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Christians and Stuff

Beyond downsizing and death-cleaning

MARCH 22, 2018 BY SUSAN VANZANTEN LEAVE A COMMENT

I'm moving from the West Coast to the Midwest in a few months, and, consequently, I've been thinking a lot lately about stuff—especially how much stuff I have stuffed into my house and office. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "stuff" has meant property, especially movable property, household goods or utensils, and furniture since the early fifteenth century. I've lived in Washington state for twenty-five years, plenty of time to accumulate many such possessions, so the question I now face is how much of my "stuff" truly is "movable property"? As I ponder the first-world scope of my possessions, I wonder, as a Christian, should I even own property? After all, in the early church, believers held everything in common, and the Hutterites and other Anabaptist groups have set admirable examples of how to live with few material belongings.

In a charming recent novel by Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, the Russian Count Alexander Rostov is sentenced to house arrest in 1922 by the new Stalinist government. When the Tsar was murdered in 1918, Rostov had downsized from his family's vast country estate and moved into the luxurious Metropol Hotel in the center of Moscow. Now he must give up his grandly appointed rooms and most of his remaining belongings to move into a cramped attic room at the hotel, where he lives for decades, courageously composing a rich life in the narrowest of circumstances:

'Tis a funny thing, reflected the Count as he stood ready to abandon his suite. From the earliest age, we must learn to say good-bye to friends and family. We see our parents and siblings off at the station; we visit cousins, attend schools, join the regiment; we marry, or travel abroad. [...]

But experience is less likely to teach us how to bid our dearest possessions adieu. And if it were to? We wouldn't welcome the education. For eventually, we come to hold our dearest possessions more closely than we hold our friends. We carry them from place to place, often at considerable expense and inconvenience; we dust and polish their surfaces and reprimand children for playing too roughly in their vicinity—all the while, allowing memories to invest them with greater and greater importance. [...] Until we imagine that these

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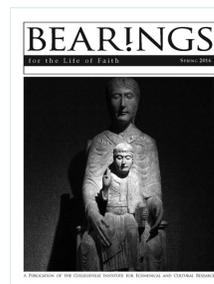
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carefully preserved possessions might give us genuine solace in the face of a lost companion.

But, of course, a thing is just a thing.

We all like our things. In a [2011 TED talk](#), Graham Hill notes that the personal storage industry in the U.S. is a \$22.2 billion dollar, 2.2 billion square foot behemoth, as people find it more difficult to get rid of their belongings. Hill claims “less stuff” results in “more happiness”; the same motivational rhetoric comes from international phenomenon Marie Kondo, who extols “the life-changing magic of tidying up” in four books that have sold millions of copies. Eliminating possessions results in a better life, Kondo claims. Her process has become renowned: hold an item in your hand and ask if it sparks joy in your soul. If it does, keep it, but if not, genuinely thank it for its past good work and toss it in that Value Village pile.



Another quirky international best-seller is [The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning](#), by Margareta Magnusson, who is “between 80 and 100,” as she notes several times in her brief guide on how to sort through and purge your possessions before you die. (She recommends you start the process at the age of 65.) Magnusson’s kindly but blunt grandmotherly advice is interspersed with her own delightful line drawings. While she identifies several personal

emotional benefits to death cleaning, Magnusson’s greater concern is how death cleaning serves to make our family’s life easier. “A loved one wishes to inherit nice things from you, not *all* things from you,” she gently admonishes. Her Golden Rule stance clearly contrasts with Kondo’s self-fulfillment mantra.

Things are only things, and we should hold them lightly, for material possessions are given to us by God so that we might be stewards—not hoarders, gloaters, or abusers. When we no longer fit into that gorgeous red silk dress, we should pass it on so someone else can enjoy wearing it. Our children’s outgrown toys may have nostalgic value to us, but much more use to a foster child served by agencies such as [Treehouse](#). On our block, we can share lawn mowers, folding chairs, and soup tureens; many Seattle neighborhood centers host “tool libraries,” along with the more traditional reading libraries. And Next Door and Craigslist provide new ways to hold stuff in common: allowing us to offer items for free to someone who can put them to good use.

Nonetheless, we have been created as embodied creatures, with senses designed to provide enjoyment and delight. “Taste and see that it is good,” God urges. “Celebrate my gifts in nature as well as in the beautiful and creative uses of the world dreamed up by my children.” Some things are so well crafted, or lovely, or ingenious, that we delight in the human imagination that brought them into being. Along those lines, I definitely have a soft spot for my kitchen garbage can, which pleasingly opens with a wave of my hand, and I have a genuine fondness for my deep soaking bathtub. As Count Rostov notes, Our most precious stuff finds its value in its associations with our family and friends, in the memories it evokes. The last thing he slips into his pocket as he leaves his splendid suite for his attic exile is his dead sister’s sewing scissors. One of my treasures is a brass gong hanging in my dining room that first summoned my grandfather to meals in the Netherlands, and then called my father and his five siblings to dinner in the United States.

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Ever since the time of Shakespeare, *stuff* also refers to what a person is made of, one’s capabilities or inward character. “We are such stuff as dreams are made on,” Prospero says about humanity in the conclusion of *The Tempest*. Human stuff includes the capacity for achievement, endurance, insight, relationships, and worship. Our material goods and our treatment of them should reflect the stuff of

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our character. Holding stuff lightly means being willing to give it up for the sake of others or the environment or circumstances, but it also means practicing gratitude as an everyday liturgy in our daily routine. Moving, downsizing, death-cleaning—these provide the high holy days of thanksgiving for stuff.

Both our holding on and letting go of possessions should involve joy.

Kondo and Magnusson each touch on some elements of the truth; both our holding on and letting go of possessions should involve joy, thanksgiving, love, and appreciation. Getting rid of things, however, does not eliminate the gifts they have given us, nor our memories of them. While I will be giving away much stuff in the next month, my garbage can and brass gong will go with me to Indiana. The soaking tub, alas, will only remain a warm, bubbly memory.

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