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Arlington Street Church
2 June, 2013

Stuff

In 2010, a Chicago couple was found buried alive under years of possessions.”¹ Last month, hoarding was officially recognized as a distinct disorder among obsessive-compulsive illnesses.² Neither mere “cluttering or insatiable collecting,” hoarding is a mental illness characterized by “the self-soothing need to acquire, coupled with a paralyzing inability to discard.” Afflicting three to five percent of Americans, hoarding is a serious public health hazard, putting those who suffer with it as well as their immediate neighbors at risk “by creating perfect conditions for explosive house fires and infestations of vermin and disease....”³

I’m pretty sure that, like most mental illness, hoarding grows on my family tree. I was really young, but I can remember visiting a great-great aunt with my grandmother, and my grandmother’s distress at the catastrophic living conditions. Nana was the boss of the world, but she was really undone. I think the house was condemned after my great-great auntie died. It all really impressed me.

Maybe that did it, or maybe it was falling in love with backpacking – hiking into the wilderness carrying everything you need but nothing more – or maybe it was living in a Zen temple, where your entire personal space is the size of the two-foot square cushion on which you sit. Who knows what did it, but I have a pretty thin relationship with stuff.

On the other hand, I love beautiful things. I love nice pens, and ceramics, and musical instruments. It would take me a long time to enumerate all the beautiful things I love. My favorite seventh birthday

¹ Jan Hoffman, “Task Force Offers Hoarders a Way to Dig Out,” *New York Times*, 5/26/13. Please see nytimes.com/2013/05/27/health/when-hoarding-morphs-into-a-safety-hazard.html?emc=eta1&_r=0

² From the *DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders)*

³ Jan Hoffman, *op cit*

present was a gyroscope from the Museum of Science. During my party, my baby sister, in one of her storied tantrums, stomped on it and destroyed it. She also opened up my brand new box of Crayola Crayons – the sixty-four pack with the built-in sharpener – and snapped every last one in half. I was heartbroken.

When I was ten years old, my friend Daphne Frankenthal’s house burned to the ground in the middle of the night. The whole family got out alive, and Daphne’s father grabbed the family Bible. The Bible and their pajamas were all that was left of their stuff. The fifth grade girls lent Daphne our clothes ‘til her mom could buy her new ones. I remember thinking, O, that’s Ann’s skirt. That’s Cynthia’s sweater. I remember thinking that Daphne didn’t look like Daphne anymore; who are we without our stuff?

My relationship to stuff may be thin, but note that the memories and feelings about these things are still sharp.

It’s interesting to talk about our relationship to stuff. There are those of us who grew up without much and then, as adults, have access to an excess. Some of us indulge or over-indulge, some guiltily and some guiltlessly. There are those who grew up with a lot – maybe a lot of stuff but not so much love. There are those who aspire to acquire, and those who are involuntarily downwardly mobile. The permutations in these relationships are seemingly endless.

The fact is, though, that all of us have stuff, and what I most want to share today is that *our relationship to our possessions could almost certainly stand some attention.*

Do we own our possessions, or do our possessions own us?

Are we careful or careless with our things?

Is there a balance between attachment and detachment,
between loving our stuff and not identifying with it?

Our relationship to our stuff can be made conscious and lifted up; it can deepen; it can be healed.

Author Andre Dubus⁴ II writes, “On Tuesdays when I make lunch for my girls, I focus on this: the sandwiches are sacraments.... And each motion is a sacrament, this holding of plastic bags, of knives, of bread, of cutting

⁴ Said “Dub-BYOOSE;” it rhymes with “goose”

board, ... this spreading of mustard on bread, this trimming of [Swiss cheese, of cheddar⁵]. All sacraments, as putting the lunches into a zippered book bag is, and [wheeling] down my six ramps to my car is. I drive on the highway, to the girls' town, to their school, and this is not simply a transition; it is my love moving by car from a place where my girls are not to a place where they are; even if I do not feel or acknowledge it, this is a sacrament. If I remember it, then I feel it too. Feeling it does not always mean that I am a happy man driving in traffic; it simply means that I know what I am doing in the presence of G*d.”⁶

It is not a great leap from “sandwiches are sacraments” to “love is a sacrament;” not so hard to open to the possibility that we live in the presence of the holy. *How would it change our lives to engage a spiritual practice of right relations with our stuff?*

Mary Ann and Frederic Brussat, co-authors of *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, write, “In the world’s wisdom traditions ... there is a rich and soulful emphasis ... on respecting inanimate objects. Many Christians see the sacramental value of *things* as signs of G*d’s presence; Jewish mystics speak of the divine spark that resides in everything; Hindus take great pleasure in ordinary objects as manifestations of Brahman; Sufis kiss cups and musical instruments as part of their [spirituality].... [Both] Native Americans and Confucians [demonstrate respect and] courtesy for all things....

“Somehow in the push and shove of our days,” the Brussats continue, “we have lost this reverence for possessions.... [We] hear about the over-emphasis [on] materialism in modern societies – ... a valid ethical critique – but there is ... another perspective.... [Former Catholic monk and psychotherapist] Thomas Moore ... [is an advocate of a practice he calls] ‘soulful materialism,’ [a practice] of appreciating and cherishing our things.” Jesuit priest and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin, challenges us “to reframe our ideas and habits in light of the recognition that [quote] ‘things have their within.’”^{7, 8}

⁵ Andre Debus wrote “liverwurst, of ham,” but I couldn’t bring myself to say it

⁶ Andre Dubus, *Meditations from a Movable Chair*

⁷ Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, *Handle Your Things With Care*. Please see spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/features.php?id=22814

⁸ Rainer Maria “Rilke, considered one of the greatest lyric poets of modern Germany, ... created [what is known as] the ‘object poem,’” which looks at things as if for the first time,

“Thing apartheid” is the word for the soulless practice of treating things “merely as resources to be exploited and discarded.”⁹ Let’s ask ourselves,

- * How are the ways I relate to my stuff similar to or different from the ways I relate to people and animals and the earth?
- * Is the way I care for my possessions reflected in how I care for myself?

Mystics across religious traditions report what has been called the mystical vision: not seeing things as they appear, but seeing things as they truly are. “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly,” said the Fox to the Little Prince. “What is essential is invisible to the eye.” To see truly is to look not with the eyes, but from within, with the heart, and the soul. Everyone and everything changes under the gaze of devotion.

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This sermon really began before I read that the new DSM-5 had included hoarding in its list of mental illnesses. It began before I thought about my relationship to my stuff, and wanted to invite you to do the same. It began with a one minute and twenty-nine second youtube video. When I saw it, I saw the power of aligning the way we treat inanimate objects with the way we treat living beings. This is about integrity: the spiritual practice of right relations with everything.

In a short sentence, the backstory of the youtube video is that when Fabian gets on a bus, the seat next to him often stays empty. I don't need to tell you anything else about Fabian; you know what I mean.

Pro Infirmis, a Swiss film company, decided to conduct an experiment. Fabian puts on a huge bear costume – a sweet cross between, say, Yogi and Smoky – and stands in the center of a crowded village square. The camera rolls. Fabian opens his bear-arms a little, inviting a hug. The very first person to approach him is a small child – perhaps two years old.

purely and clearly. He wrote, “The incomparable value of these rediscovered Things lies in the fact that you can look at them as if they were completely unknown. No one knows what their intention is and ... no subject matter is attached to them, no irrelevant voice interrupts the silence of their concentrated reality...” (According to Stephanie Dowrick, author of *In the Company of Rilke*, the phrase “The silence of their concentrated reality” appears in a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé. I found it in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poetry*, p. 303)

⁹ Thanks to physician and author Larry Dossey

And then the cascade begins: a teenage boy, a young woman, a woman with her dog all move in for a hug. Young boys, a big group of young teenage girls, and an elderly gentleman, who remains in the embrace for a long time: gentle hugs, sideways hugs, hugs from behind, big bear hugs. And everyone – everyone – is smiling.

At the close of the experiment, Fabian removes the giant bear head, revealing his crooked face. The words print out across the screen, “Do we need to disguise ourselves to get closer?”¹⁰

In the final frames, Fabian ambles away, bear head in hand. Superimposed on his retreating form is the directive, “Get closer.”

Beloved spiritual companions, it is not a great leap from “sandwiches are sacraments” to “love is a sacrament;” not so hard to open to the possibility that we live in the presence of the holy.

Everything – absolutely everything – is connected.

What is essential is invisible to the eye.

How would it change our lives

to engage a spiritual practice of right relations with our stuff?

The gaze of devotion could change the world.

Let’s get closer.

¹⁰Jong von Matt/Limmat: Pro Infirmis, *Get Closer*, at youtube.com/watch?v=zFWr-CKMWGY