

Too Much Stuff
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In May, I unexpectedly spent a week in hospital. As I got better, I got bored. So, I started scrolling the internet to find something to amuse myself while I waited to go home.

There's a lot of stuff on the internet, you know? Not all of it amusing or inspiring, but I did find two posts that intrigued me. So I clicked on the sites and went to learn more.

One is Treasure Hunting with Jesus, where Stephen Frazier purchases abandoned storage units in the United States, clears them out, and resells or redistributes the items of value he uncovers. This is how he makes his living and supports his extended family [who are involved in the business.] He uses social media to enhance his income, does charitable work in his community, and offers instruction in how to use storage unit sales as your life's work.

The second is Jocelyn Elizabeth, better known as the Crazy Lamp Lady. She frequents garage sales, antique malls, and Goodwill (in western Pennsylvania) to source antiques and unique décor which she sells on her website Niknax. Jocelyn started about 14 years ago when she became a single mom and couldn't find a "regular" job. Reselling was already her hobby, she just turned it into a full-time pursuit.

Of course, there are plenty of other people who do the same things to make a profit. These were just the ones that appealed to me. I was impressed with how the resellers quickly figured out how to separate items worth selling from those not worth their effort. Pursuing this form of self-employment seems to meet the needs of the resellers, who describe themselves as having learning challenges, personality quirks and concerns, and individual preferences for independence and running their own businesses. It works for them.

While the resellers are focused on what they can salvage for a profit, I noticed all of the "stuff" they didn't identify as worthwhile. In the scene behind each are huge quantities of boxes, totes, bags, and shelves filled with trash, items that are broken or worn-out, things that have never been opened or used. Goodwill's shelves are crammed with donations that are chipped or cracked, clothes in poor shape, appliances not working.

At some point, when these items don't sell, they're removed from the shelves and distributed to other dealers or sent to a landfill.

Storage units vary in size, from 5' x 5' to 10' x 25' – almost all of them packed to the ceiling with boxes, furniture, plastic totes, and stuff. When Jebus opens these up on camera, many are filled with literal trash – garbage, old food, worthless paperwork, and so forth.

The same thing will happen to much of this stuff, it's on its way to a landfill if it can't be donated, sold in a yard sale, or listed on specialty websites for reselling.

There's too much stuff. In much of the world's developed countries, we simply have too much product to adequately meet consumer demand.

More is produced that can be consumed, whether it's food or clothes or personal hygiene, or whatever.

And, in some third-world countries, there's too much stuff, too, but it's not their stuff, it's our old, unsold, or used stuff that we export to them to deal with. I'm sure many of you have seen the piles of used clothing or electronic devices in India or Africa that are picked over for anything of value to support families in these “unseen to us” corners of the world.

In the US and Canada combined, there are approximately 3200 Goodwill stores. Of course, both countries are also home to other antique stores, charity shops, and resellers. The US has over 52,000 storage facilities, while Canada has about 3400. They are all full of stuff. As are garages, basements, spare rooms, sheds, barns, and cupboards across the land. Only 25% of people with two car garages ever park in them at all. That means there must be a lot of stuff.

In 2021, Canadians generated 26 million tonnes of material that went into 19 landfills and multiple dumping sites. The US contributed 265 million tonnes to their 3200 landfills. That's only two of the world's countries. Imagine the amount if we considered all of the world's populations. And many of the world's countries have inadequate waste disposal strategies, using the oceans or wilderness spaces as dumping grounds despite treaties or agreements not to do so.

That tonnage of garbage represents resources pulled from the earth, modified or restructured or manufactured into the myriad things we use every day. At the end of its useful life, we toss packaging, appliances, electronics, food waste, and unused products into the trash.

Some of it gets recycled and repurposed. Some enterprising individuals pursue “dumpster diving” to recapture usable products – even food – which they use themselves or donate to community hubs for redistribution. Reports are that this has become increasingly popular as prices have risen in the last year or so.

If you want to hear a funny take on stuff, be sure to seek out George Carlin's comedy routine titled "Stuff." His starting premise is that life is really about just trying to find a place to put our stuff. Quite insightful – as Mr. Carlin's legacy demonstrates.

Why is there so much stuff?

Ultimately, it's a cultural question. We have constructed our lives to be dependent on stuff. The Canadian Dream of peace and stability, a strong social safety net, and inclusion is being bombarded with a call for changes, especially in affordability and sustainability.

Our economic model is formulated on production – making, marketing, and selling stuff to make a profit for shareholders and to pour money back into the system to make more. There is an emphasis on having more, needing more, buying more. There is an appeal to human foibles – having more and better stuff than your neighbours, being able to demonstrate your success because you have the means to purchase and use "preferred" or up market goods. We learn quickly which purchasing outlets demonstrate one's good taste or wealth – patronizing at Loblaws, for example, or T&T Supermarkets as opposed to Giant Tiger or No Frills.

In 1949, the average house was 909 sq. ft., with one washroom. Now, that figure is 2480 sq. ft. with multiple bathrooms. If you have more house, you need more stuff. And, sometimes things do break or quit working and we need to replace them. But more often, we get more

stuff because we are into collecting – and there are multiple producers of special collectibles – plates, statuettes, figurines, dolls and so forth. Perhaps we've developed a hoarding mentality and our house is packed with stuff. Maybe we have generous friends and family who give us gifts which we feel we must display, use, or acknowledge in our home.

Perhaps we inherit special items from our extended family – dishware, serving pieces, blankets, jewelry, and so forth. We may not use the items, but we have an emotional attachment to them that makes it hard to move them on. We believe they have worth now because they were worth something to someone else at some time. We remember them at grandma and grandpa's house.

When we cleared out my husband's family home, there were beautiful antiques, lovely works of art, several sets of dishes, and lots of furniture with a long family history. However, we didn't want most of it – we don't have the space or desire to carry on the legacy. Carl's adult children didn't want to inherit any of it either – they don't live that kind of life, they don't entertain in those ways anymore, they don't have the space, they prefer the stuff they can get at IKEA.

You may have had similar experiences if you've attempted to downsize, or you've been offered beautiful things by elder family members that you can't or won't ever use.

Our personal burden of stuff can be reduced by sorting and carefully asking ourselves what we still enjoy, feel we need, and can use on a regular basis. Researchers tell us that people abandon their storage units because of a crisis (health, finances, divorce) but more often from indecision about what to do with their stuff, laziness and/or selective forgetfulness. That can be tough and budget-busting, as the average storage unit cost per month is around \$250.00 – or \$3000.00 a year - a lot to spend keeping things we don't remember, use, or need.

The larger burden of excess stuff in the world needs a broader effort from many more people. And a complete reshaping of our relationship with the world, our earth.

Japan, Germany, and South Korea are named as countries that have developed industry leading strategies for dealing with trash. Some put more effort to recycling bottles and packaging and others use non-recyclables in waste-to-energy plants that power heat and electricity. Others have developed ways to improve food distribution and recycling.

The biggest issues, however, seem to be in getting people to think differently about how we are currently using our planet's resources and impacting this planet. While countries who are currently noted for doing a good job have also engaged in massive education efforts to switch people's view of garbage from worthless trash to useful resource, I can't avoid the challenge of getting the entire world's population on board with a new vision of living on Earth.

Many indigenous people have healthy ways to interact with the Earth, to use resources in such a way that they are not stripped from the ground or made extinct, and to reverence our planet and treat it with respect. We are still dealing with climate change denial,

self-interest by resource users and producers who value profit over life, and the otherwise clueless or unaware. It will be imperative to remember to invite and listen to the wisdom of our brothers and sisters on the whole planet who will bring ancient and innovative options to the table.

It's a huge job, a monumental change, a mind-shift we've seen manifested in other ages of our human history. It never seems to happen easily – there's dissent, confrontation, back-sliding, and competition. Each of us must look at what's possible and determine

how we can make even a small impact on the path forward, just as each of us must make decisions about our own approach to the stuff of our lives.

Now that I'm feeling better, my husband and I have had a look around our home and started to make the next round of choices and actions we can take to reduce our burden of stuff rethink our choices about lightening our impact on Earth. Ultimately, it is an act of will – what will we actually do to align our behavior with our hopes.

Wish us luck! We all need it to continue to grow and show our commitment to the ongoing and sustainability of life on Earth.