



Clutter

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When our ancestors lived in caves, every tool was a prized possession. Furs for comfort and drawings to decorate the cave were difficult to come by. They were passed down from generation to generation.

Later, when human productivity made the goods of the world readily available, our grandparents became collectors. Growing control over nature enabled them to stockpile everything imaginable, converting their homes into storage units.

Some claim this was in response to the tough times of the Great Depression. Others attribute it to smart shopping: buying on sale is a great saving, even if you never use the item.

The important idea is that the twenty-eighth sweater and the 5-pound Ketchup bottle are there, ready to be used ... if, that is, they can be found. “You never know when it’ll come in handy” is a great justification if what you look for is not lost in the clutter.

We feel it impossible to discard perfectly usable clothing even if we have no intention of ever using it. Surely, there is nothing wrong with keeping food that is only a few months past the expiration date. And though we have no interest in the second treadmill a friend wants to give away, we’ll manage to find a place for it.

There is always room for the next coffee table and, after a good sale, the clothes in the closets just have to be compressed a little more. Eventually, the stuff we collect invades all rooms and peaks out from under the beds.

The moment of truth comes when we have to move. The death of a loved one or a divorce reveals the momentousness of the collection. Every item has memories attached, everything cries to be preserved. Discarding anything feels like losing a friend.

Is there a solution? Only one as radical as surgery is for cancer. Take ten items you cannot live without. Leave everything in place and get a couple of friends to bring their friends to carry away whatever they want. What is left can go to charity.

What we value says a lot about who we are. Look over the ten objects you kept. What do they say about you?

Discussion Questions on John Lachs's "Clutter"

By Caroline A. Buchanan, Derek Daskalakes, Erik Jarvis, James William Lincoln, and Eric Thomas Weber

- (1) What counts as clutter?
- (2) Why do we have so much stuff, when we do?
- (3) Why is it so hard to let go of things from our past?
- (4) What does it mean to throw something away or to give things away, in contrast with choosing to keep things?
- (5) Why do we sometimes experience loss when we choose to discard or give away possessions?
- (6) Why do objects take on so much emotional power when they do?
- (7) Why do we become so attached to objects?
- (8) Why do people collect things?
- (9) Can the impulse behind "waste not, want not" cause us real problems?
- (10) Is it healthy when fear of scarcity motivates the accumulation of clutter?
- (11) Does an ascetic* lifestyle make people's lives better?

*Ascetic, *adj.*, characterized by or suggesting the practice of severe self-discipline and abstention from all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons.

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