

## **The Long Haul: Reflections on Decluttering**

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**Abstract:** This photo essay illustrates my journey of decluttering my childhood home. I have spent eight-months decluttering so far. Interestingly, I initially planned to declutter quietly and not document my experience. But the more I decluttered, the more I felt there was a story to tell, a cautionary tale of sorts. In this essay, I document my reflections on decluttering and raise questions about Western consumer culture. Logos and brand names have intentionally been edited/removed from photos.

**Keywords:** decluttering, unsustainable consumption and waste, consumer culture, consumption studies

It was early January. I was sitting in my parents' basement when I noticed a box tucked away on a bookshelf. I was curious. So, I opened the box. It was full of stuff: pens, postcards, a telephone directory. There was also a deck of cards, a bag of buttons, and a few family photos in the box. I stopped to look at one photo. It was a picture of me with my grandmother circa 1996. Opening this box started me on a journey. It led me to decluttering my childhood home.

My parents live in a detached bungalow, located in a suburb of Ontario, Canada. They have lived in this house since the late 1970s. I grew up in this house. This house has three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a 1.5 car garage. Floor plans indicate that there is a total floor space of 2200 square feet, with a lot size of 50' x 110'. While I consider this fairly spacious, all this space was the perfect storm. It provided room to store stuff.



**Exploring the Stuff: Not All Fun and Games**

Stuff did not just happen. Rather it was accumulated over many years. Growing up, I remember my parents spending weekends driving to big-box stores to buy groceries and other things like tools and building supplies for home repairs. Cans of paint, carpets, flashlights, screwdriver and wrench sets: it was all stuff that my dad could not resist buying, especially when on sale or discounted (see Khan et al., 2019). Other stuff like clothes, books, furniture, board games, stereo equipment, antiques, and dishes were given to my parents from relatives and friends or found at thrift stores. Many times, before school, I remember my father stopping the car to pick-up 'free' stuff left on the curb. Now, decades later, I was sitting in a graveyard of stuff. Some of this stuff

was left in its original packaging, price tags intact. Feeling sick to my stomach, I knew that this was a mess I would eventually inherit. I had the sudden urge to declutter (see also Hall, 2020).

Decluttering is a growing trend. This is evidenced by ‘decluttering’ having more than 44 million hits on Google. There are books on decluttering (e.g., Silverthorn, 2017), articles (e.g., Marx, 2022), blog posts (e.g., Gordon, 2023), TV shows (e.g., Berman & Kondo, 2019), podcast episodes (e.g., Mills, 2023). There are even decluttering experts (e.g., This Girl Can Organise, n.d.). The Cambridge Dictionary defines *decluttering* as an action, where the objective is “to remove things you do not need from a place, in order to make it more pleasant and more useful”. Lee (2017) states, “While the process of tidying things up is considered mundane, the domestic order is often linked to consumer tranquility” (p. 454). Muster et al. (2022) characterize “decluttering... between housework and self-care” (p. 1).



**Exploring the Stuff: This Fairytale Needs a Sustainable Ending**

For me, decluttering my parents’ home was work, a laborious process. But it was also an emotional experience. I was delighted to find dolls and teddy bears that I played with as a child. I always liked my science kit and xylophone. Finding the VCR player, I snacked on popcorn and watched my favorite ‘90s movie on VHS. The picture was fuzzy but the movie still made me cry. One rainy afternoon, with board games stacked around me, I sat in the hallway and played a game of Tiddlywinks. At one point, I sipped on tea and reminisced with my mother over old arts and crafts supplies. Nostalgia was seeping in. I was getting sentimental.

Batcho explains nostalgia as an emotion or feeling, where one remembers their past and longs to return to it, aching to re-experience what once was (Luna, 2019). For Batcho, nostalgia can



toss everything into it. It would have saved me hours, days, months. Instead I chose a sustainable approach (see Muster et al., 2022). This meant washing, sewing, glueing, and mending anything salvageable and then dropping it off to a non-profit thrift store two miles down the road. Sometimes I walked to get to the thrift store. Most times I carpooled.

There was a designated donation center at the back of the thrift store. Large blue trolley bins were lined up, welcoming donations. When these bins were full, staff would wheel them inside to be emptied. On a few occasions, I took a look inside the center to get a closer look at the donating process. I watched as thrift store staff rushed to organize and sort through donations. There was barely any floor space to walk. Rugs, clothes, computer printers, shoes, suitcases, books, toys, sports equipment, furniture, artwork, and small appliances like toasters were piled high to the ceiling. It looked like a game of Jenga where, at any minute, things were going to topple.



Exploring the Stuff: I Used to Roller Skate

After donating, I would often hear a thrift store employee shout “wait a minute” and then smiling, hand me a coupon. In large bold font, the coupon read: “Thank You For Giving Generously” and “20% OFF your next purchase of \$20 or more”. Each time I donated, I received a coupon. By the end, I had accumulated 10 or more. These coupons invited me to thrift shop, to experience the thrill of finding that one-of-a-kind item (see Sicurella, 2021). These coupons were also a “scheme” (Kadoya et al., 2020, p. 1), “designed to improve consumer spending” (p. 3). Thrifting or buying vintage has become big business, a “\$28 billion industry” (Sicurella, 2021, para. 5).

Although I was a thrifter, somewhere between cleaning up and donating, owning more stuff lost its appeal. The more time I spent sorting through stuff, the more I questioned its value, purpose, and relevancy. Thinking about my own mortality, everything I own, at some point, will be passed on or donated and burden the Earth. Is materialism the “legacy” we want to leave behind (see Mills, 2023)? Taking multiple trips to the thrift store, being privy to behind the scenes, seeing the piles of unwanted things, made me confront the realities of mass consumption and waste (see also Sabanoglu, 2024).

Donating is a stopgap measure, helping “to keep the items out of landfills for longer” (Wells, 2022, “Choose where to donate,” para. 5). But was there a way to stop the waste or at the very least slow it down? How might we as a society reduce our consumption and waste and adopt more sustainable lifestyles? Below, I describe five popular sustainability strategies: minimalism, sharing, self-audits, thriftiness, and eco-challenges.



**Exploring the Stuff: Plastic Colonizer**

Minimalism is a growing movement in the West. Martin-Woodhead (2022) portrays minimalism as “voluntarily reducing consumption and lessening, limiting and maintaining the number of possessions owned to a bare minimum” (p. 1012). In his TED Talk, *Less Stuff, More Happiness*, Graham Hill speaks about minimalism being key to a happier life. Hill states that owning less stuff, owning stuff that is more efficient (multi-functional), and living in smaller spaces reduces financial stressors, environmental footprints and provides more personal freedom (TED, 2011). In support of minimalism, Shearer and Burton (2021) state that people in Western countries are choosing to voluntarily downsize and live in smaller spaces like vans and tiny homes. “The [tiny house] movement” Wilson and Wadham (2023) state, “is frequently linked to Thoreau’s ideas of

simple living and its relationship to questions of freedom, sustainability and economic security” (p. 332).

Another option is sharing. An increasing number of organizations and community programs are part of the Sharing Economy, which is based on communities and individuals using, renting, and sharing resources (e.g., Cooper & Timmer, 2015; Sanders, 2019; TED, 2023). Nonprofit organizations like Little Free Library (2022) promote book-exchange. The Buy Nothing Project (2024) has a broader goal of sharing anything and everything for free. Also, at various libraries across Canada and the United States, books and other things can be borrowed like camera equipment, board games, telescopes, fishing kits, musical instruments, and tools (e.g., Barrie Public Library, 2023; Brampton Library, 2023; Grande Prairie Public Library, 2023; Prescott Public Library, n.d.).

What about auditing our consumption and waste? At University of California, Savageau (2013) teaches a sustainable design course and begins this course with students performing a three-day audit of the water, gasoline, and electricity they use, and what they throw in the trash. Having implemented this audit in her course for years, Savageau finds a reoccurring pattern: students are generally shocked by their audit results and convey an interest in changing their behaviors. “The results of this audit” Savageau argues, “suggest that it can lay the groundwork for real behavioral change when paired with self-reflection and other activities” (p. 22). Savageau mentions that she couples this audit activity with an excursion to a local landfill and recycling facility. This helps to strengthen “the urgency of changing consumption and waste behavior and leads to class discussions on the role and responsibility of designers as well as consumers in today’s consumer culture” (p. 22).



**Cleaning the Stuff: I Am Not Golfing Around**

You can also be thrifty. Dent defines *thrifting* as finding new uses for things, giving stuff “a second life, or third life or fourth life” (TED, 2018). This means reusing stuff, upcycling things, reimagining, repurposing and wasting nothing. For some upcycling inspiration, see Upcycle That (2017) and Kruger (2023).

Lastly, eco-challenges are another way to encourage sustainable change. At University of the Sunshine Coast in Australia, Maher and Burkhart (2017) describe students in a food and nutrition course taking part in an “eco-friendly food challenge”, where they blogged about and reflected on their experience of buying local and seasonal foods, reducing their food waste, and lowering their consumption of meat (p. 1108). Maher and Burkhart state that this food challenge aimed to advance student knowledge of “sustainable food systems and dietary practices” (p. 1108). Other popular eco-challenges include the zero waste challenge (e.g., Worcestershire County Council, n.d.) and the commuter challenge (e.g., Global Cycling Network, 2022). To engage more deeply with the issue of consumption and waste, see Hansen and Nielsen (2023).



**Donating the Stuff: The Send-Off**

The above sustainability strategies present a way for individuals to support sustainability in their daily lives. I consider this positive. But many contend that change for sustainability is beyond the individual, that it is the responsibility of corporations and other large organizations. I recognize this argument but believe that we are in this together. Sustainability is not *your* responsibility or *their* responsibility but rather *our* collective responsibility as a global community (see also Monbiot, 2021).



What good is stuff on a burning planet? I wrote this article when wildfires were burning across Canada and evacuation orders issued due to the ongoing blaze (see Cabral, 2023). Terrifying moments like this, the new reality of a climate changing world, helps to put things in perspective and what really counts: air, water, soil, and a livable planet for present and future generations. We can live without the material stuff like fast fashion, throw pillows, and fancy dinnerware sets. But we cannot live without a planet.

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