

Barnacles in the Basement

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The Second Law of Thermodynamics holds, in essence, that everything proceeds inexorably from order to disorder. It is amazing to me that this principle was discovered in the middle of the Nineteenth Century, for it describes perfectly every place I've ever lived in, every desk I've ever worked at, every car I've ever driven. How could those thinkers back then have seen the way we live today?

It is springtime, and while gardeners are harrowing and mulching and planting, boaters are painting and scraping the barnacles. You scrape the barnacles to make the boat go faster and smoother through the water. I think of the clutter, the stuff that accumulates in our lives as like the barnacles on a boat. It slows us down.

I titled this sermon barnacles in the basement, but of course it's not just in the basement that stuff accumulates; it's in the attic, the garage, the bookshelves, the coffee tables, the desk tops, the kitchen counters. When it gets really bad, stuff is everywhere and our movement is confined to little paths which wend their way through piles of stuff.

There is a lot you can say about stuff, junk, clutter, packrat behavior, hoarding, amassing, accumulation, materialism, but I want to make basically three points this morning. First, having a lot of stuff around does not mean that you're crazy, though it may be driving you crazy or driving someone you love crazy. Second, much of our accumulation of stuff is the result of the way we live now, not some original sin or character defect. Third, to begin to understand how to trash our stuff, we need to understand why we treasure it.

This sermon, by the way, is designed not only to make you feel better about the messes in your lives but to make us all feel better about the work of our Thrift Shop, which functions as kind of a stuff mission to the world at large. Though a couple of our Thrift Shop mainstays are sidelined at the moment, I hope that some of the rest of you are making some plans to help collect the stuff that this church recycles so joyfully and efficiently into operating funds. Opening day is just around the corner!

Let's start with some religious perspectives. I think Jesus weighs in against clutter in the Sermon on the Mount when he says (Matthew 6)

19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do

not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The Kingdom of Heaven preached by Jesus was clutter-free; it is rich in spiritual treasures and bereft of material things. Of course, we know that over the years, and particularly in the Middle Ages, this anti-materialist ethic has been used as a tool of economic exploitation by the elite, to keep the starving peasants from revolting or the workers from unionizing.

By the 14th Century, Dante is able to depict two types of people in the Fourth Circle of Hell in his inferno: Hoarders and Wasters. These move perpetually around the circle, shouting at each other, “why do you hoard?” and “why do you waste?” We may gather from this picture that in his day both were considered equivalent sins and there was not way they were reconciled: a two-sided argument never resolved.

I find this curious. Given Jesus’ anti-materialistic stand, I would have thought that the hoarders were bad and those who spent freely, who gave away their wealth, would be in rewarded in paradise.

But let us look at Eastern religion. The Tao Te Ching says, “Though the sage knows himself he makes no show of it; he has self-respect, but is not arrogant, for he develops the ability to let go of that which he no longer needs.” Here is an Eastern virtue: To let go of that which one no longer needs.

Letting go. The Latin word for baggage is impedimenta which conveys they notion that what you carry with you is what keeps you from going very far or very fast. The Buddha taught that the root of suffering, of dukkha, was craving and clinging. The path to release from suffering lies in letting go of the objects of our craving and clinging. As the physical baggage we carry with us slows us down, limits how far and how fast we can travel, so the spiritual baggage we carry limits how much we can grow.

The ideal of simplicity, of a stuff-free existence is expressed in both Eastern and Western monasticism. There is a famous story in Japanese Buddhism about the poet/monk Ryokan, who lived in a remote hut high in the mountains. One day a robber came to Ryokan’s hut. Ryokan told the robber he was very sorry, but there was nothing in his hut to steal. The only thing material was the robe that Ryokan was wearing, so Ryokan gave the robber that. The robber left and Ryokan was naked and shivering, but satisfied. He looked out at the moon rising and wrote a poem in which he wished that he could have given the robber the moon instead.

‘Tis the gift to be simple. The Shakers like the Puritans before them, and like the Amish and the Mennonites today, believed in voluntary simplicity, living with as few possessions as possible.

With that religious framework, let us turn now to the questions at hand. First, does clutter mean that you’re crazy? When we talk about clutter from the psychological side, we often throw around the term obsessive-compulsive, so I wanted to check this out. The bible of

psychological conditions is called the DSM, and I consulted that work's definition of obsessive compulsive disorder; the nub of the definition of compulsion is:

“repetitive behaviors (e.g., hand washing, ordering, checking) or mental acts (e.g., praying, counting, repeating words silently) that the person feels driven to perform in response to an obsession.”

This may fit some of us who suffer from cluttered lives, but certainly not all or most of us. Some of us are compulsive acquirers, like the packrat I sang about earlier. Some of us are compulsive shoppers.

If shopping is what fills that hole in your soul, you will tend to accumulate stuff, but I don't think that makes you an obsessive compulsive. In other words, I'm no psychologist, but I think the prevalence of clutter in our homes and offices is far more common than the incidence of this psychological disorder.

Now clutter may be an indication of depression, and living in clutter may feed depression. I'm not saying that stuff doesn't have an effect on your mental health because it certainly does. I'm saying for most of us, we can do something about it, and if we can't do something by ourselves, help is available. So my first point is that being cluttered does not mean that you are crazy.

Now I imagine that most of us who live with clutter feel bad about it to some degree. I know that I do. I would like to have a house that is spot-clean with lots of empty space in which I could contemplate life's persistent questions. But I realize that part of the accumulation of clutter comes from the very pace of life.

We tend to look at our clutter as our fault. If we are drowning in stuff, it is because we are lazy or disorganized or spend too much time watching TV, doing crossword puzzles or surfing the Internet. Those of us of a Calvinist bent will seize on any explanation that puts the fault on us.

And some of the mess may in fact be due to character flaws or, God help us, Original Sin, but I want to point out that an awful lot of it is due to the features of life today and particularly the retail revolution and the information revolution. It is easier to buy things than it has ever been before, and most of the goods which are on sale anywhere in the world are available to the US consumer with a simple click of the mouse. Anything you every thought about having, you can have if you've got the money. Goods are tantalizingly available, and if you want to know how many come into your house through the modern means of retailing, count how many UPS and Fed Ex and Postal Service boxes you discard every month.

Information is also at your fingertips. Practically anything you want to know is available online. Now, you will say that online information doesn't create clutter in your basement, and that is true. But it feeds the flood of paper information. Ask yourself,

how much of the clutter in your house is reading material? How much of the reading material which is clogging your guest room, those magazine articles you want to get around to reading someday, is actually available online?

Much of the clutter in my house is mail, and the volume of mail seems to increase exponentially year by year. As we interact with more people and organizations online, as more businesses and organizations use mass-mailing techniques, the amount of clutter coming in in the mail just keeps growing. In order to keep up with it, we have to make time, and that's something I don't do enough.

So a lot of clutter has to do with the pace of life, ease of retail, and the increased flow of information, not with our own character defects. I think everyone is having a hard time keeping up with the flood waters, and if our organizational abilities begin to deteriorate as we age, we will find it harder and harder to keep up. It is not that something's wrong with you; we're all in this boat that has all the barnacles in the basement.

But we don't have to be. There are two logical ways to deal with clutter. One is the intake and one is the output. If we can restrict what is coming in to the house, we can start to get a handle on it. But the real test comes in trying to throw stuff away.

Here we have to learn to let go. The Taoist Sage learns to let go of that which he no longer needs. The Buddha teaches that craving and clinging is the root of suffering. Easy to say, but hard to do. Why is letting go so hard? In order to trash our stuff, we have to understand why we treasure it.

We know we are not supposed to be materialistic. We come to church and sing the Shaker hymn and give great lip service to people who live in caves or sparsely furnished houses. The Noble Savage looms very large in the liberal value system. Are we actually so in love with our stuff itself that we can't bear to part with it?

As I think about my own stuff, I don't think so. There are some objects which are precious to me, but they are a minuscule percentage of the stuff I actually have. If my house were on fire and my loved ones had escaped, I could rescue the things I care about in about two armfuls – I'd hardly get singed.

I think most of us hold on to stuff for other reasons, and that is explored by a passage from the article I read from earlier. This article, in the AARP magazine, is about the accumulation of stuff particularly by older folks. It was copied by our late and sorely missed Chuck Chesnut and sent around to his children and he put the original in his funeral file so I could read it at his memorial service, which I did. Chuck was well aware of his own stuff problem.

The author of the article has this to say about cleaning out his parents' house preparing to move them:

“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.’”¹

This is what we hold on to: not the objects which represent our past, but the objects which represent our unfulfilled plans. To throw them out is to die a little prematurely, to have a funeral for the plan of life that each object represents.

There’s an article on hoarding in the current issue of the online magazine Salon, and the author puts it this way:

“... our inability to get rid of certain things is sometimes tied to our hesitation to give up on some idea of ourselves: ‘I might still be a size 4 someday,’ says the 40-year-old size-8 mother. ‘I might still train for a marathon following this program in this 1998 issue of Runners’ World Magazine, I might still learn something from my old philosophy books from college, I might still break out my old acrylic paints and read all of these back issues of the New Yorker.’ We all want to feel that our lives are filled with endless possibilities, that we have all the time in the world. Hoarding can be a way of denying that there’s an end point to your timeline or boundaries around your opportunities.”²

¹“Conquering Clutter” by David Dudley, AARP magazine January & February 2007
http://www.aarpmagazine.org/lifestyle/conquer_clutter.html

²Heather Havrilesky, “How Hoarding Shows Cured my Hoarding” Salon.com

What is clear , in other words, is that the barnacles in our basements are the result of barnacles on our brains; we need Barbara Waters to give us her talk on the sex life of barnacles, we need to understand how they got there in order to get rid of them. It is a physical problem which results from a spiritual one.

Many, most of us here are retired. I expect that when you retired, you entertained all kinds of plans as to what you were going to do with the rest of your life, and for each plan, there was certain stuff that accompanied it. That stuff will stay with you until you root through your plans and decide realistically what you expect to implement and which ones you can let go.

My own humble suggestion is to start small. You might start with a little section of your desk or a little piece of your living room or a table top, which you can declare a clutter-free zone. And then once you get into how nice it is to have a little breathing space in the house, you can expand that zone. And for each item that you can't bear to throw away, you can ask yourself, do I really like holding on to the possibility that I will use this someday more than I like the empty space that will be there when I've taken it to the Thrift Shop?

In sum, no you're not crazy just because you have clutter, but your clutter may be making you or your loved ones crazy. Much of your clutter is not even a character defect, but a result of the way most of us live today. And to understand how to remove the barnacles, you have to understand how they attach, why we hold on to this stuff in the first place.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth. If your treasures on earth look a lot like trash, it might be time to do some spring cleaning. Don't forget the thrift shop! Amen.

Readings

From "Conquering Clutter" by David Dudley, AARP Magazine, January February 2007

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.

http://www.salon.com/entertainment/tv/heather_havrilesky/2010/04/10/am_i_a_hoarder?source=newsletter

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.