

Le Bon Journal

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Volume 2 Issue 8: Decluttering and letting go of clutter

Clutter, as defined by the dictionary.com site, is a confused or disordered state or collection; a jumble. We all know what clutter is if we have things lying around unused but taking up space.

And now, it's taking up two pages of precious space. "It better be worth my time and attention," you mutter to yourself.

Drowning in clutter

My study is a place where I have packed everything small in different laundry tablet boxes and cotton cloth bags. The "stuff" consists of free amenity kits that I saved from hotels and airplanes, free sample make-up items that came with purchases over \$30, and name badges that I saved from the conferences I attended in the last two years.

Who is to blame for my behaviour? My parents encouraged me to collect stamps as a child. It certainly taught me organisational skills. But it also taught me to save everything, especially everything that was free.

Interestingly my sister doesn't have clutter. She doesn't keep anything. She even gave away my precious classical guitar to the Salvation Army. She sold the car I gave her. If I ever want to get rid of anything, she's the one I'd give to.

In contrast, my brother keeps everything. He's the one I gave all my stamp books to. He doesn't consider his collection of old and new toys clutter.

Drowning in clutter – part 2

The cause of my clutter problem is simple. The rate of input (accumulating clutter) is much higher than the rate of absorption/digestion/decision-making. As a result, the rate of output (getting rid of clutter) is just too slow for comfort.

The rate of absorption or digestion refers to the rate at which I'm able to

absorb or digest information. Equally, it's the rate at which I'm able to consume food or use goods. The rate of decision making refers to the rate at which I'm able to decide what to do with the stuff. Should I keep it? If I keep it, where should I put it? Should I get rid of it? If I get rid of it, should I throw it away? Or should I give it to someone I know? Or should I donate it? Or should I sell it? Or should I recycle it?

There are too many decisions to be made in the stage before the clutter actually leaves the house. There lies the rub. It's complex. It's time-consuming. It's boring. It's the last thing I want to do on a Saturday evening. And so the rate of accumulation accelerates until I give it attention.

Clutter, I conclude, is the result of indecision and irresponsibility.

Drowning in clutter – part 3

I am the kind of deal-prone buyer who is only motivated to shop when there is a sale. Otherwise, there is no real good reason to buy anything. But just because the item is discounted doesn't mean that I want it. I wasn't aware of this association until I noticed all the unworn brand new clothes and shoes in my closet. I bought them because they were on sale. But they didn't look good on me, and worse, they didn't even fit well. I just didn't feel comfortable in them, yet I kept them because they were good value for money.

Deal-prone behaviour extends easily to freebie frenzy. If it's free or if someone gives it to you, then you feel obliged to keep it.

The second thing I realised about myself, besides going for bargains - and freebies, is that I have never considered throwing new, unused things away. The implicit rule for discarding things was that it had to be very worn or very torn.

The third thing, which I can generalise for a lot of people, is the

"kia-soo" mentality. Literally translated from Hokkien, it means "afraid of losing." You collect actively and you keep everything you collect. You want to make sure that you don't lose out.

The fourth thing, resulting from my postgraduate days, is the common sense of keeping it in case I might need it. It's a contingency measure that reflects the fear of regret. As a student, it was easier and less costly to keep something than to go out and get it when I needed it.

Fifth, as an environmentalist I dislike waste. This means I'd rather waste my space, my time, my body, and my energy than to let something rot in the environment. And once it's in my possession, I rarely throw it away. I am very good at reusing and recycling, but I've yet to learn how to reduce my acquisition. I have made cloth bags and pillowcases out of old skirts. But the impulsive nature of the woman I am leads me to compulsive shopping sprees or inability to say no to other people's junk.

Sixth, as a variety seeker, I love novelty and diversity. This makes it all the more burdensome to keep track of all that I have. I collect matchboxes, piano duet sheet music, business cards, memories, photographs, chilli sauces, and you-name-it, not just one, but all varieties that exist.

More recently, as a time-challenged traveller, I simply don't have the time or energy to go through my mail or everything else I've kept from my travels. The only way to run away from all this clutter is to continue travelling. For, in the clinical existence of flying and staying in hotels, there's no clutter.

Emotional clutter

Baggage. Things we should have said to those we've wronged. And vice versa. Such clutter resurfaces in dreams (or nightmares).

My neighbour tells me that people get recycled. For example, your ex-boyfriend appears as a client. Your ex-housemate joins your best friend's company. Your ex-colleague asks you for a date. If you don't close the past, they come back again at some point in your life to haunt you.

For most of us, we were too naive, too wronged, too unforgiving, or just too stupid to close those relationships when we should have and in the way they should have been closed.

Clutter of the emotional kind is probably what explains the reluctance of older, single people from rushing into commitment. Emotional clutter from the past prevents the person from living in the present. It is probably the hardest kind of clutter to get rid of, for letting go is even harder than breaking up!

The urge to purge

After returning from my friend's clutter-free house, which was deliberately minimalist and modern, I felt the urge to purge.

My clothes, socks, stockings, scarves, etc have taken up all of my closet space, unorganised, unrecognisable, and cluttered.

Each time I tried to purge, I ended up reclaiming the contents of my purge after decision dyslexia. It seems such a simple sequential decision, yet it causes me such pain and heartache.

The "keep" test is not so simple.

When I was a student, short of money but not short of time or space, I would only purge if my clothes and shoes were too old and torn to wear. As a result, I've kept many items still perfectly brand new and intact. I've never worn them, because either I bought them on a sale (too good to say no) or was given the item as a gift. And presumably I 1) never liked them or 2) they became out of fashion or 3) they didn't fit. If they didn't fit, I'd tell myself that someday they would. If they were out of date, I'd tell

myself that someday the fashion would return. This time, I told myself to face the truth: I will never ever wear them. So why keep them?

The "not keep" test is equally difficult. Some clothes are old and worn - even with holes - but I'm still reluctant to part with them. I feel good wearing them. Each item carries many memories. How could I let go? My cotton sleeveless summer top is torn on the sides and thin from wear. Only when I think about it, do I realise it is 12 years old. I made it from an old black skirt. Just holding it in my hand brings back memories of Singapore, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian adventures. But it's time to let go.

The stages of decluttering

The unpleasant and dreaded task of decluttering is something I read, discuss, intellectualise, and procrastinate until it becomes unavoidable.

How many times have I opened the closet to look for something, curse at the amount of stuff I have to wade through, and shut the door only to forget about it?

Stage one in my decluttering process consists of quickly identifying those things that I never use and mean nothing to me. By default, such things will not be missed because I am not fond of them anyway.

Selling them makes parting a bit easier. Money is a compensation for keeping the useless stuff.

Stage two is about identifying those objects that are of sentimental value but may need to be parted for good reasons. Here I risk journeying down memory lane and getting all emotional about the past.

What remains to decide in stage three are the things that are no longer worth keeping because you can get a more efficient or effective replacement. Technology and fashion dissuade anyone from keeping things past their sell-by date. It is almost easier to rent or borrow than to buy and own.

Letting go of books

While I was re-shelving my books today, I began to question why I kept all these books. Will I want to read the books I've read before? When will I have the time to read those books I have not yet read?

Other than cookbooks, atlases, dictionaries, and music books, what else is worth keeping?

The same goes for CD's that I bought, listened once and never again. Why bother keeping them?

While I was gathering them to take upstairs to my loft, I found myself asking why I was putting the books away.

I now understand why second-hand bookstores exist. If they get books (for free) from people like me, the sale of every book will be 100% profit. Books are as transient as human beings on earth. It's really not worth hanging onto.

Donating to charity

I packed two boxes of my college textbooks and two boxes of empty three ring binders. These are the things that I can't give away or sell. Who would want electrical engineering textbooks from the eighties? Who in the UK would use US-style three ring binders?

This morning the Heart Foundation took them away. I'm so relieved to reclaim a few square feet of empty floor space in my loft.



Anne Ku, editor, held a declutter sale to get rid of three rooms of "stuff" that she decided she no longer wanted to own. She advertised the sale on analyticalQ.com and anneku.com Web sites and passed out leaflets to all her neighbours and friends. To encourage them to visit, she baked several cakes and cookies to serve to those who came to her sale. The remnants after three months were either donated to charity or given to her friends as Christmas presents.

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