

View

Edit

Revisions

Workflow



From our sponsors :



## I Got Rid of My Clutter by Taking It to Court

Despite pleas for mercy, how I determined what stays and goes

posted by John Stark, July 12, 2013 [More by this author](#)



John Stark is the articles editor of Next Avenue. Follow John on Twitter [@jrstark](#).



Thinkstock

Lately, I feel like Judge Judy.

My house has become a courtroom. Before me are numerous objects that I have found guilty of cluttering up my life. I have no need for them.

Since I'm in the process of moving, I reasoned that this is the best time to lighten my load. But weighing whether to chuck or not to chuck has been a trial. So many of my things come with emotional baggage.

To present my case, I have selected seven objects whose fates I've recently had to decide, as impartially as I could. Before I pronounced sentence, I listened to their pleas — the guilt-

inducing words they said with the hope of remaining in my permanent custody.

### My Mother's High School Diploma

**The Plea** "You're going to toss me in a garbage can? Send me off to some landfill? I can't believe a son could be so heartless. I remember when I was handed to your mom. She was 17 years old. Look how small I am. I take up no room in a shoebox. You won't know I'm there."

**The Sentence** I had to assure myself that a piece of parchment is not my late mother. I reasoned that she no longer needs proof that she graduated from high school. The diploma's final argument — "You won't know I'm there" — might sound compelling. But to me that was the best reason to get rid of it. I won't know it's there because I'll never have reason to look at again. Bailiff, take it away.

([MORE: Why You Should Live Like You're Moving Tomorrow](#))

### Small German Desk

**The Plea** "Remember when you bought me in Soho 20 years ago? You fell in love with me at first sight. But you failed to treat me with the respect my price tag commanded. I'd be at Sotheby's instead of staring down a thrift shop if it weren't for my chipped laminate top. Now that I'm damaged goods, you want to say *auf wiedersehen*. The nerve! Hey, check out my tapered steel legs. They still turn heads."

**The Sentence** Furniture repairers have told me over the years that the broken desktop can't be fixed. Still, the desk's pleas for mercy motivated me to give it one last shot. I found, through friends of friends, an artist who works in laminate. I summoned him to my house to render an expert opinion. "There's nothing I — or anyone else — can do," he concluded after a careful examination of the evidence.

But then inspiration voiced an objection and demanded to be heard.

I blurted out the words: "Is it possible that you could replace the old top with a new one made of brushed steel? It would be more durable, and more in keeping with the desk's industrial-style design."

The artist hesitated before answering. "Yes," he finally replied, "I could absolutely do that." The desk is now at his studio. I don't know what its rehab is going to cost me, and I don't care. The desk will be with me for a very long time.

### **Polynesian Tapa Cloths**

**The Plea** "Your father brought us back from Fiji after World War II. We were handmade from the bark of trees. Your dad gave us to you as a keepsake when you were in your 20s. You've hauled us around with you ever since. I know we're difficult to display, and that we fight with other décors. But we still have dreams that one day you'll open a tiki bar. When you do, we're here for you."

**The Sentence:** I had an agonizing decision to make. The tapa cloths weren't valuable enough to go to a museum, nor were they appropriate for a junk store. I was ready to postpone the sentencing indefinitely, but then force majeure intervened. One night while I was in bed, a tropical-force storm flooded my basement. The next morning I found the tapa cloths had drowned in their temporary holding cell, which was a cardboard box. Their soggy bodies disintegrated when I picked them up. All I could say to them was "ni sa moce," which in Fijian means good-bye forever.

(**MORE:** [5 Best Ways to Lose the Clutter for Keeps](#))

### **Retro Kitchen Chairs**

**The Plea** "You acquired the four of us in 1992 just after buying your first house, which was a 1950s rancher. Our red vinyl seats with the white banding haven't faded, and our chrome frames are still shiny. You'll never be able to replace us. If a dealer buys us, he'll probably break us up. No one will ever love us like you do."

**The Sentence** The reason the chairs look brand new is precisely why I needed to unload them. I long ago sold the rancher. I keep taking the chairs with me, even though I don't use them. Since moving to Minneapolis two years ago, they've been in my basement. Before that, they were in my attic in Boston for 14 years.

I put the chairs on Craigslist and got a response within minutes. A woman named Pam bought the whole set for \$100. "My family has a cabin on a lake," she told me. "I've been looking for chairs like this for a year. We have a vintage kitchen table in the breakfast nook. These chairs will go beautifully with it. They'll get a lot of use. I just love them and so will my husband."

### **Mahogany Jewelry Box With Inlaid Teak**

**The Plea** "You discovered me in your mother's cedar chest after she died. I have quite a history. Your great-grandmother brought me to Brooklyn from Munich. Just look what you found inside me: Vintage costume jewelry, a lady's fan and assorted bric-a-brac. If you don't want to keep me, at least hand me down to your daughter or nieces."

**The Sentence** The jewelry box had me stumped: I don't have a daughter or nieces. I needed another opinion. So I consulted my co-worker, Suzanne Gerber. "Why does it have to go to a blood relative?" she asked. She was right. The jewelry box's argument that it stay in the family was irrelevant. I ruled that it would go to the adopted daughters of a friend of mine. Like my great-grandmother, they too are immigrants who crossed an ocean to get here.

(**MORE:** [Why You Shouldn't Get Rid of Old Photos](#))

### **Primitive Country Hutch**

**The Plea** "I'm the first thing people notice when they enter your house. Need I say more?"

**The Sentence** My decision to sell it was not popular among my friends. They said I gave the hutch away. I originally paid \$300 for it; a store owner gave me only \$100. But the shipping costs would have been \$200, so I broke even! I denied the hutch's motion to appeal on grounds that I needed to move on to a more contemporary look.

### **'The Story of Civilization'**

**The Plea** “How smart I make you look — all 11 bound volumes of me, from *The Life of Greece* to *The Age of Faith*. I’ve been a staple of your living room bookshelf for decades. Will and Ariel Durant spent 40 years compiling me. I’m not even offended that you never read me — no one else has either. Still, how vapid your bookshelf will look without me.”

**The Sentence** Movers charge by weight. Books are the heaviest objects that people bring with them. Even if I could transport them for free, I wouldn’t be lightening my load. I decided to donate them to the Foundation for American Veterans. The nonprofit organization sent a truck to pick them up. I’m sure that if the Durants were still alive and writing, their next volume would be *The Age of Paperless*.

Those were seven of my difficult decisions. I have many more to make before the moving van gets here in a month. To the guilty parties cluttering my life: You’ve meant a lot to me. I’ll do my best to hand down my sentences with prudence and due care.

I’m sure my mother’s diploma is still holding out hopes for a last-minute stay. The next garbage truck pickup is tomorrow.

***Like this article? Sign up for Next Avenue's weekly newsletter to get more fascinating articles and blogs about work, finance and lifestyle issues geared to a 50+ audience.***