

STUFF

There's an old George Carlin routine where he riffs on the subject of "stuff". He goes on about how we're all slaves to our stuff. "Your house is nothing more than a pile of stuff with a roof over it. It's just a place to leave your stuff while you go out and buy more stuff." And a lot more "stuff" along those lines. You can find it on You Tube. It's pretty funny, and, like the best comedy, it has a definite kernel of truth to it.

So how true is it? Are we really all slaves to our stuff? At the very least don't we all have way too much stuff? In our house we certainly do. My wife, Joan, reminds me of it almost daily. Her mantra is "We've got to get rid of all this stuff."

And I try. I winnow. I declutter. I sort. I dump. But this is far too gentle an approach for Joan. She'd prefer a military style campaign - an army marching through enemy territory, razing and pillaging, leaving nothing but barren, smoking ground in our wake. But it's not really working. Our wake is still awash - with stuff.

But we try.

We drop off stuff for Value Village. We put out old clothing for Diabetes and CP pickups. We take used furniture and building materials to the Habitat ReStore. More clothes to the Goodway Thrift Store. Old computers to e-waste depots. Metal stuff to the Kimco bins. Books and records to the Kingston Symphony. We donated a bed to a Syrian family, dozens of bankers' boxes of my papers to Queen's, my mother's ancient settee to the Thousand Islands Playhouse. We set stuff out at the curb with a "free" sign on it. Occasionally someone actually takes something.

But, in spite of all of this de-junking, our household pile of stuff doesn't seem to be shrinking. In some weird variation of Parkinson's Law junk seems to expand to fill the space available for it. And de-junking isn't quite the right word for it either. Because "stuff" doesn't necessarily equate to "junk". Junk is, well, junk. But some stuff is actually Good Stuff. And therein lies the problem.

Stuff often has an emotional or nostalgic element to it. Presumably we've held on to it for years, for decades, for half a century or more, for a reason. It evokes a memory or a feeling, something indefinable that we're reluctant to consign to a dumpster. It's part of our history. It's part of us.

Someone - Yogi Berra maybe? - said nostalgia ain't what it used to be, but it's a potent force and the intractable enemy of de-cluttering. From where I sit writing this I can see several old hats - a beanie covered with pins (including two plastic toilet seats?), my little green cub hat, a straw hat from my junior golf days when I was trying to emulate my idol, Sam Snead. They're of no earthly use to me. I'm certainly never going to wear them. But I can clearly remember shots I hit when I was 16 wearing that straw hat. I can't bring myself to throw it out.

A decluttering project invariably starts with the best intentions. I have boxes of old school stuff - notes, essays, exams - none of it of any use. But just opening the boxes sends me tumbling down a rabbit hole into Memory Never Never Land. And before I know it I'm looking through my grade 7 science notebook with some surprisingly nice drawings of the parts of plants, going over a history exam which I did well on in Grade 12 but would fail miserably now, and reading a pretty interesting essay on the sociological significance of James Bond.

And a couple of hours later I have a whole new perspective on James Bond, I've been reminded of what the Treaty of Utrecht was about, and not a damn thing has actually been thrown out.

And there's more - a lot more. Stacks and stacks of old Esquires and New Yorkers packed with fascinating articles yet to be read, boxes of income tax returns, cheap plastic trophies from years of coaching kids' soccer, woodwork projects from grade six, several typewriters untouched for decades, a bin of dried up old baseball gloves, balls and bats, rolls of carpet ends, "favourite" shoes and boots that haven't been worn in years, dozens of ties and a couple of sports jackets dating back to university. And more ...

And then there's my collection of hockey and baseball cards. But the difference with them - unlike almost all of the other stuff - is that they might actually be worth something. Every once in a while there will be a small news item about a Wayne Gretzky rookie card selling for an exorbitant sum. Or there's that Honus Wagner baseball card that's worth millions. (Honus Wagner?! Who's he anyway?)

One day a while back Joan spotted an ad in the paper which said something like: "Reputable dealer will buy sports cards and memorabilia. One weekend only." There was a suite number for a west end hotel.

Now to call my shoe box full of slightly dog-eared cardboard cards a "collection" is a bit hifalutin. The Frick is a collection. Of Rembrandts and Vermeers. My collection had the Rocket and Beliveau and Gordie Howe. And while they may have been the Rembrandts of the rink in their day, it was hard to believe that tattered cards with their pictures on them were actually worth cash money.

But Joan seized on this as a gilt edged opportunity to get rid of some stuff. The cards fit into one large shoe box.

Getting rid of it was going to make no discernable dent in our mountain of stuff. But still, it was a small step on a long road. And, who knows, maybe there was a million dollar card lurking in there. Yeah, right.

And how attached was I to these cards? Was I willing to part with them? They were called Topps cards. You got five and a stick of gum in a package. My recollection is that the packages were five cents. But buying them wasn't the objective. Much better to win them through skill or guile. They brought back memories of the school yard at Mutchmor Public School in Ottawa, where we spent (misspent?) countless enjoyable hours flipping them, shooting them against the wall - closest wins - trading them. Two or three of those card-flipping boys are friends of mine to this day.

So I did have a connection to my cards and to the memories they evoked, but perhaps not quite as strong as to my Sam Snead hat. Maybe I could bring myself to part with them - particularly if they might actually be worth, you know, money.

In addition to my hockey and baseball cards I also had old CFL cards - in black and white no less. Who remembers "Prince" Hal Patterson? Or Sam "The Rifle" Etcheverry. There were even some cards of wrestlers - wrestlers for heaven's sake. Hello Antonino Rocca! I sorted everything into handy packets, but really it was foolish to believe that this ragtag "collection" was worth much of anything. I thought I might get a few bucks for it. If I was lucky. Or I might get laughed out of the room.

So on a Sunday morning I headed for the west end hotel. Walking down the hallway to the designated "suite" clutching my shoe box I felt just slightly apprehensive. It all felt a little seedy, a little shady. I couldn't help wondering if it was some sort of scam. But what was the worst that could happen - that I got cheated out of my priceless shoe box of cards?

There was a guy in a T-shirt sitting behind a big table with an array of cards spread out. They were laminated and shiny and put mine to shame. But I noticed that they were quite recent. My cards may have been scruffy, yes, but they were definitely old.

He wasn't the friendliest character. There was no introduction or chit chat. Just "What have you got?"

From my cursory research on eBay I knew what sort of cards were available and what people were asking for them. The one thing I had that I thought might be worth something was a complete NHL set of 100 from the 1950's. I also learned that there was a card quality rating system - from 10 (mint) to 1 (something the dog dragged in after giving it a good chew.) Presenting my shoe box like an offering, I optimistically thought my cards might be a 6 or 7 but was promptly told they were a 4 or 5 - at best.

But at least he didn't dismiss me out of hand. He started looking through the cards. Some he shoved aside, almost snorting with disgust, but others he didn't.

"So what do you want for them?"

I had no idea what to say. A couple of hundred dollars?
"Well, uh ... "

He pulled out a fat roll of bills. I don't think I'd ever seen a wad like that except in gangster movies.

"I'll give you fifteen hundred for the complete set."

I tried to keep a poker face. Fifteen hundred!?! That was far more than I was expecting, but something prompted me to say:
"Could we make it two thousand?"

He got visibly irritated, grumbling that the cards were "only fours" and "I have to sell these, you know" and so on.

I was about to back down but he grumped assent and peeled off 20 hundred dollar bills. I thought we were done, that the

"complete set" meant everything. But it turned out that he meant that complete NHL set of 100. To my surprise he kept going, peeling off hundreds - "Five hundred for the rest of the hockey cards ... six hundred for the baseball ... four hundred for the rest." Those black and white CFL cards?! The wrestling cards?! Who knew.

So I found myself standing there with 3,500 cash in my hand, trying to look nonchalant. And I got out of there before he changed his mind.

He didn't keep the shoe box.

My first thought was that the bills might be counterfeit, but when I took them to the bank the next day they were perfectly legit.

When I got home Joan saw the shoe box in my hand. "So - no luck?"

Without a word I put down the box, whipped out my wad, and, with a bit of a dramatic flourish, counted off 35 hundred dollar bills, placing them on the table in front of her one by one.

I thought she might, if not jump up and down, at least say "Wow!" or "We're rich!" or something.

But all she said was: "Good. What can we get rid of next?"

(To be continued.)

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