“Spark Joy! The Spirituality of Stuff”
May 5, 2019
The Rev. Heather Janules

I was about eight or ten years old, visiting my cousins in rural New Hampshire, when we embarked on an adventure. My cousins lived on a quiet street, their trailer at the edge of a thick forest. I grew up in a time when people didn’t worry so much about where kids were at any given moment. We three girls could explore this natural wonderland unsupervised. Such freedom! But my aunt did give us one admonition before we ran out the door: “Whatever you do, don’t go into the abandoned house.”

She was talking about a two-story farmhouse, just one lot over. The peeling grey paint and cracked windows suggested it stood empty for many years.

Within the hour – you guessed it – we were in the farmhouse. Creaking open the old door thrilled me. It was not just the excitement of disobeying the grownups but the illicit feeling one gets by entering into someone else’s space, unannounced and uninvited. We were convinced the house was haunted.

I never saw a ghost as I wandered through but I did see something that frightened me. Whoever lived there seemed to have left in a hurry. There were still dishes in the cabinets and coats in the hall closet. I remember children’s drawings hung on a now-dated refrigerator. A family once lived here and inexplicably left behind all these objects, like fossils or forensic evidence of a crime. Who were these people and why did they leave all their things? The possibilities filled our dramatic imaginations. We picked up a few random items; I took some movie magazines, featuring stars from the 1950’s. We left with our trophies and unanswered questions.

Last summer, I drove down Day Road in a nostalgic moment. Across the street from my aunt’s old trailer, now there is no farmhouse, only an open field. I could not even find the foundation where it once stood. If I hadn’t remembered our guilty adventure, I would never have known that a movie-loving family with young children once called this tiny part of rural New England home.

Since that furtive exploration of the forbidden house, I have thought about this family, their life in that house and their fate many times. And, in a broader sense, I have thought about our physical possessions. I have thought about our "stuff." I have wondered what our things – our dishes and coats and drawings and magazines, singularly and together - say about us and about our lives.

These thoughts come to mind as our relationship with our stuff has become a popular culture obsession through enthusiasm for Japanese consultant Marie Kondö's approach to decluttering. And these thoughts come to mind as we here at the Winchester Unitarian Society prepare for an occasional and important sacrament among our people: the rummage sale. Donate, volunteer and be there! As part of my exploration of "the spirituality of stuff," I have decorated the chancel with some choice selections from what has already been donated to this effort.

When I consider our relationship with stuff, I begin by considering how people experience and live in different environments. Perhaps it is the classic "nature/nurture" debate but I wonder if how we manage our physical spaces is an innate tendency, something we learn…or both.

Take my extended family as an example. My grandmother was famous for the intensity she brought to housekeeping, exemplified by her habit of vacuuming the ceiling. And, as the family interior decorator, her formal style may have "sparked joy" in some – to use Marie Kondö's famous phrase - but was hard-pressed to spark warmth or comfort.

Her son – my father – has a radically different approach. I cherish my father's eye for beauty, revealed through his exquisite nature photography. And, yet, his domestic spaces are full of random things – chipped figurines he picks up at the Swap Shop at his transfer station, displayed randomly throughout the house. He doesn't seem like the "Precious Moments" type but…there they are. There are also decades of bits of twine and carpet from past projects as "you never know when you might need some" and appliances that broke long ago but have never made it to the aforementioned transfer station themselves.

I have a hunch that his seemingly chaotic relationship with stuff is a defensive response to the stark environment of his childhood. Which may explain why I am

somewhere between these two extremes. Clutter makes me anxious, perhaps the same way one feels when they see the river rising over its banks outside their window. Stuff without clear purpose or without a permanent storage place presents itself to me like a problem to be solved, a problem that will only get worse if I don't do something about it. Soon. I know life is particularly overwhelming when my house or my office become cluttered. And if I feel overwhelmed, a sure way to calm me down is to make my living and work spaces clean and orderly again. But, I am messy enough that my grandmother would likely be horrified.

I read Marie Kondö's book, "The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing" as today's primary text. In her book, Marie Kondö shares her own response to different environments, recalling the early signs that tidying was her life's calling.

In Marie Kondö's elementary school, the children were all invited to claim a chore in the classroom. She was the only one who volunteered as the "bookshelf organizer." While some children become obsessed with with things like dinosaurs, superheroes or ponies, Marie Kondö was fixated on different methods and tools for space organization, reviewing and reorganizing her possessions many times over.

Once she achieved the height of tidying in her bedroom, she tried to address the rest of her childhood home. However, her siblings and parents weren't interested in tidying. So Kondö decluttered the family home without them knowing. She would identify items people weren't using and hide them in the back of a closet. If the owner did not ask about them for a few months, she would get rid of them. Occasionally, her family members would ask Marie if she got rid of their things and she would lie. In time, Marie Kondö developed an ethic of decluttering and tidying, never again discarding items without the owner's permission. Having watched some of her program on Netflix, she seems to feel an impish glee when she enters a highly-cluttered space, just waiting for her administrations. Marie Kondö's passion for tidying still seems strong.

Perhaps some struggle with the idea that there is a "spirituality of stuff" at all. Yet, I find it noteworthy that Kondö once worked as a "miko" or attendant

maiden at a Shinto shrine, whose tasks include cleansing the shrine.[1] If there is no "spirituality of stuff" then there is no "spirituality of space" and a visit to a shrine or this very sanctuary affirms that buildings can be dwelling places for the soul. As comedian George Carlin affirmed in his famous monologue, "That's all your house is: a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time."[2] House or home, temple, church or mosque - physical places and their objects within can have transcendent dimensions.

Marie Kondö's book offers us two important spiritual lessons: We are in relationship with all our possessions and exploring these relationships reveals our true selves.

Theologian Martin Buber is remembered for his understanding of the "I/Thou" relationship, a connection between two things in which one perceives the other not as an object – part of the world of sensation - but as a limitless expression of the divine – part of the world of relation. To Buber, each "I/Thou" bond serves as a microcosm of God, the ultimate Thou[3]

I have been inspired by Buber's ideas in my relationships with other people and with living things but I confess I struggle with some of Marie Kondö's insistence that we approach our possessions in a relational way. For example, I was taught that, while folding laundry, you line socks one on top of another, roll them into a ball and stretch the outer sock around the ball to keep the two socks of the pair together. Yet, Marie Kondö chastises one of her clients for using this very method as it demonstrates *profound disrespect* to the socks. They work hard, she reminds us, and they have to rest. They cannot rest if they are balled and thrown into a drawer like a bunch of potatoes in an old box.

Yet, some of her suggestions invite me to think about how I understand my home and how my behavior within my home shapes that experience. What would it be like if I followed Marie Kondö's example and greeted my house when I got back from church every day with, "Hello, I'm home!" What if I thanked my house for providing me shelter from the rain and wind?

---

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie_Kondo
[2] https://www.thefrug.com/george-carlin-stuff/
[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_and_Thou

While these ideas feel a little strange to me, they are practices born of awareness and expressions of gratitude. And when my feet are cold and wet, there is nothing I want more than a pair of clean and dry socks. I am deeply and profoundly grateful for something as simple as a pair of socks in such moments. In this way, I can see how I have a relationship with socks and how they do work hard to make my life better. Maybe I should find a way to show them some respect.

Marie Kondö also teaches us that by listening to our intuition, our "voice still and small," as we evaluate our possessions, we gain awareness of "what [our] true values are" and [what is really important to [us] in…life." As named in today's reading, by going through all our stuff and keeping only what inspires joy, we may find our way towards "enjoying life according to [our] own standards." Kondö has many stories of people who change their lives in other ways, leaving jobs or beginning relationships, after they assess their possessions through the Konmari method.

While known for decluttering, Konmari is really about selecting only the things that reflect our true identity and current life. So often, she argues, our attachment to objects is rooted in memories of the past – which includes feeling obliged to those who give us gifts – or anticipating an unknown future. But if we evaluate all we own in a tangible, tactile way – taking books off of shelves and photos out of albums – and truly pay attention to our response, we know what "sparks joy" and what does not authentically belong to us.

Take, for example, this wooden Chinese lunchbox. I received this unique item many years ago as a gift from a fellow seminarian for feeding her cats when she was out-of-town. While I have always liked the lunch box, I have never carried my lunch in it. And I am fond of my colleague but I would not describe us as close. It's only purpose has been to be something interesting to look at in my house.

After reading Kondö's book, I saw the lunchbox in a new way. I was honest with myself; it does not really "spark joy." So, following Kondö's advice, I had a silent conversation with the lunchbox: "Thank you for being part of my home for so many years. I appreciate you for reminding me of my colleague's gratitude. I send you on your way with affection."

Unfortunately, the lunchbox has already been promised to another colleague who gathers unusual items. His delight in adding it to his collection of swords, taxidermized alligator parts and many strange boxes does bring me joy. Maybe another one will be available at the rummage sale.

Perhaps the most profound example of how one's relationship with stuff reveals their true selves is a story I heard from a hospice chaplain.[4] She was providing ministry to a dying patient and his family. At the very end of his life, at a time when he could hardly move or speak, he suddenly rose from his bed and spent the next twenty-four hours going through his house, emptying the cabinets and drawers and then putting everything back. When this strange ritual was complete, he lay down and soon thereafter breathed his last.

The chaplain understands this man's final act as part of the natural process of dying. As we prepare for death, we often undergo a "life review" in order to make sense of the past and bring our lives to closure. Perhaps this was an embodied way this man "put his life in order," allowing him to surrender to whatever comes next.

Last weekend, I was one of the Winchester Unitarian Society members participating in Service Day at the UU Urban Ministry. It was a great day, sorting and bagging food for distribution to the Roxbury community and, with the time that remained, planting flowers in large pots near the front door of the Education and Justice Center.

Right before we were to leave, we met an archeologist from the City of Boston. Joe Bagley and his team are digging small holes throughout the property to see what dwells beneath the earth before the Urban Ministry undertakes landscape modifications.[5]

Through an informal discussion and exhibit, Bagley showed us some of the objects unearthed from the Meetinghouse yard, such as a chip of stone, assumed to be a piece broken off when an American Indian sculpted an axe or knife. He also passed around a small slate pencil, dug up from an area along the street. The

[4] http://www.thebrickwall2.com/topics.html
[5] https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Beyond-our-gates.html?soid=1100344840223&aid=6ludGJ525Qk

archeologists believe that the pencil was from one of the students who walked to school along this road in colonial times.

Who are these people who left these things behind, hundreds or thousands of years ago? How did they experience the objects in their lives? If these items could speak, what story might they tell?

Did the student find joy in their studies? Did the Indian find joy in their labor? Decades from now, what might our things say about us when they are pulled from the earth?

We write part of the story of our lives in the language of our possessions. May we live with intention. May we live in joy.