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Conquering Clutter

By David Dudley, January & February 2007

We love stuff. We hate stuff. How did we get so much? And how can we ever dig out?

The thing that brought us nearly to blows was a brass chafing dish. It was tarnished and dusty, unearthed from a distant corner of the basement. I had never seen it before.

“What’s this?”

It was the wrong question. I didn’t really care what it was; I just wanted to know whether I could get rid of it, toss it in the back of the station wagon with all the rest of the broken, forgotten, unusable, or just useless objects that populated the home my mother had lovingly assembled over 30-odd years. In preparation for a long-overdue move to a smaller home, she and Dad—with my help—were “decluttering,” a mild and businesslike verb that doesn’t properly evoke the forces at work here. We were at war, engaged in a desperate guerrilla campaign against a faceless enemy that had insinuated itself into every crevice and nook. This was a clash, a struggle, a pitched battle with our stuff, and each other. The chafing dish would be our Waterloo.

Like everything, the dish came attached to a story: it was a wedding present from someone, now deceased, and was once used “all the time” at dinner parties of yore. I wasn’t really listening, because I had heard many such tales in the course of the decluttering, and the fate of the chafing dish had already been decided. It was pretty but pointless and had clearly warmed no meatballs in my lifetime, so I would toss it in the wagon for the next run down to the Salvation Army. But as she had so many times before, Mom dug in. She extolled the dish’s beauty and utility, and the kindness of the friend who bestowed it on her 45 years ago. And she insisted I would want it—even need it—someday.

The rarely used objects that clutter our lives are not really objects at all but symbols of our plans and untapped potential.

This defied all logic, just as it had for the giant punch bowl, the set of crockery shaped like waterfowl, the candelabra with the broken arm, and the peculiar vacuum cleaner that was designed to vacuum hot fireplace ash. I would never need them, because I did not have a life that involved punch parties or large amounts of wood burning and did not anticipate acquiring one. And I knew from bitter experience that there was probably another chafing dish lurking nearby, poised to emerge and replace its fallen comrade. (There were, in fact, two more.)

We fought, and things got ugly. I was trying to wipe out her life; she was losing her mind. The chafing dish went out the door, only to be rescued, a bit later, by my father. “Your mother,” he said gravely, “really wants this.” Defeated, I pulled the accursed thing out of the car and pondered what would become of it, and all it represented. I would have to take it to my house and consign it to my own basement in the hope of someday conjuring up a situation that required a chafing dish, before my own children discovered it and asked me what it was so they could throw it out.

We stood there in the driveway, the dish and I, and I looked back at the house, so dense with belongings it all but vibrated with anxiety. And I wondered how life had deposited my family at this point,

hostages to the bric-a-brac that once served us.

In Dante's *Inferno* there is a circle of Hell reserved for two warring armies, the Hoarders and the Wasters, who spend eternity rolling enormous boulders at each other on a desolate sun-baked plain. The boulders are actually diamonds and represent the possessions they had such unhealthy relationships with during their lives. "Why do you hoard?" the Wasters shout. "Why do you waste?" the Hoarders scream back. This repeats, endlessly, joint punishment for their respective sins.

The contemporary earthly equivalent of this infernal battlefield is the self-storage facility, the charmless metal sheds that sprout alongside interstates and in industrial parks across the country. All but unknown before 1970, such facilities now number 45,000 nationwide, representing slightly less than 2 billion square feet of rentable space filled with the excess material burden of Americans whose caches have outgrown their houses and garages. (This despite the fact that a quarter of homeowners with two-car garages use them exclusively for storage and park in the driveway.) The rise of the self-storage industry in the past decades has been accompanied, counterintuitively, by the supersizing of the American home, which has swelled about 60 percent since 1970, from an average of 1,500 square feet to about 2,400 square feet today. So voracious is our appetite for acquiring stuff—and so great our attachment to it once acquired—that we are willing to rent space to hold it, miles away from these homes, even though the investment in monthly upkeep is typically greater than the worth of the contents themselves.

Why do we hoard?

Why do we waste?

The answer is somewhere deep in our genes, perhaps, or in the social programming of millennia that is colliding with an era of unprecedented access to consumer goods. Survival of the fittest once favored the far-thinking fellow with the biggest collection of rocks and sticks, and even the advent of eBay and the $29 DVD player has not dimmed this evolutionary urge to collect everything we can lay our hands on. Once acquired, such objects tend to become permanent additions to the collection, despite age, disrepair, or manifest uselessness. After all, maybe the children will need them someday.

In many cases the tools and materials for creative projects stack up, while the projects remain uncompleted.

The price of this psychic grudge match between Darwin and Calvin is being paid to another recent addition to modern life, the professional organizer. The National Association of Professional Organizers currently boasts 3,900 members, who, for an hourly fee, help their pack rat clients stack their CD collections, shred old bank statements, toss broken flashlights, and clean all the dead batteries, twist ties, and soy sauce packets out of their junk drawers. Failing that, the clutter-prone can join 12-step support groups such as Clutterers Anonymous or Messies Anonymous, or self-medicate with any number of how-to books and instructional DVDs that promise to put the untidy life in order. And then they can curl up in front of home-makeover reality shows such as *Clean Sweep* or *Clean House,* those curious entertainments devoted to chronicling how a team of happy young people descends on someone else's disaster-zone household and swiftly renders it stylish and habitable again.

For older people the challenges of keeping clutter at bay take on a specific dimension. Depression-era mindsets about the value of manufactured goods have not adapted to the short shelf lives of today's technology. That same technology is making it even easier, via the Web, to participate in the consumerist frenzy that is American culture. Meanwhile, household demands have grown in complexity as an array of vendors now deliver cable TV, Internet access, and cell phone service—and their accompanying monthly bills—to a home already lashed with a steady stream of junk mail. Add the inevitable health concerns, complicated medication schedules, and related memory issues that advancing age can bring on, and a once functional household can descend into chaos practically

overnight. The dangers are both physical—a cluttered house is an obstacle course for people with limited mobility—and psychological. Particularly when the day comes that all that stuff has to go.

In the early 1990s Smith College psychologist Randy Frost, Ph.D., placed a classified newspaper advertisement for "pack rats and chronic savers" to participate in a research study and was surprised by the scores of responses he and his team received. "We suspected that we were on to something," he says. Frost, an expert on obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), became a pioneer in the then-little-known field of compulsive hoarding, a clinical term for the most severe form of cluttering behavior. Hoarding cases emerge via newspaper headlines periodically whenever authorities uncover homes filled to the rafters with newspapers, garbage, or simply piles of possessions that cover every available surface and often render the homes uninhabitable because of animal infestations or structural damage. Frost estimates there are as many as 4 million hoarders nationwide, but there are far greater numbers of individuals who fall elsewhere in a spectrum of problematic cluttering behavior.

Understanding the mind of a clutterer is a difficult process. Frost breaks down the behavior into its three major manifestations—compulsive acquisition of useless possessions, living spaces so cluttered they can't be used, and distress or an inability to function because of the hoarding. The syndrome can appear in patients as young as 13 and tends to worsen with age. While the phenomenon is often associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder, "it happens outside of OCD as well," he says. There's also a link with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD. Frost's studies have found hoarders across the income spectrum and around the world. "We know it's related to materialism, but it's not just a Western phenomenon," he says. "There may be a cultural component. We also know that it runs in families, so there may be some genetic influence."

Nor is it a peculiarly modern malady: history, Frost notes, is full of case studies, including Mary Todd Lincoln, whose compulsive shopping proved a political liability for the 16th president. Frost once speculated that adults who exhibited such behavior were responding to childhood poverty, but the studies did not bear this out. He did discover, however, a different background issue—a link to emotional deprivation and the level of warmth expressed in the family during adolescence.

The National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization (NSGCD), a nonprofit group of 440 professional organizers and psychiatric professionals that Frost consults with, has compiled a five-point Clutter-Hoarding Scale to assess potential clients. Levels III and up are clinical cases that require psychological intervention. At Level I and Level II the sins of the chronically disorganized are detailed: "slight narrowing of household pathways; unclear functions of living room, bedroom; one exit blocked." It is these minor offenders—the "common clutterers"—that Terry Prince, a Sacramento professional organizer, tries to help. Prince teaches clutter-control classes and workshops for the chronically disorganized, and she's made her own observations of the species during her career in the field.

"Clutterers are interesting," she says. "They're creative. They're people with a lot of interests." About one in three of her students, she points out, are teachers—notorious compilers of paper clutter—and many others have craft hobbies, along with an unrealistic number of projects in process and a large backlog of supplies and materials for which they claim, "I'll get to that someday," a familiar clutterer's refrain. "If that's what you're hearing," Prince says, "you're in trouble."

Both my parents, unluckily, fit this description: one was a university professor; the other, a piano teacher with a lengthy résumé of homemaking sidelines, from furniture refinishing and cooking to sewing her own clothes and knitting several closets' worth of sweaters. Their home was a monument to their shared pursuits, completed and otherwise. Books climbed to the ceiling, hid in stacks underneath tables, and clogged narrow upstairs hallways. The paperwork of decades in academia filled my father's office until the door could barely be opened, so he simply moved his desk into a vacated bedroom and started a second office. In basement boxes sat every paper and journal he ever read and every note he ever jotted, dating back to his undergraduate days, and perhaps beyond. Amid all this, in heaps and bags and unregulated piles, was a dense residue of family history: trunks packed with imported fabric for

dresses that were never sewn, hand-hooked rugs too worn to walk on, heirloom furniture built for another age—all of it so freighted with memory that it might as well have been bolted to the floor.

In other words, it was a house probably much like many others, well lived in and a bit overstuffed by the passing of years but certainly not a job for the local health department; and I expected that the chore of emptying it would be just that: a chore, slow and grimy and unpleasant. But there were unexpected difficulties. Discarding even the most innocuous bits of junk from the garage—a half-emptied propane tank, a stack of catalogs, full jars of paint and weed killer—seemed strangely painful to my parents. Progress was agonizingly slow, and each station wagon load of detritus I managed to wrest from the house seemed only to deepen their attachment to what was left. My father's books were declared untouchable; my mother's majestic trove of kitchen gadgetry—enough to stock an exhibition of postwar American cooking—was culled only after objections so fevered and persistent that I sometimes caught myself wondering if one really did need two kinds of cherry pitters.

What I didn't understand until it was much too late was that the objects going out the door were not objects at all. Often the items that had been used the least were the hardest to throw out, symbolizing as they did not fond memory but never-tapped potential. They were, as my father said while I hauled off a nearly new portable gas grill, "artifacts of unused life."

According to professional organizer Jeanne Smith, her older clients often have a connection with their possessions that other family members can't fathom. "They're going through a life-review process and a grieving process," she says. "They're reliving 20 years of their lives through that coffee cup."

Smith specializes in what she calls estate organization: helping downsize households prior to moves to assisted living or after the death of one spouse. Such events, stressful at the best of times, are often handled by adult children who are woefully ill-equipped for the task. Today's more mobile families mean that offspring are often geographically distant, and typically there are fewer siblings to share the load. Smith, who lives in the San Francisco Bay area, serves as a sort of field general for this traumatic process, coordinating the intricate logistical ballet of charity donations, estate auctions, paper shredding, and lost- heirloom-finding that accompanies the upending of a well-rooted household. She can help sell cars and homes, work with trustees and executors with the clients' assets, and ease the psychological transition to new and unfamiliar lives. (The National Association of Senior Move Managers offers a referral service to similar businesses on its website.) More than once, Smith has taken photos of a client's living room, then duplicated the arrangement of books and knickknacks in the new apartment to create a miniature facsimile of the old home.

It's a delicate role. "We are invited into the most intimate parts of their lives, especially if there's a clutter issue," Smith says. Sometimes she's hired by adult children to take over or jump-start a stalled decluttering initiative, and her arrival signals something of a gentle ultimatum: "If you don't go through your stuff, I will." For individuals who are horrified to leave such a mess behind for their children but are unable to tackle the problem alone, the situation may be laced with denial and shame. As an outsider, Smith can wade into this fraught family dynamic without exacerbating what is likely to be an already tense situation. "I don't have that history with the client," Smith says.

"If it's your child [helping with the process], it's twice as irritating," agrees Prince. "It's a lot easier when it's a third party." Much of her work involves simply listening to her clients talk about their stuff, a ritual that the kids may no longer have the patience for. You also have to avoid the drastic measures that many exasperated family members might take when faced with an overloaded home, a stubborn parent, and a moving deadline—just throwing everything out on the curb. At a time of life when loss of control is a painful reality, forced decluttering can be devastating. "Clients need to make the decisions themselves," Prince says. If you throw things out for them, "they're not going to feel happy. They'll feel violated."

To help break the grip, organizers rely on a number of strategies. Smith will act as a family archivist, assembling photographs and recorded reminiscences into a "memory box" of beloved belongings that just don't belong anymore. "You're validating the objects without actually having to hold on to the objects themselves." Prince coaxes reluctant clients with positive language. "Find charities your family

honors and loves," she says. "Say, 'Who would be the perfect person to give this to?'—not 'Can I throw this away?' " When all else fails, she's also willing to put things in self-storage, briefly, to get an intractable homeowner out of the house. "Some battles don't need to be fought then and there," she says. "It's costly, but it's less costly than ruining the relationship."

In the end, the decision to go was made for us, as it often is. A series of health problems made staying in the home difficult, and then impossible, for my parents. It was their stuff or their lives, and, thankfully, their stuff lost.

Let us skim past the actual mechanics of that move, a journey best forgotten by all parties. When the dust settled, my parents were safely installed into a bright one-bedroom apartment, several states west of me but just blocks from my brother and his family. A great deal of their stuff also made the journey, though only a fraction of it could be unpacked. Much of the rest was warehoused in a storage facility at the windswept edge of town. Once, my brother drove my mother by this place and rolled up the metal door of their unit, so she could survey the towers of boxes and blue plastic storage bins stacked to the ceiling.

Left behind in their vacated home was yet another subset of that stuff, the stubborn dead-enders. For several weekends I labored at this archaeological dig until the last holdouts were donated, auctioned off, or stuffed into my garage and basement to await some uncertain fate. And there they rest: the steamer trunks full of tweed, the old rugs, the boxes of papers and toys and camping equipment. Sometimes I poke into a box and pull out some bit of family ephemera—the 50-year-old receipt to my grandfather's watch, photographs from a trip to Europe in the early 1970s, the original architect's drawing of the home I would grow up in. They have the familiar, earthy scent of that house's basement, transplanted into my own.

I am plotting a garage sale, of course, just as you probably are. I will not inflict this curse on the next generation. Everything will go, and I will live as I did in my 20s, when everything I owned fit in the back of my car. And as I contemplate the unburdening of this great payload of memory, I am confronted, again, by a brass chafing dish. Several months after their move, my parents visited me at my house, and I surprised my mother by dusting off this dish and showing it to her. At the sight of the thing she immediately burst into grateful tears.

The dish sat on the dining room table, useless as ever, for the duration of their visit. When they left, I carefully replaced it in its box and put it back in the basement, with everything else.

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