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# Confessions of an Ex-Hoarder



By Marty Kaplan

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I've run out of excuses for hanging on to stuff.

No, I haven't achieved Zen non-attachment to material things, but I'm no longer on the road to *Hoarding: Buried Alive*.

It was easiest to get rid of the piles of unread magazines. Those now get the heave-ho every few months. The fear that had made me their custodian, which I'd confused with the theoretical pleasure I'd have when I'd eventually read them, was the chance I'd miss something important. The reality, it turns out, is that if I do overlook some essential, or just juicy, journalism, I'll hear about it from a friend, or online, and saving a link to it for reading later, even if later never comes, requires no real estate from my non-virtual life.

Clothes were harder to let go. I didn't really believe that wide ties would come back, or that someday I'd be glad I saved those tap shoes (don't ask). But it was easy for me to mistake my closet for a scrapbook, to treat old clothes like souvenirs of where, when and who I was when I got them. When that happens now, I remind myself that if I'm warehousing something I haven't touched for years in order to keep alive the guy who once wore it, it's less punishing to put a selfie of it on my hard drive than to be sentenced to a lifetime of curating my personal wardrobe museum.

Book-hoarder has been an even tougher role to jailbreak. It's intellectually respectable to have your own library. I love looking at all those spines on all those shelves; they map the cultural journey I've taken, and no Kindle can duplicate that experience. But shelving books three-deep, which I'd been reduced to, was a labor of guilt, not love. I still can't throw books away; it feels sinful, even if I didn't like them, even if I never have or will read them. But I've learned that I can drop off cartons of books at the local public library with a perfectly clear conscience. If they end up in a dumpster, my hands are clean.

But these were all baby steps. My big problem, the ball I've chained myself to for decades, is the stack of boxes, currently numbering 33, in my garage. Every move I've made — from my parents' home, to dorm rooms, to apartments and houses and homes of my own — has included the fiction that it'll be easier to deal with those multiplying cardboard boxes at the other end, when I unpack. Of course, I never do.

At first, it was just mail that I saved. When I was a kid, getting a letter was as unusual, though for different reasons, as it is today. I loved mail. Corresponding with someone beyond the bounds of my family bunker was evidence of my growing autonomy, a validation of my nascent identity. I could no more throw letters away than I could toss a Kodachrome in the trash. Yes, I saved pictures, too. And postcards. And comic books, baseball cards, *Mad* magazines, geometry projects, ticket stubs, lists of books I'd read and places I wanted to go — anything that testified to my existence.

In college, I couldn't bear to throw away the spiral notebooks I had filled so carefully with notes, not to mention the course catalogues, term papers, student publications that ran what I wrote, calendars, address books, I.D. cards. Travel added new categories of ephemera to save — odd matchbooks, cool baggage tags, train schedules, hostel receipts, shells from Greek islands and sand from Israeli deserts. I don't think it was OCD; it was proof of my cosmopolitanism, and prophylaxis against amnesia.

Once in the work world, it was effortless to justify the files I kept amassing. Those pieces of paper made up a personal archive, priceless material for the memoirs I'd one day write and the biographies that would doubtless be written about me. Surely future historians would be grateful for the 18 drafts of Vice President Mondale's acceptance speech at the 1980 Democratic convention, the relentless pre-production script notes I wrote on *Three Men and a Baby*, the letters I got from baffled friends and newfound fans when *Time* published a piece I wrote in praise of mysticism.

It's a wonder I was able to confine this monument to me to 33 boxes.

Today I'm on the road to recovery. Marvels like document scanning and cloud storage are enabling my rehab, and though I suppose there's still the risk that I might turn Dropbox into my digital garage, I'm now throwing away more stuff than I'm converting to PDFs. But it isn't technology that's motivated my self-intervention, or the panic of seeing myself in the mirror of a Discovery Channel hoarding show. It's the freedom I've given myself to entertain some humbling thoughts.

The truth is that pretty much no one is going to need this stuff I've saved, least of all me. I'm not going to use the 1978 White House phone directory to recall the names that will trigger the anecdotes that will make Chapter 4 of my hypothetical memoir sing. (Those 18 drafts, though, are going to the Minnesota Historical Society.) Shakespeare's tax records may be gold, and Ben Franklin's juvenilia may inspire entire dissertations, but the list of dishes I ate on my first trip to Italy are biographically fascinating to no one. The day when I finally have the time to savor the call sheets of the first movie I wrote will likely also be the day I'm evaluated for dementia. Maybe, out of all the mail I've hoarded, there's a way to reconstruct who I was then to the person who wrote it, but I'd rather give those packets of letters back to their authors — which I've actually begun doing — than disappear down the forensic rabbit hole of reading them.

There's no mystery why I've saved so much stuff: to prove that I'm alive, that I'm someone, that my trail on this earth is worth preserving. My fear of letting go of those boxes is the fear of mortality, the fear of not having become worthy enough to investigate and document. What's taken me too long to recognize is that the present moment is more than enough time to manifest and appreciate that worth; that its measure is not what some stranger may someday find riveting; that its meaning and poignancy derive not from the fear of death, but the love of life.

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