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## **Clearing the Spiritual Path**

Like many members of her generation, my grandmother’s response to the Great Depression was to save everything. And the money was under the mattress, though there was no security blanket big enough. It didn’t make her happy – she fussed about wanting a tidy house – but she couldn’t seem to part with anything. Even the wax paper wrappers from inside empty cold cereal boxes were removed to wrap up leftovers. Her refrigerator was a scary place.

“In March of 1947, the infamous Collyer brothers died in their Harlem brownstone, trapped beneath 140 tons of detritus. The death and the home itself were so gruesome that East Coast firefighters ... still use the term “Collyers’ Mansion” to indicate a home that’s dangerously full of flammable stuff,”<sup>1</sup> now known to be the cause of six percent of all deaths by house fires.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible tells us that greed is the root of all evil;<sup>3</sup> medieval Christians viewed *avarice* as the “most offensive to the spirit of love.” The fourth circle of hell in Dante’s *Inferno* is occupied, in part, by hoarders: those who stockpiled their fortunes greedily and insatiably, sharing nothing.<sup>4</sup>

Today we know that hoarding is a *condition* to be treated, not punished. It wasn’t officially studied until 1993; Smith College professor Randy Frost named it, and it turns out that five percent of Americans – nearly 15 million people – suffer from hoarding disorder, characterized by “the excessive acquisition of things that appear to be of little or no value; the inability to discard possessions; and the disorganization of those possessions, which

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<sup>1</sup> Bonnie Tsui, “Why Do You Hoard?” in *Pacific Standard*, 4/29/13. Please see [psagmag.com/health/hoarding-science-55196](http://psagmag.com/health/hoarding-science-55196)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 6:10

<sup>4</sup> [danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/circle4.html](http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/circle4.html)

clutter up living spaces and make them impossible to use for their intended purpose.”<sup>5</sup> In 2011, Randy Frost co-authored a book called *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*; and that May, *hoarding* finally earned its own category in the fifth edition of the diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

Treatments for hoarding are still primitive. The best I’ve seen started with completely removing hoarders from their homes – usually by a kind of trickery – and though they have, in every case, felt *relieved*, it wasn’t at all clear to me that their underlying soul sickness had been addressed.

A key difference between hoarding and being a collector is in the way in which the stuff is displayed. The hoarder doesn’t display; it’s all in disarray. But that doesn’t let the collector – often affectionately called a packrat – off the hook for living a life drowning in possessions. I’ve been ruminating about this uniquely developed-world affliction: the disease – the spiritual affliction – of too much-ness.

“Seventy percent of home-owning Americans cannot park cars in their garages because there’s too much stuff. One in ten has a storage unit.”<sup>6</sup> Hoarders need compassion and help; packrats need a spiritual prescription – a soul remedy – to get out from under the weight of stuff. That means cleaning up our act, physically, but also clearing up mentally, freeing up emotionally, and deepening spiritually.

There’s *stuff* between us and happiness – the external manifestation of our inner clutter – but stuff is not just stuff. Business coach Sue Kearney writes, “What else can clutter look like? Projects and dreams swirling around in [our heads], unstarted or incomplete; tolerations in [our lives; in other words, unhealthy or unfulfilling people and situations we need to stop putting up with]; ... addictive behaviors; [and, in general,] victim thoughts and mental chaos.

“Clutter,” she says, “... has a negative impact on our energy, our attitude, and our effectiveness.” Piled-up stuff, including unsatisfying life circumstances, can all be addressed with decluttering. Decluttering is a spiritual practice, an accelerant to clearing the spiritual path and lightening

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<sup>5</sup> Bonnie Tsui, *op cit*

<sup>6</sup> Sandra Stark, Peer-Led Hoarding Response Team, Mental Health Association of San Francisco, in Bonnie Tsui, *op cit*

up for serenity, creativity, and joy. Nineteenth century textile artist and writer William Morris wrote, "... I determined to do no less than to transform the world with Beauty. If I have succeeded in some small way, if only in one small corner of the world, amongst the men and women I love, then I shall count myself blessed, and blessed, and blessed, and the work goes on."<sup>7</sup>

William Morris also said, "The greatest foe to art is luxury. Art cannot live in its atmosphere.... If you want a golden rule that will fit everybody, this is it: Have nothing in your [house] that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful."<sup>8</sup>

Books and websites can provide the how-to when it comes to decluttering actual stuff. Marie Kondo is a sensation; her book is *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying-Up*. Every tidy person has a slant on it; the five best directives I've heard are to

1. stop the flow of stuff coming in – including unwanted junk mail and email;
2. encourage non-material gift-giving;
3. make a decision not to keep things out of guilt, especially when we can practice generosity;
4. understand that every time we let go, we build the muscle of surrender, meaning surrendering to a life of freedom; and, my favorite,
5. Do Not Waste Your Life On Clutter.<sup>9</sup>

All the various ways of clearing the spiritual path lead to the same open vista.

As it turns out, the state of our souls is directly related to the state of our homes.<sup>10</sup> As a reminder, here is 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian mystic, Rumi. Do you have it memorized, yet?!

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<sup>7</sup> As quoted in Jan Marsh, *William Morris & Red House*, p. 65

<sup>8</sup> William Morris, "The Beauty of Life," a lecture before the Birmingham [England] Society of Arts and School of Design, 2/19/1880. This speech was later published in *Hopes and Fears for Art: Five Lectures Delivered in Birmingham, London, and Nottingham, 1878*.

<sup>9</sup> Colleen Madsen, *365 Less [sic] Things*, reposted as *10 Decluttering Principles to Help Anyone Clear the Clutter* at [BecomingMinimalist.com](http://BecomingMinimalist.com)

<sup>10</sup> Kim Wolinski, "Is Clutter Sabotaging Your Spiritual Life?" [bellaspark.com/articles/entry/is-clutter-sabotaging-your-spiritual-life/](http://bellaspark.com/articles/entry/is-clutter-sabotaging-your-spiritual-life/)

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
[They] may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.<sup>11</sup>

Kim Wolinski, the social worker known as Dr. DeClutter, is the author of *Burn Your House Down!*<sup>12</sup> In a piece called “Is Clutter Sabotaging Your Spiritual Life?” She writes, “G.O.D... stands for Get Over Distractions. We cannot quiet our minds enough to stay close to G\*d, Spirit, ... and our Higher Self when we are distracted by ... unimportant mind chatter,” what Buddhists call monkey mind. “We have over 60,000 thoughts a day, and 75 percent of them are the same thoughts we’ve had for days, months, years....”

“We can declutter our thoughts [as well as our homes].... When our focus is diverted ... to disorganization and clutter, we are cut off from our connection to Spirit. ...[Distractions] drag us into the past and ... away from the present, where ... our purpose and joy reside....”

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<sup>11</sup> Rumi, *The Guest House*, translation by Coleman Barks

<sup>12</sup> Another of Kim Wolinsky’s books with another great title: *Letting Go With All Your Might*

“[A] clear mind [is free] of fear, worry, guilt, ... jealousy ... resentment. When [our] lives are free of clutter, it becomes much easier to fully experience ... stillness ... intuition, ... wisdom, gratitude, ... joy ... [and] peace of mind... When [clutter and chaos] – inside and out – pull [us] off center, these spiritual qualities can be blocked.... [*Undistracted*, we can serve; express] ... compassion and generosity; and [appreciate] the ordinary as extraordinary....”<sup>13</sup>

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As the time for Spring cleaning gives way to summer, I invite you to join me in clearing out for some new delight with the spiritual practice of G.O.D: Get Over Distractions. G\*d is in the details. Let’s engage our guests, as Rumi names them, see what hospitality we have to offer them, and, when it’s time, suggest they find new lodgings. Dr. DeClutter concludes, “Make room for G\*d, ... room for Spirit.... [Move] stuff, move energy ... to become ... more open, to allow room.... [We’ll] find not only [our] things, but ... [ourselves]!”<sup>14</sup>

Beloved spiritual companions,

Let us take to heart the spiritual affliction of too much-ness,  
and seek to treat it with a soul remedy.

Do Not Waste Your Life On Clutter.

Let’s set to cleaning up our act, physically;  
and also to clearing up mentally,  
freeing up emotionally,  
and deepening spiritually.

Let’s clear the spiritual path and transform the world  
with beauty, service, compassion and generosity,  
appreciating the ordinary as extraordinary.

May we so count ourselves  
blessed, and blessed, and blessed.

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<sup>13</sup> Kim Wolinski, *op cit*

<sup>14</sup> Kim Wolinski, *op cit*