Cleanliness Is Next to...Something

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May 14, 2020 By Jeff Neurman

Like many out there, I have basically lost all sense of time. I seem to recall that here, on the penumbra of the epicenter of the pandemic, we have been staying home for roughly two months. Unlike some areas of the country, however, our self-containment looks like it will be continuing for an indeterminate amount of time longer. That is not the case for all of the State of New York, just that area that is referred to by some—but not anyone that actually lives here—as "downstate." (Essentially, if you are a resident of the Empire State, you either live in the greater NYC area or you don't, the latter of which is referred to as "upstate." But in life there is not always a yin for every yang so we of the mass urban sprawl don't feel the need to define ourselves by not being from somewhere else. Call us elitist if you must.)

And since this state of existence, which is really not much of an existence at all at this point, will be continuing beyond any visible endpoint, I have recently been attempting to occupy myself with trying to remember how it is that I have managed to endure the last eight weeks of doing virtually nothing. This was actually a good exercise, by which I mean one that involved a lot of thinking on my part, as it is surprisingly difficult to remember the mind-numbing minutiae that has occupied me for so long.

As I attempted to declutter my mind as part of this pointless exercise, I became fixated on the word "declutter." I then suddenly recalled that we spent the first part of this voluntary incarceration attempting to get rid of things; I thought this would be a common reaction among similarly homebound people—sort of akin to a nesting instinct or a decontamination of the places where the novel coronavirus could lurk—but apparently this is more of a binary choice than I would have thought.

On one side of the equation, there are those like us. Melissa and I essentially engaged in a top-to-bottom cleaning and, more importantly, discarding of all kinds of drecht that had somehow accumulated in our unnecessarily crowded abode. While I began with a shampooing of all of the rugs and carpets, an activity that undoubtedly makes more of a mess than it resolves, Melissa went to work on straightening our sons' rooms. Once we had tackled those minor areas of overgrowth, we reconvened to take on one of the biggest challenges of them all: the basement.

In our neighborhood, most of the homes do not afford the occupants thereof with such subterranean storage. Now, real estate "professionals" will often tell you that this lack of cellar

dwelling space is a detriment to the value of the house. And, strictly from an economic standpoint, that may well be the case. Yet, from a real-life perspective, nothing invites hoarding like a large, dimly-lit space that is cold, occasionally damp (and, more to the point, dank) and out of the sight of both occupants and their occasional guests. Consequently, the amount of useless stuff, to be polite, we have amassed is astounding. Making matters worse is the fact that both Melissa and I grew up in homes with similar cavernous cumulating spaces, which only encouraged our respective parents to also never throw anything away. And since they had never discarded any elementary school drawings, board games (does anyone have a set of directions to Park & Shop they could send me—the game is so anachronistic that I do not believe that a modern human can interpolate the rules from our Amazon-influenced society?) and of course photos of people that I barely recall or, perhaps, would prefer not to. So all of that mildew-infused material has now been relocated and consolidated from two other basements into our one. We also had to wade through mounds of semi-broken toys or toys that are so cheap—usually given as part of gift bags from other kids' parties— that breaking them would only enhance their value. And, just to be clear: Enough with the balloons already.

Of course, our desire to cleanse our existence of many of these unwanted items is running afoul of an ever-increasing sense of fear of waste. I am not an economist—not by training, anyway—but it seems pretty obvious that you can't just stop the world's economy for two whole months and then switch it back on without there having been some serious damage. This is not in any way a political statement—I work for neither party—but just a common sense observation, and a situation that may or may not have been avoidable. I really don't know. Regardless, it does not seem like a good time to be throwing anything away that might have some value. As a result, we did what most people do when getting rid of things—we just put them in newly formed piles or reorganized them to temporarily look less imposing. In fact, overall, we may have had a net gain as we also are stockpiling other items, including copier paper and printer ink since we now run a two-grade school out of my office. (We already had plenty of Charmin; some things are just too valuable to ever run out of.)

Which brings me to our pantry. It gives me great pain to throw away food just because it is beyond the "Sell By" date or, worse yet, the "Best By" time. As for the former, we met that target obviously—we aren't kleptomaniacs so someone must have sold us the goods in a timely fashion. Regarding the latter, do I really need canned corn at its "best"? And how good could that even be? But, given our sheer horror of going to the ER at this point, particularly with my immune system already have long passed its "best by" date, we were forced to trash large amounts of canned and other pre-packaged foods, the type of provisions that I think were created solely so one would not have to worry about their newness. Anything that is approaching one of these dubious endpoints, however, I am determined to consume. Thus, my diet largely consists of evaporated milk packets, politically-incorrect "Oriental" Ramen noodles and an occasional side of tapioca pearls, which I assuredly bought as I needed one mere tablespoon from the one-pound package. While I am at it, does anyone out there—probably one afflicted by Celiac—know how long Xanthan Gum lasts? What if it has not been refrigerated?

But as I said, not all of our friends and socially-distanced neighbors have taken to decoupling

themselves from their accumulated items. And I am not here to judge. Not about that anyway. I will, however, share my views on another cleaning topic that has disturbingly emerged during the pandemic. Specifically, self-cleaning. I do not really understand the rationale of not having to go to an office and thus stopping all self-hygiene. Some, for sure, is a challenge. Both of my sons look like they could audition for Peter Tork's role in a remake of The Monkees. But the hair, unwieldy though it is, is at least clean. (As an aside, I should note that the only thing that makes a balding man look worse than the actual balding is when it is unintentionally highlighted by ridiculously long hair in the more fertile spots of the scalp.) Especially for the now underemployed or unemployed, how can there not be time for a shower? I actually take more showers than normal, partially to remove all the dust from the faux-cleaning we did but also because, why not? I don't think showering kills virulent pathogens, but if you are stuck at home all the time with others is it not just common courtesy? That being said, I will confess to less usage of anti-perspirant. For better or worse (but mostly better), I am not sweating too much doing nothing. So I am using this as an opportunity to cut down on the aluminum in my diet. Besides, I have some Reynolds Wrap nearing its "sell by" date so that is really my focus until 080120.

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