

Wyoming Tribune Eagle Column of January 5, 2017: “Time to clean up your cluttered life.”

Now that we are past the season of given and receiving, it's time for collecting, saving and hoarding what we've been given or have acquired. Once again, the cycles of excess spin in their grooves.

A woman acquaintance who is close to eighty likes to collect crèches. She owns hundreds of them, probably well over a thousand. Years ago, once her friends caught on to her attachment, every birthday- or Christmas gift became a crèche. People brought them from distant lands, colorful, unique, interesting. What will become of the collection? Children and grandchildren have said they don't have use for more than two at the most.

During my sewing years I saved every pattern I ever used, though I knew full well I'd never use it again. I also saved every last scrap of left-over fabric, thinking it could be handy for repairs, quilting, or what not. It never did.

Ditto with sheet music and music books. I have songbooks in German that go back decades, their spines coming unglued. Occasionally I leaf through them, hum this or that tune, regret that no one but myself is interested in any of this.

A man I know collects antique tools, anvils to lathes. He finds them in junk yards, at auctions, through word of mouth. He'd put them to use once he retired, he thought, but it's been twenty years and he hasn't touched a thing except to make room for more. One time he showed me his workshop-cum-storage; it's stuffed to the gills.

Sometimes, knowing the burden for those who come after, we may force ourselves to throw something in the trash or recycle bin. But many of these possessions have acquired a place at the table, so to speak, and we've become fond of our guests. We know that collecting stuff can turn into an obsession, having observed crotchety elders' rooms and hallways stacked with every magazine and newspaper that ever was relevant; still, inertia often gains the upper hand. We prefer not to think about our impending demise. We'd rather not picture disgruntled heirs combing through our outmoded things.

T. C. Boyle's story, “Filthy with Things” can be a call to action in any of the above scenarios. Julian and Marsha, husband and wife, are obsessed with antiques— one-of-a-kind, “precious and unattainable” antiques. Problem is, they've run out of space. The pool house, the pool, the prefab storage sheds, the crammed closets, the unlivable living room: everything is filled to the brim. Julian has just signed off on delivery of a mahogany highboy that won't fit into the overburdened patio when his wife drives up with a piece of furniture strapped to her Land Rover, calling, “Julian! Wait till you see what I found!”

The next scene has Julian negotiating, “in the narrow footpath between the canyons of furniture that obscure the walls, the fireplace, even the ceiling,” with an “Organizer” who says she's seen worse. Susan Certain implies she has worked with “the Liberaces, the Warhols, the Nancy Reagan . . . You remember Imelda Marcos? Twenty-seven hundred pairs of shoes alone.” Certain serves as a purifying stream, she says, a cleansing torrent. “You're dirty with things, Mr. Laxner, filthy, up to your ears in muck.” Silently he agrees but brightens when she promises, “I'll make a new man out of you.”

She whips out a contract. She needs seven days, seven short days, to have everything under control. “We'll inventory everything,” she promises. “All we need is your go-ahead.”

He wants to consult with his wife, but Certain asks about the upstairs room. “Come now, come clean. All those charts and telescopes, the books—there must be a thousand of them.”

He's an amateur astronomer, he says, but teaches a class on the subject at the community college.

"You intellectuals," she tells him, "you're the worst."

When he protests that the one with compulsions is Marsha, she cut him short "It takes two to tango, Mr. Laxner, the pathological aggregator and the enabler."

On a pad from her briefcase she jots down figures, inquires about "family money." He mentions an inheritance. She regales him with anecdotes, informs him she'll charge a thousand dollars a day.

He gasps, protests. She reminds him he is dirty, he is "filthy. And I'm the only one to make you clean again." He signs.

The following evening, just after supper, Susan Certaine arrives, as arranged, with a psychologist to persuade Marsha. It takes some doing, but the team prevails. The next morning, at the stroke of seven, the movers arrive. Certaine suggests the couple stay a hotel for the duration. They do—and when they return seven days later, their house has been stripped clean. Not even a coat hanger is left. The contract, however, specifies small amends: for sixty days, they may reclaim one item per day.

That's all he wrote. It's a message worth pondering.