Is it trash or is it treasure?
by Steve and Kathy Beirne

Our marriage is made up of a saver and a person who tends to want to throw everything away. Now I’m not saying who’s who or whether one habit is better than the other (until you need something and find it’s been thrown away so you have to go out and buy it again.), but it seems to me from talking to other couples that we are not unique in having this difference. But I never realized until recently how that difference related to owning things.

Take the books in our house. I believe that books are sacred objects, filled with the collective wisdom of those who formed our civilization. They will provide us with something to do on a rainy day, they will inspire our children and fill their heads with something besides the fluff of television, they will prop up an uneven table leg—there is hardly a need that a book cannot fulfill.

However, my husband is always looking for ways to empty out some of the many bookcases in our house. “We’ve had this book for fifteen years and nobody has read it,” he’ll say.

Isn’t that a good reason to keep it, I think? If I haven’t gotten around to reading it yet, we shouldn’t get rid of it. I’m just coming up on my leisure years when I’m going to get to do all the things I’ve been putting off. Reading that book fits right in there, with learning to play the fiddle, and writing a novel.

It’s his opinion that if he brought a book into the house in the first place, he should have the right to decide when it should leave. I believe that once it took up residence in our bookcase, it became our book. And as such, it came under the book protection program at work in this home. Which means that a good reason for getting rid of it hardly exists.

Steve (the husband in question) doesn’t have any interest in individual ownership of things until it comes to getting rid of them. In the interest of relieving our home of clutter, he likes to lay claim to things in order to be able to throw them away. It is pitiful, though when he lays claim to a purple stuffed dinosaur only so he can send it to its just reward.

The way we look at our possessions is entirely a matter of perspective. I see all the flotsam and jetsam in our house as treasures, each with a memory attached. Steve doesn’t have a long memory and sees the things we have as clutter. I feel that I am preserving history, while he feels he is creating sanity in the present.

I joke about it, but if you have this tension in your relationship, you probably know that differences like this cause their share of difficulty. We make a sincere effort to compromise, but many items that get tossed out make me feel grieved. That bowl
came from my mother’s house. She always served her homemade applesauce in it. That was the hospital wristband from our first baby. And those were the cards people sent when he was born.

I also know that managing all the stuff is a huge job and one that neither of us really has time for, and truthfully, I don’t like living with mess any more than he does. It’s just that there is an ongoing tension between what constitutes trash, and what is treasure, what is potentially useful and what is taking up space.

There are two books currently available that deal with this conflict. One is The Life–Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing, by Marie Rondo. She recommends looking at things and deciding whether or not they give you joy. The other book is Blessed by Less: Clearing Your Life of Clutter by Living Lightly, by Susan Vogt. She puts decluttering in a spiritual context.

If this is an issue for you, these books may help add a new perspective to the conversation. (But be careful about buying them without getting rid of something already on your bookshelf 😊) As for us, we keep at the balance between our two approaches to the objects in our life. As Harville Hendrix, great advocate for marital happiness says, “You don’t deal with an issue once and be done with it. You renegotiate over the course of your lives and each time add a nuance onto the understanding you had before. And it’s worth it, truly it is.”

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