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The Life-Changing Magic of Tearing my Students' Papers Up

by GUEST CONTRIBUTOR on Mar 19, 2019 • 8:30 am

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Grateful to share this piece by [Mischa Willet](#):

The exercise goes something like this: at the start of class, I ask students to take out a piece of paper, which more often than not these days means they cast about looking helpless till a more-responsible classmate offers aid. I give them some prompt, whose subject changes each time I try this but which always includes the injunction to “make it beautiful.” Not merely a jotting down of their thoughts, I want them to think about their sentences and to make something in which they can take a measure of pride. It’s difficult for them. They wring their hands in exhaustion, having handwritten a full-page of prose after so much time only typing. When I collect them—just to turn up the heat a bit—I say to make sure their names are atop the work. I tap the papers on my desk to neaten the pile and then tear the whole stack in half, once, twice, and then place them in the recycling bin.



Usually, someone curses. Someone else shouts “what?” Several gasp audibly as though I’d just stomped a beloved pet. I ask how they feel and the responses range between “angry” and “amused,” settling somewhere around “frustrated.” What I want them to feel is free.

Marie Kondo has built an entertainment empire out of helping people clean up their stuff, beginning with her *New York Times* bestseller “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying-Up,” extending through a slate of international speaking tours and YouTube videos about folding your socks, into its current incarnation as a Netflix series “Tidying Up with Marie Kondo.” The method is really about simplifying one’s life through developing a healthier relationship with our possessions. We shouldn’t keep anything around, Kondo advises, that doesn’t “spark joy.” When we get rid of something, Kondo recommends taking a moment to thank it—a worn-out shirt, an old photograph—for serving us.

It’s all a little silly of course, but is also surprisingly touching. Most of the clients on the show weep with thankfulness at the release they feel having organized their garages. Their lives seem actually and measurably changed.

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2. **“Seven Deadly Finns” — BRIA...** 3:10
3. **“OK” — ROCK FOLLIES OF 77** 3:34
4. **“Under Cover Of Darkness” ...** 3:57
5. **“Tainted Love” — GLORIA JONES** 2:15
6. **“A Lion In the Jungle” — CARL...** 2:28
7. **“Hey Bulldog” — FANNY** 3:55
8. **“Space Captain” — BARBRA S...** 3:19
9. **“Plundered My Soul” — THE ...** 3:48
10. **“Give It Up” — TALK TALK** 5:13
11. **“Spoiled” — CONOR OBERST & ...** 3:17
12. **“The Book Of You” — BELLE ...** 4:24
13. **“Sugar High” — STEPHEN DU...** 3:54
14. **“(Don't Go Back To) Rockvill...** 4:33
15. **“The Reason” — SON VOLT** 4:00
16. **“Hard Candy Christmas” — ...** 3:24
17. **“From Dust with Yours” — T...** 2:19
18. **“I Thought” — BRYAN FERRY** 5:41

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Part of the method's success is Kondo's own quirky charm, but part also must be the reformation of capitalism it implies. Most of us have lived our entire lives under advertising's insistence that we are, more or less, what we own: my sense of the responsibilities of manhood defined by the brand of razor I use, of patriotism by the brand of beer I drink, my strength and attractiveness measured by the number of seats and/or horsepower my primary vehicle does, or does not, have. And even if those narratives are not true all of the time for all of us, it does seem true that I am, for example, the fellow with those blue towels, who has won these awards in my garage, and who was married in that suit that no longer fits. I save them out of inertia, sure, but also as remembrances, as bricks in the foundation of this self as I understand it.

Kondo's revision is to teach her clients, in front of all of us, that they are more than that baggage. Their relationships matter more, their time matters more. They are more dignified than they understood themselves to be; are not, at base, equivalent to the junk they stow. Still, the contestants feel guilty about letting go of their stuff, guilty for having acquired so much in the first place, guilty for not wanting it anymore, for not loving it better. So Kondo has them thank the object, a little blessing turning guilt into gratitude. At the same time, Kondo is not so radical; the turn is from "you are what you have," to, as James K. A. Smith writes in his book of the same name, "you are what you love." At the show's end, clients still define themselves by their possessions, but only by the best ones, having gotten rid of the rest. The problem all along was not that capitalism erodes the modern self, but that these selves simply have too much stuff to love it all well.

My students face the inverse difficulty. Though they have arrived at a college composition course, they still have not written enough to value their creations rightly. Every artifact is precious because they have so few of them. It's a lesson that most human cultures have learned in one way or another. From ancient sacrificial systems, to the American Indian potlatch ethos expounded by Lewis Hyde, to tithing as a discipline for modern religious groups, even to the commercial where the rapper Lil Wayne pours a bottle of fine champagne on his phone to test its waterproof capabilities, the message is the same: true wealth means having enough to get rid of some of it, often in extravagant gestures.



This, I suspect, is behind one of the main difficulties professors have had in trying to teach revision. Over and over, we teach our students to revise their papers; we teach them the difference between revision and editing and over and over, every term, we get papers whose revision means a fixed citation, some newly misplaced commas, a few thesaurused words. Are we being unclear in our expectations? Are such concepts beyond a college freshman's intellectual reach? I don't think so. More likely, the students have a fundamental difficulty in letting go of things, like the grown woman on TV sobbing over tossing out a chipped coffee mug. Maybe they can't discard an ineffective sentence, or a badly-argued paragraph, due to a sense not of excess, like the over-stuffed garage people suffer from, but of scarcity. I am afraid that they, having created a paucity of prose artifacts in their lives so far, are all in drought mode, forced by poverty to become hoarders. It would make sense: having written between 0-3 things on which they have spent any considerable effort and in which they could possibly take pride, of course they are protective when we go poking around asking "does this still fit?" and "do you wear this anymore?"



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One way to help them out of this mindset is to try, through this little piece of theater, a staged catharsis, to show my students they are more than the sentences they have made, that like everyone, they probably have a bunch of junk lying around. My own extravagant gesture goes over well enough in the end. If course evaluations are to be believed, they appreciate it, after the initial shock. I've shown them they can afford more than they thought. Not to oversell the contribution, but I think some of them feel another self is possible, one that's less protective of one's work, less clingy about possessions, less fragile in the face of challenges. I want for them a sense of super-abundance borne not of the horde of possessions on which they rest, but of the competence and creativity they are even now developing, the sense that they can do without some things, can toss whole essays into the rubbish bin if they need to because they can always make more, as if by magic.



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2 comments

[Tim Burbery](#) says:
 Mar 23, 2019
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Fascinating and insightful — as an English professor I really resonate with this idea, of helping students cultivate a light touch with their work. I'm often amazed at how many of the great poets — Frost, Shakespeare, and others — include a number of mediocre works among their masterpieces. In fact, most of their published poems aren't great; only a handful are. But perhaps these writers learned to have the proper perspective on their stuff, and that enabled them to write masterpieces from time to time. Thanks for this inspiring column.

[Mischa Willett](#) says:
 Mar 26, 2019
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Thanks, Tim, for your kind reading. I agree about the uneven quality of arts, even among the greats and wonder similarly whether the adjudicating function is sometimes just less developed than the creative OR if, like parents, artists are just given to loving and looking past the flaws of their creations. In any case, you're right; perspective can be given/re-adjusted, which is all I'm trying to do with this exercise. Cheers!

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