

The Spiritual Meaning of Stuff

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Well, I'm glad to report that he's going to be okay.

You might have heard that earlier this month,
an older gentleman, out in Vancouver,
was found severely dehydrated
after being pinned for almost a week
under a mountain of debris in his own home.

When he hadn't been seen in days, a friend called the RCMP.

Constables were dispatched to investigate,
but when they arrived and broke down the door,
they found the halls so clogged with junk
that they called in the fire department—
complete with chainsaws—to clear a path.

You can't help but wonder how such a situation comes about.

Have you've seen the relatively new television programme called *Hoarders*?

I'm embarrassed by the time I've spent watching
this most depressing of reality shows.

I just can't turn away—even though it's essentially the same story,
episode after episode.

Someone's accumulation of stuff overtakes her or his life,
to the point that their home is piled from wall to wall and floor to ceiling
with boxes and bags, with mounds of clothes and sporting equipment,
with rotting food and endless piles of paper.

In the words of AA, their lives have become unmanageable.

Often they know it; only rarely do they not.

That they've been recommended to feature on the show is the result of an intervention by their nearest and dearest—who are often in a complete state of desperation to find some relief.

Most heart-breaking are the stories of hoarders who live with other people, but seem incapable of quitting their habit, even when tears stream down the faces of their loved ones, even when the fire department issues citations and fines, even when the city threatens to condemn their home.

As I say, it's hard to look away, even though the story is always the same.

These people have a very complicated relationship with their stuff. Yet, you don't have to necessarily be a hoarder to relate.

It seems most everyone I know feels they are fighting an epic battle against clutter.

I've heard a number of people in my life, including many in this very room, say they desperately want and need to downsize—so that they can live more simply, so that they can move to a retirement residence, so that they can be liberated from dusting, or so that they can simply find their keys when they go missing.

And, yet, it can be very hard to part with so much of our stuff.

Back in the early 80s, there was a news report on the Today Show about a woman living in Boca Raton, Florida.

It seems, if the story is to be believed, that the woman was in possession of a possessed toaster. When it was turned on, she was certain she heard it say, "I am the devil."

When the reporter came to visit, she hauled out a sample piece of toast she'd saved

etched with the words “Satan Lives.”

When she placed a piece of bread inside,
to demonstrate the toaster’s demonic powers,
sparks and flames shot up and out of the diabolical little appliance.

At the end of the interview, the reporter, still not completely convinced,
asked why she keeps the toaster.

And, she said, “well, you know, at the end of the day,
it still makes a good piece of toast.”

Sometimes it is the ongoing utility of something
that keeps us from carting it out to the curb.

I have lived with a lamp I can’t stand for fifteen years.
It’s hideous, but it works. Well.
Even though I’ve routinely prayed for its demise.

But, because I love Bob, I’ve learned to live with his lamp.

Sometimes we keep things because we don’t even know where to begin
to dismantle the impressive collection of whatever it is
that we’ve amassed over the years.

For me, this mostly applies to paper.

To my horror, a forest of trees has been felled
to fill my filing cabinets and cover my desk,
to build up teetering piles of paper
that I can’t seem to get under control.

Even though, for years, I’ve read most newspapers and magazines online
and have long resolved to print only what I must have in hard copy,
my life, like many of yours, is overwhelmed with paper.

Most of it isn’t all that important.

And, yet, it’s the knowledge—or rather that sinking feeling—
that somewhere in those piles,
tucked between the syllabus from a course I took twenty years ago

and last week's Order of Service, lurks some receipt,
some slip, some sacred sheaf of paper
that I will surely, desperately need if I'm ever audited.

Sometimes we hang on to stuff, because, well,
you just never know if you might need it again.

And, sometimes we just hang on to things
because they're actually more than things.

I imagine each of us has treasures in our home
we can't imagine living without.

I'm not necessarily talking about some heirloom crystal
or your grandmother's silver tea service.

For most of us, I'm guessing it's the kind of stuff
that if our homes were robbed, a thief would never think to take.

A particular book, a well worn quilt, a box of old letters,
or a handful of photos that tell the story
of who you are and who you love.

So often, in powerful and poignant ways,
our stuff is the physical embodiment of our memories—
the tangible reminders of moments, of relationships, of ourselves.

These things are to be rightly cherished.

Recently, I checked in with Bob to make sure I truly understand
what, if anything, of his I should grab, should our home ever be on fire.

Besides our cat, Tabitha, he simply said our photos.
Most everything else, of course, could be replaced.

In the wake of the Japanese earthquake almost two years ago,
there's been a committed team of volunteers
recovering and restoring photos found amid the debris.

For those who've survived, being reunited with these images
reminds them of the value and vulnerability of life and of love.

Photos, perhaps like nothing else,
are some of our most treasured possessions.

And, yet, the memories that infuse our stuff
aren't always helpful or healthy.

Sometimes our stuff haunts us.

Several years ago, the life coach guru Cheryl Richardson
spoke at an event held in a congregation I was serving.

At one point, a woman came forward to the microphone
and explained her home had become a prison.
She said she felt enormously burdened by all of her stuff.

Cheryl Richardson asked her what kind of stuff she had.

The woman told the room that she had all kinds of art supplies—
paint and canvasses and easels.
She had an entire room dedicated to her art stuff.
And in that room, she said,
were lots of sketches and paintings left unfinished.

Cheryl asked her if she considered herself an artist.
The woman said, “no.”

Cheryl then asked her if she enjoyed painting.
After a considerable pause, the woman confessed, “not really.”

When asked why she devoted a room of her home
to something she doesn't really enjoy, the tears began to flow.

With a warble in her voice, she said she just always felt
she could or should be an artist.

As it turns out, the prison she found herself in was one of expectations.
In trying to understand the story of her life,
she had painted herself into a corner,
saddled herself with dreams that perhaps weren't truly hers to fulfill.

And what she was left with was a constant reminder of her failings.
An overwhelming sense of should.

Sometimes our stuff is more than our stuff.

It's the emotionally overwhelming reminder
of dreams deferred or lost,
of good intentions never to be realised,
of hopes we can't admit have been dashed,
of grief we can't begin to bear.

The story I see repeated in every episode of *Hoarders*
reflects some aspect of this.

No one sets out to be a hoarder, to risk life and limb,
pinned under a pile of their own things,
only to be rescued by the RCMP.

It seems behind so much of their stuff,
there's some wound, some pain,
some void that cries out to be finally filled.

And, yet, each episode confirms with a crush of clutter
that mountains and mountains of things don't do the trick.

It's one thing to watch reality television with smug satisfaction
that we're not nearly as bad off as those poor people.

It's quite another to be confronted with our own mountain.

My colleague Barbara Merrit tells the story
of trekking to Maine one summer with her older son.¹

They found themselves "following
one of the most ridiculous looking cars [they'd] ever seen."

It was a sports utility vehicle, laden with all the evidence
of... consumerism and conspicuous consumption.

¹ Barbara Merrit, *Amethyst Beach: Meditations*, Skinner House Books, 2007.

Lashed onto the top were a canoe and a kayak.
Strapped onto the back bumper were four bicycles.
Golf clubs, tennis rackets, and camping equipment
were visible through the Jeep's back window.

Every car that passed by stared in astonishment
at this visible study in recreational excess.

The thing [Barbara] found most remarkable
about the vehicle in front of [her] was that [her family] owned it.

[Her] husband and younger son were driving [their] Jeep up to Maine,"
while she and her other son followed behind.

She says that:

After staring at our car for some miles,
and noticing the attention it was attracting from drivers-by,
I decided that this was an auspicious moment
to have a discussion with my older child about "nonmaterialism."

I explained, trying to keep a straight face,
that his father and I were dedicated
to an ethic of simplicity, diminishing consumption,
and intentional reduction in material accumulation.

My son greeted this pronouncement with hysterical laughter.
Even I had to chuckle. But I was persistent,
and after his raucous laughter subsided,
I explained how, throughout our married life we had, both of us,
consistently chosen jobs that paid less,
even when we were offered positions that paid more;
how we had invested our modest resources into education and travel
rather than in real estate and furniture;
and how we tried constantly
to decrease our dependence and reliance on material wealth.

Notwithstanding the visual evidence to the contrary,
we were working to simplify our lifestyle.

“Robert,” she says, “listened to everything [she] said,
and then replied, ‘I understand Mom.
You and Dad are nonmaterialistic.
You just aren’t very good at it.’”

It would be easy to stand here and preach against materialism.
Many religious figures, from the Buddha to Jesus and beyond,
have done just that.

Through most of the world’s religions runs a persistent reminder
that the selfish accumulation of things will set us on a path to spiritual ruin.

To that wisdom, we now add the knowledge that our unchecked consumption
is speeding life on this planet toward ruin, as well.

If that particular message from this sermon
(as so many preached before it) speaks to you,
then I hope you’ll follow it
to whatever commitments it might stir you to make.

Yet, what I hope you’ll take with you today is that
our relationship to our stuff—to what we own—
is often, at best, complicated.
And, I hope you’ll give yourself over to the question
of what it would mean for it to be made at least a little less complicated.

What would it mean for you to be more mindful about your stuff,
yet less burdened by what you have—or don’t?

What would it mean to let go of what you no longer need—
or never really needed in the first place?

What would it mean to be more intentional
about what you bring into your life—and into your home?

What would it mean to be more than a collector of things,
and, instead, become a curator of meaning?

My hope is that it would mean freedom.
My hope is that it would mean both literal and figurative space.

Room to grow. Freedom to stretch.
A renewed capacity to fill your life with what matters most.

May we open our hearts to make it so. Amen.