

The Things We Keep

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Some friends of mine own a small storage facility. Every once in a while, they have a garage sale to dispose of the things people have left behind. Payments have stopped, phone calls aren't returned—no trace of the owners can be found except the collection of stuff they couldn't bear to part with—until they did.

My friends have opened abandoned units to find taxidermic deer heads, family pictures—including wedding pictures (usually stored along with divorce papers)—loose change, clothes, furniture, televisions, mattresses, tools, cassette tapes and CDs, half-empty bottles of shampoo, Christmas decorations, and even food.

Stuff overload seems to be a widespread problem, judging by the amount of storage facilities around. According to the Self Storage Association, 83 percent of all the counties in the United States have at least one storage facility. The association, which lobbies for the self-storage industry, lists some other enlightening facts on its website:

- There are 49,940 self-storage facilities in the United States. By contrast, there are just 12,000 facilities in Europe, Asia, Australia, Canada, Latin America, South America, and Japan combined.
- Total rental space for self-storage in the United States is now 2.3 billion square feet. That is approximately equal to seventy-eight square miles, or an area more than three times the size of Manhattan Island in New York City.
- One in ten U.S. households (10.8

million of 113.3 million households) currently rents a self-storage unit—a 65 percent increase in the last fifteen years.

- The self-storage industry built its first billion square feet in about twenty-five years; it built its second billion square feet in about eight years.

And in case you're wondering, the association reports that the self-storage industry raked in \$22 billion last year. We're paying a lot of money for possessions we're not even using. It's especially interesting to see that our storage needs are rising at the same time the average home size in America has increased, from roughly 1,600 square feet in 1973 to 2,392 square feet in 2010, according to the U.S. Census.

Here's some perspective: the average income of the world's population is around \$1,200. Most people hardly have two coins to rub together, and yet others have so much stuff that they can afford to abandon entire rooms of it. It makes an environmental impact, because some of that stuff goes straight to the landfill.

It makes an emotional impact, too. When our family downsized, I spent over a year de-cluttering. It was painful to let so much go, especially because I felt so ashamed that I had purchased it in the first place! The question is: how do I keep from letting stuff pile up again?

My habits have to change.

Bad habit: I used to shop because I was bored, lonely, or tempted by some product. New habit: stop using shopping as entertainment for myself

or my family, especially my daughters. By the way, according to one poll, 80 percent of today's teens identify shopping as one of their "hobbies or activities."

Bad habit: buying a new hammer because I can't find the old hammer. New habit: establishing a place for everything, reusing and repurposing what I have, borrowing more and buying less. Clutter has inspired any number of new reality shows, but an organized house is not the goal. Sharing and being good stewards of our God-given belongings is the goal, because so many of our brothers and sisters have so little.

Bad habit: I don't always distinguish between a "need" and a "want." When I was single and earning about \$12,000 a year, I could easily distinguish between needs (rent and food) and wants (new clothes). New habit: now in a more comfortable midlife, I'm realizing that love, relationships, and service to others are what truly satisfies.

Here's a case in point: my kids went through their belongings as we prepared to move and saved very little. I was horrified at their lack of sentimentality—what about those toys they absolutely had to have? To my surprise, rather than the stuffed animals, Barbies, and action figures, they were adamant about keeping the books I read aloud to them when they were children.

Things are just things. It's people who matter. ■

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