

Going down with the ship: a daughter's observations on hoarding

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Opinion

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Abstract

This essay is a first-person narrative of the author's experience as the child of a hoarder. It is published anonymously to protect the privacy of those discussed.

My father has always had a tortured relationship with the objects he possesses; perhaps it is more appropriate to say the objects that possess him. His hoarding was one factor – though certainly not the only one – that contributed to the demise of my parents' marriage. From the time I was very young, my father's garage served as an always-overflowing storage facility. To a child, the presence of a warehouse on the premises that was stuffed full of miscellaneous objects did not seem pathological, and even carried some charm. In fact, it inspired wonder. Our two-car garage was nearly impenetrable with towering stacks of newspapers, boxes of miscellaneous objects, obscure tools and various items stored solely for sentiment, off-season respite or the miniscule potential that they might be of use to someone at some other time. There were shelves to the ceiling crammed with bins of misplaced hardware and broken parts of things in a purgatory of repair, each awaiting a redemption that would likely never come. My father's garage was the Valhalla of fallen warriors from the army of objects that had once served my family well. There were also items of value and utility to be found in certain nooks and crannies – like the bicycle in the back corner, blocked by debris like an icebound ship – but these things rarely saw daylight because opening the overhead door invited the neighbour's eye and the cast of shame.

The narrow, labyrinthine passages through stacks and piles of accumulated artefacts in my father's garage provided a carnival fun house to the free-range kids in my neighbourhood. My older sister, our friends and I would search this lost island without a treasure map, occasionally discovering a prize, such as the faded rattle I recognised from infancy as if from a dream, or the enormous stack of Playboys I found strange and my father was infuriated to learn were pilfered by the older boys in our neighbourhood.

The garage was at once mysterious and dangerous, therefore irresistibly enticing. The mystery was born from both the excitement of unearthing buried treasure and the dissonance I felt trying to reconcile how this dirty, used up, broken down rubble could be so prized and evoke such passion from my otherwise phlegmatic father. The danger lay in trespassing in forbidden territory and the possibility of toppling some sacred, makeshift totem pole of junk, creating an avalanche capable of sweeping a kid off her feet or even burying her with little warning. Worse than these possibilities, however, was the fear of certain wrath from my father such a disruption would bring should we be caught. Whenever someone or something lost its balance in that precarious world, instant panic would erupt in a flurry of kids scurrying for daylight. But, more often than not, the offence would go unnoticed as we avoided the scene of the crime long enough for plausible deniability to set in and our curiosity and boredom to overpower our prudence. After my dad had been in and out of the garage multiple times on reconnaissance to retrieve some necessary tool or he had spent an afternoon 'cleaning out the garage', we would be right back at it, assured that any evidence of our mischief had been attributed to entropy and gravity – more powerful forces than us at work.

My dad's clutter could not be contained to the garage. It crept into the shared spaces of our home, its presence significantly affecting all of our lives. Stacks of newspapers reached the height of his recliner in the living room of the house he shared with my stepmother and my two younger half-sisters. Innumerable piles of bills, receipts, letters and notes covered the entire surface of their eight-person kitchen table, rendering it unusable for anything but a sorting and storage surface. Countertops, dressers, end tables and nightstands were designated for holding items, mostly documents, that my father insisted on keeping for security, consideration or future reference. And if something went missing, the uncertainty of its value elevated its perceived importance and his associated frenzy to find it. He was rigid to the point of being authoritarian about his things not being disturbed. My father's outbursts were terrifying. As a big man with a booming voice and weighty stare, his anger was paralyzing when directed at me. This was to be avoided at all costs.

Despite these circumstances, it took some time for me to realise that my father's inability to get rid of things was a real problem. In third grade, I learned about recycling when students were invited to bring in newspapers to contribute to a mass recycling drive. The classroom who collectively contributed the largest quantity would win a pizza party. Picturing those stacks of newspapers in my father's house, I was giddy with confidence: this was going to be a win-win! Finally, we had something useful to do with all those newspapers, and I would be the class hero for the stunning haul I would bring in. I was eager to share the proposal with my father, who I was sure had been awaiting an elegant solution to this ever-growing blight of papers. When I found his response to be chilly, I initially assumed he did not understand. When I tried launching into the explanation again, my father's stony face became set in a warning. My stepmother intervened by quickly explaining that these papers were important and must be kept. There would be no further conversation about recycling. I was crestfallen and confused.

As a child, the space that held my father's accumulation was like an island of lost treasure to discover, but now, in adulthood, I have come to think of it as a sinking pirate ship, drawn under water by the weight of its own precious cargo. And what has become even more clear: my father is going under with it, clinging to his loot. He is so burdened by his things and his inability to manage them that this struggle has not only come to define him, but it seems to have swallowed him whole. All my life I have watched him spend hour upon tedious hour, intent with focus as he counts and sorts and rearranges the most miniscule items while standing amidst a mountain of clutter. A mountain that is left to be moved for a day that has never come. The task of managing his things exhausts him mentally, emotionally, and physically and takes him away from engaging with his family and enjoying his life. Sorting and deciding what to do with each item is painful for him, it is punishment. And he seems to feel he deserves the self-inflicted torture for his failure to manage the mess. Even when he is not sorting or reorganising, he flagellates himself with demoralising self-talk. His inner dialogue and external commentary frequently perseverate on the idea that he is forgetful, absent-minded, or losing his memory. He constantly tells himself he has so much to do, not enough time to do it, and he is too overwhelmed to even begin.

Despite the self-loathing rooted in his failure to accomplish tasks, any offers to help him or motivate him towards his stated goal tend to incite rage. He is intent on doing it all on his own and has only rarely admitted that he needs help. In the past, we spent a few family weekends together clearing things out of the house and attending to neglected landscaping and other home maintenance projects that had fallen to the wayside. During these short bursts of combining our efforts, my father's job was always to work on the garage. Usually he worked alone, but occasionally he would let one of my younger, more mild-mannered siblings assist him. Inevitably, my sister's efforts would end in tears after she probed too much, pressed too hard, or touched the wrong thing. The last time we all pitched in like this was the summer before my stepmother died from a prolonged battle with cancer. All four of us girls, our partners, my stepmother and father worked diligently over a long weekend. We rented a dumpster, filled it to capacity, and still only managed to barely make a dent in the garage.

My stepmother, who was 12 years younger than my father and reasonably expected to outlive him, died from metastatic breast cancer almost a decade ago. With her death, not only did my father

lose any boundaries that she had set for containing his clutter, he also lost any confidence in the structure of his life. So certain was he that she would outlive him, that she never carried a substantial life insurance policy. As his grief threatened to bury my father under the weight of this earth-shattering loss, so did the things he kept. His hoarding became more pronounced and debilitating and his inner critic became harsher and more punitive. He has never been an expert at recalling information he did not study and rehearse, but with age these details have become more slippery for him. Whether it is a sports stat, the details of an appointment, a missed birthday, or a memory from long ago, each loss torments him. And the torment keeps him preoccupied with the loss and escalates the cycle of despondency and hoarding. He dreads letting things go because to lose them might mean to lose something more than the object: a memory, a responsibility, a piece of information vital to the survival of his integrity, utility, purpose and meaning.

In time, after my stepmother died, my father stopped accepting visitors and eventually stopped letting any of us enter his home. He had supported my stepmother throughout the 12 years of chemo, radiation and surgery she endured, and then moved forward alone to face prostate cancer and pancreatic cancer without the support of his partner by his side. But he did have his daughters. Prior to the complex gastrointestinal surgery that saved him from pancreatic cancer, he allowed my three sisters (who still live in close proximity to him) to help him prepare his home for his return from surgery. Although I encouraged them to employ the service of professionals, there was no time for the slow, therapy-guided process that would promote lasting change. Besides, my father was too proud and ashamed to allow strangers inside his home. Allowing my sisters inside was a disgrace he permitted only because he understood the dire importance of a clean environment to convalesce from his procedure. I was not there in person, but I saw pictures and heard the reports. The state of his home had reached a level of squalor, only then apparent to us for the first time.

His recovery from surgery was long and complicated. His extreme nausea, pain and the insistence of his medical staff that his anti-depressant medications be discontinued as they were 'non-essential' severely exacerbated my father's depression. After he was physically stable, the depths of his mental state finally drove him to visit a psychiatrist for the first time. Whereas he had previously depended on his primary care physician to diagnose his myriad mental health concerns and manage his psychiatric meds, for the first time he received expert care and took steps towards a stable and effective psychiatric regimen. Then another catastrophe occurred. My dad's description of the state of dishes, boxes and papers atop his kitchen counters and stove raised the concern of a psychiatry fellow who saw my father at one visit, and Adult Protective Services was called. He was offended, ashamed and enraged. He dealt with the situation by refusing to let the social worker into his home and vowing never to see a psychiatrist again.

Since that time, my father has continued to shut the world out of his home. His mental state has continued to decline and he has stopped attending the church that, for decades, he was even more fanatical about than his possessions. It is heartbreaking to talk to him and hear his once commanding voice weakened by the dark forces that keep him confined to a prison of his own design. By my father's account, things in the house are worse now than they were prior to his surgery 2 years ago. He constantly complains that his medications are not working and then admits that he is inconsistent in taking them. Occasionally, he will let it slip that he has not been to the grocery store in weeks or that he has not fed or let out

his dog in days. This is when I consider the wisdom of calling Adult Protective Services myself, but so far I have refrained as we have been able to problem-solve each crisis. Periodically, he implores my sisters to help him clear out his house again or claims that he is ready to just abandon the house and everything in it and find a new place to live. I see these moments as hopeful and try gently to reopen discussion about assisted care communities, which he quickly dismisses.

As an adult and a psychologist, I understand that my father's hoarding is the byproduct of multiple untreated or under-treated mental health conditions – obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), depression and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) – that make the mental and emotional task of sorting, deciding and discarding extremely difficult, if not immobilising. I know that a

new residence is not going to resolve these underlying issues or his problematic relationship with things and his clutter will follow him wherever he goes. As a daughter living several hundred miles from him, my despair over the pervasive toll hoarding has taken on my father's life is jostled together with the hope that he can still dig out of this morass and recover his life. While I know it is out of my control, I hope he will live to embrace a life free of the burden and self-loathing his possessions bring him. My sisters and I aspire to find for him some living arrangement that can help him minimise his accumulation and maximise his consistency with basic activities of daily living and self-care. The question that tugs at our hearts as we imagine the possibilities of tomorrow is this: will he ever embrace the life preservers we have tried in vain to extend, or will he continue to go down with the ship?

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