

## Hoarding: Accumulative Identity & Memory

As a child I did not understand that there seemed to be a problem with my house. Between my grandmother and my uncle, it is a packed house. He collects newspapers; DVDs; CDs; movies; magazines; toy cars and tractors; baby books to give his nieces and nephews; steak knives (my grandmother mentioned needing some once); notebooks full of names of actors and actresses from every movie he watches (lest he forget any of them); candy bars; lunch boxes; tupperware containers; tool boxes; old cameras; extension cords; salt and pepper shakers; electricity bills; medicine bottles; boxes of bandaids; and work clothes.

My grandmother doesn't go out of her way to buy things as often as my uncle. She keeps rocks and fossils, and there have been countless times where she will spot a particularly nice looking rock while driving, pull over, and make me run out into a field or empty lot and lug it back to the vehicle. She has thousands of romance novels, the primary flavor being the cowboy genre. When she reads one, she'll write her name in the front cover so she won't accidentally read it twice. She has boxes upon boxes of yarn; Christmas wrapping paper; thread; string; baubles; plant encyclopedias; yard decorations; sweatpants of every color; 4-H ribbons from her children; nearly 400 photo albums; and her drawers are full of her mother's jewelry boxes. She doesn't often acquire, but she does keep. She treasures things, sees value, usefulness, and beauty in everything. For as long as I can remember, whenever someone had a pair of jeans too raggedy to pass on she would cut out the back pockets. She would nail them to the wall of the garage and use them to hold keys, hammers, and flashlights.

Understandably, a lot of people in my family are frustrated by the state of the house. It is a fire hazard to be so crowded and often it is hard to walk in certain places. Things get dirty faster: dishes pile up, food goes bad, and dirty clothes get lost amongst the clean. It's impossible to comfortably host guests and unsafe to. It goes deeper than the disgust of an unclean house, although that is a powerful contributing factor. There is a lot of discomfort that comes with entering a home that seems so alien to what our society considers normal. Being in that interior world can generate a lot of anger, anxiety, disgust, embarrassment,

shame, and the fear of social ostracization. Sometimes, I think they wonder how I let it get so out of control. They wonder why I couldn't even be bothered to make my grandmother and uncle see the difference between something you should throw away and something you should keep.

Hoarding was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) in 2013 and is a behavior that drives individuals to collect things (often clothes, trinkets, newspapers, books, and trash) in excessive amounts. Emotional attachments having to do with memory, fear of the unknown, and the idea of potential future worth can make throwing things away distressing and seemingly impossible. Studies have shown that out of those who exhibit hoarding behaviors, more than half are likely to have experienced one or more traumatic life events. This suggests that the act of compulsive shopping, obsessive collecting and keeping of material objects “may serve as a coping mechanism for grief, loss or posttraumatic stress.”<sup>1</sup> It is my belief that hoarders, and to an extent a majority of us, cultivate our identity and our memories through the keeping of material possessions. This line of research has led me to multiple places: hoarding being connected to historical events such as the Great Depression and the Holocaust; the infamous Collyer brothers; my uncle's newspaper collection; layers of the earth; strain; burden; and mountains and mountains of things.

The most famous, or at least the first truly sensationalized, case of hoarding in America, was the reclusive Collyer brothers. Homer and Langley Collyer were born in New York in the mid 1880s. In 1933 Homer Collyer suffered hemorrhages in the back of his eyes and lost his eyesight. Langley quit his job to care for his brother and the two began their withdrawal from society. Another contributing factor to this was most likely the Great Depression's effect on what used to be their upper-class neighborhood; lots of working class African-Americans began to move into Harlem. The brothers were uncomfortable and

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<sup>1</sup> Mueller, Ph.D, Robert T. “Hoarding as a Reaction to Trauma.” *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 7 June 2013. ; Claes, Laurence, et al. “Compulsive Buying and Hoarding as Identity Substitutes: The Role of Materialistic Value Endorsement and Depression.” *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, Elsevier Inc, 7 Apr. 2016. pp. 65-71.

fearful of the demographic shift, and as the years passed Langley began to only leave his house after midnight.<sup>2</sup>

At night, he would walk for miles in New York City collecting food for his brother and himself. He also would search the street for treasures, like rusted bicycles, baby carriages, and stacks of newspapers to drag back into his mansion. In the following years, the brothers would become the subject of fascination and rumor in their neighborhood and eventually all of New York. The attention caused the brothers even more anxiety. After boarding up all the windows and wiring all the doors shut, Langley, who was a brilliant engineer, began to construct highly elaborate tunnels through the floor-to-ceiling mass of items. These tunnels also contained complex booby traps so burglars, upon snagging a trip wire, would find themselves buried by hundreds of pounds of the Collyer brothers hoard.

One day, as Langley was crawling through one of the tunnels to bring some food to Homer, who at that point in time had become paralyzed due to inflammatory rheumatism, he tripped his own booby trap and suffocated to death under the weight of his treasure. Homer, unable to move or see, died of starvation and heart disease. The excavation of the bodies took weeks and the decluttering of the house took longer. It was soon condemned and torn down, and today there is a small park in its stead named Collyer Brothers Park.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 120-140 tons of debris and possessions were removed from the Collyer brownstone including countless bundles of newspapers and magazines, some of them decades old. Once, when asked why he collected so many newspapers, Langley said they were for his brother Homer; when his blindness was cured he would want to catch up on the news.<sup>4</sup> These newspapers, and the future value he saw in them, were the physical manifestations of Langley's hope that his brother would someday be able to see again, and that the first thing Homer upon regaining his sight would like to do is settle down and read thousands of newspapers.

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<sup>2</sup> "Langley Collyer Dead for Weeks; Police Find Body in Homer's Room". The Montreal Gazette. April 9, 1947. p. 1. Retrieved March 18, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Frost, Steketee. "Stuff." p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> McQueeney, Kerry. "Homer and Langley Collyer: Hoarder Brothers Killed by Their Own Clutter in Their New York Mansion." *Daily Mail Online*, Associated Newspapers, 15 Oct. 2012.

Whenever someone first meets my uncle I think their first impression would be that he is a physically imposing man. He is somewhere in the region of six-and-a-half feet tall, he has an unruly beard that everyone wishes he would shave, he is very strong from lifting and welding car engines together all his life, and he also constantly wears a huge Carhartt jacket that only increases his bulk. But I know my uncle very well and I know that he loves toy cars, model trains, and Walker Texas Ranger. I know that he one-hundred percent believes that WWE wrestling is real and that he still misses his cat, Precious, that died when I was probably six. I also know that he loves to laugh and does it often.

Ever since I was three years old, I have lived on and off with my uncle. For as long as I can remember, every night before my uncle would go to sleep he would drive all over town and hit up every single newspaper box he could find. He would purchase *The Greensburg Daily News*, *The Indianapolis Star*, *The Batesville Herald Tribune*, and *The Republic*, most of which report on towns 30 to 50 miles away from ours. He would often take multiples—two, three, or sometimes five—of the exact same paper. His huge red truck, including the bed, has always been filled to the brim with a variety of newspapers, some of them yellowed with age. Often they would spill over into the bedroom, livingroom, and kitchen of wherever he was staying. I always thought it was curious that as often as he brings home these papers, I don't particularly think he enjoys reading them. I think the small print gives him a headache and that the huge volume of pages he brings home intimidates him. Despite this, he often flatly refuses to ever get rid of them, even the duplicates of ones that he has read and ones that are extremely out of date.

This isn't a unique activity. A lot of people who hoard collect newspapers, and often what motivates hoarders is "maintaining information" or a desire to hoard opportunities.<sup>5</sup> In a case study by Randy O. Frost, psychology professor, pioneer in hoarding studies, and one of the leading researchers in the field, his subject Irene also had trouble throwing out newspapers. She believed throwing out the newspapers meant losing the information they contained forever; even papers she had already read she

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<sup>5</sup> Frost, Steketee. "Stuff." p. 30.

would keep because she was afraid of forgetting what was in the pages. Irene had a strong belief that the newspapers held opportunity and getting rid of them would deprive herself from the life experiences she could have if she had access to the information.<sup>6</sup> She had once told him that she was not able to visit New York City because she would have to walk past newspaper stands. She said that she would see all the newspapers and magazines and think, “Somewhere in all that there’s a piece of information that could change my life. How can I walk away without it?”

If piles of newspapers can operate as piles of hope, or as piles of potential, or as a living future memory than I propose that our relationship with objects is far more complex than originally thought. Sociocultural anthropologist and professor Dr. Sasha Newall also wrote about hoardes and their “possessive agency.” Newall described the object as, “endowed with personhood, making them inalienable from the individual self and especially the identity of the family.”

The explanation for why we keep things is that they are a part of us. They are living, contained memories and they are actors in a complex relationship. They serve as thinking spaces, talismans of hope, the thought that one day you could better yourself, and one day everything in your life could change. If hoarding is the erosion between the subconscious and the home then perhaps it gives us insight into the tremendous, powerful agency things have over us “masters” that are meant to possess them.

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<sup>6</sup> Frost, Steketee. “*Stuff*.” p. 32.