach, intending to spend days in the storage room, say, to make major headway. We then lost steam, leaving a lingering sense of dread over the unfinished business.

Our slow approach lets me bask in the memories I find even in a little thing—and then let the object go. Reading through my childhood letters this summer while cleaning out my files, I came upon a birthday card that the four of us older siblings had written, apparently to Grandfather. It was complete with our signatures and an anatomically incorrect line-drawing of our dog, Mittens, peeing.

I sent it to our youngest sister for her 60th birthday from the rest of us. A precious memory became a new gift to her, inspiring laughter and new memories.

Slow-and-steady doesn’t work as well for furniture, which we need until we move. So I’m making a list with each piece’s eventual fate. When the time comes, we will give the antique Japanese *tansu* cabinets to our boys, donate the piano to the local outdoor-piano program, send the corded chairs to Goodwill, and put the small hexagonal inlaid table on the sidewalk where we found it. I don’t need to think about furniture again until then. In an idle moment, I went through my bag of yarn. Why was I saving all these skeins? I held them and thought back to my intent to turn the hand-spun yarn into knitted pincushions.

Then I tossed them in a bag and set them at the bottom of the stoop. Gone within a few hours, leaving that puff of joy.

Steve

I was startled for a moment when I opened my top desk drawer and saw the contents. A red paisley handkerchief, nothing more.

Oh, right, I recalled, I’m a neatnik now.

I had finally finished culling my desk’s contents the day before, after a year of going through it drawer-by-drawer, a few minutes at a time. Inside, it was now spare and organized.

My new fastidiousness is a surprise side effect of postretirement downsizing. As Karen and I triage our possessions, I have discovered the joys of life in a tidy house.

My desk now holds only stuff I actively use during a typical month, and I keep the top uncluttered. I’ve thinned out my closet mostly to clothes, shoes and luggage I use during a year’s time. The garage shelves hold boxes of stuff I remotely expect to use within a few months or can’t easily buy.

I used to be a bit of a slob, my friends and family will attest.

As evidence, Karen pulls out an old photo of my newsroom cubicle with its remarkable mounds of documents, folders, newspapers and books on every horizontal surface. I used to leave my workshop so messy that our engineering-major son would spend a day organizing it whenever he came home from college. I grew a little neater as I aged, especially during Covid, but was never what anyone would call fastidious.

Then a funny thing happened after I retired and began winnowing my stuff in earnest: The resulting tidiness begot more tidiness. As I thinned out the garage shelves—recycling old paint, listing plumbing supplies on Craigslist’s “free stuff” section—the shelves grew neater. Looking at them made me want to cull still more.

I devised a game: Every day I set foot in the garage, I needed to get rid of one thing on the shelves before I could enter the workshop to tinker.

In the workshop, I enforced another rule: Clean up every day. I now put away all tools and tidy the workbench when I’m done for the day, even if I expect to come back to a project. I often shop-vac the floor at day’s end.

It is still a pleasant surprise when I open the door to my shop or office or closet to find a tidy workbench or desk—or to see the actual closet floor. Tidiness also helps keep me from losing things. I’m starting to forget where I left the house key, my iPhone or the $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch Craftsman ratchet wrench—unless I stick to my rule of putting everything in its place.

And perhaps the best part of all: Nobody can call me a slob again—if I don’t backslide.

Read previous columns at

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