

About the stuff

By [L. Gail Irwin](#)

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About a week after my mother-in-law died, I went by her house to borrow her sieve. Every year, my daughter and I borrow grandma's sieve to make applesauce. Then we take some applesauce back to her. I was hoping the sieve was still there. I knew my mother-in-law was gone, but I wanted to find the sieve. Maybe it was still in the house. Or maybe one of the children had taken it home in their efficient whisking away of loose belongings.

But the house was shuttered and locked. So instead, I sat in the car and had my first big cry. Every time I thought of that sieve, and all the family memories attached to the making of fall applesauce, I cried a little more. I don't need to keep the sieve. I just want to touch it.

I remember one of my first interviews with a woman who, after three years, was still unable to resolve her grief about her church closing. "They've locked the church and I don't know what they did with all the stuff," she said to me plaintively. The "stuff" she was referring to was all those holy objects she had attached meaning and memories to over many years as a church member: the chalice and patin, the baptismal font and cross, the china set used for stewardship dinners and the faded illustrations hanging on the Sunday School walls. Her unresolved grief was so great she couldn't drive through her own hometown any more, because she had to pass the empty church building.

As it turns out, the stuff matters. We don't want it to matter; after all, it's only "stuff". But it matters. The holy objects are vessels of meaning.

"They have taken away my Lord," Mary said to the angels, in tears, "and I don't know where they have put him." (John 20:13) She knew Jesus was dead. But she still needed something to touch, to remember him by.

Whatever you do, if you're closing a church or a household or ending the ministry of the Women's Guild or completing any beautiful human effort, don't just whisk away the stuff. Lay it all out and let people touch it, lift it up and tell stories about it. Let everyone take a little piece of the past home with them.

The things we can touch do matter. That's why Jesus came with a body.

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