

Dossier

THE JOY OF LESS

PHOTOGRAPHS TRUNK ARCHIVE

What does the inside of your wardrobe look like? Is it neatly tidied, colour-coded and free of clutter (if so – congratulations), or, like ours, is it full to the brim, with inhabitants you can't quite remember, since they've lived there undisturbed for years? What about your storage cupboards, bedside table – and that dreaded drawer of doom we're all ashamed of?

This month, we're considering the primal urge to declutter. However, before your dread of disorder and dust bunnies sets in, what if you could clear out your clutter with a sense of joy? Yes, we said it – JOY! Take on your mountain of stuff with a new frame of mind, discover how to decipher your relationship with it in order to create serenity, and make decluttering more simple and, dare we say it, enjoyable. Bite the bullet, flick the page, and read on...

“Excuse the mess, but we live here”

Roseanne Barr

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THE ART OF LOVING YOUR STUFF

What's your relationship with the material world within your home? Is it overflowing with unknown clutter, or do you have a feeling of disconnection with the things you live with? **Anita Chaudhuri** delves deep inside her wardrobe to discover how her possessions reflect what's really going on in her life and what it all means

February. A freezing cold afternoon. And I have a bone to pick with international tidying goddess and inventor of the 'KonMari' method, Marie Kondo. Along with five million others across the globe, I purchased her bible, *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying* (Vermilion, £10.99) and more recently, her new book *Spark Joy: An Illustrated Guide to the Japanese Art of Tidying* (Vermilion, £12.99) hoping that if I followed her advice, magic and joy would happen. 'A dramatic reorganisation of the home causes correspondingly dramatic changes in your lifestyle and perspective. It is life-transforming,' she promises in her first book. 'Not only will you never be messy again, you'll have a new start in life.'

This is quite a promise, as I am not exactly blessed with the neat gene, but I embark on the 'tidying festival' she suggests with hope in my heart. Three weeks later, I get out of my immaculately made bed and decide to go for a muddy February walk. Throwing open my wardrobe, I survey one silver snakeskin dress by Vivienne Westwood, 50-per-cent-off price-tag still attached, three other party dresses, three cashmere jumpers, two tailored jackets and assorted yoga separates. I search

in vain for chunky jumpers, fleeces or hooded items. It had been a wrench letting go of my stuff. Many things were suffused with memories: a pair of designer jeans my late mother observed were 'on their last legs' the first time I wore them, the vintage tea set which was a special gift from an ex... But I'd steeled myself to focus on Kondo's tidying mantra; to only hold onto things that create joyfulness. I held out the designer jeans and asked myself 'Do these "spark joy"?' No? Then be gone... Now I've nothing to wear. I cancel my walk and go shopping.

CLOSET CLARITY

Surely there must be another way to create a more joyful relationship with our material world than simply throwing out our joyless-but-useful possessions? Annmarie O'Connor, 'reformed-hoarder' turned decluttering coach and author of *The Happy Closet* (Gill & Macmillan, £12.99), thinks so. 'I'd been working as a fashion journalist for nine years when I had an aha moment. At that time, I was hopelessly attracted to the shiny and the showy with no regard for my actual life. I was seeking external validation from others. Something needed to change – it took me 45 minutes to get dressed in the morning. My wardrobe looked like the costume department of >>>

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>>> Caesar's Palace, even though I had nothing to wear to go and buy a pint of milk in the morning.'

It dawned on O'Connor that she had no real need for all those purchases and that they didn't reflect her authentic self. 'It wasn't the stuff I wanted, it was the feeling I derived from it. I was chasing the emotional pay-off.' At the time, she was giving personal styling advice to private clients and noticed a pattern. 'Most of us don't dress the person we see in the mirror, or shop for her. We buy for the person we once were or the one we want to be. So I was taking the bus to work and getting a free coffee with my loyalty card, but dressing as if I was Anna Wintour. I often noticed this with clients who were shopping for their imaginary future life or those who were holding on to things they no longer used or wore because it reminded them of a time in their life when they were at their best, maybe before they had kids and were slimmer, or when they were in a particular relationship.'

O'Connor wants to help people reframe their relationship with the material world. 'I aim to encourage people to occupy the present,' she says. 'Where you are now and what your own is an evolving entity, it's not a one-shot deal. It's not about "let's choose the 12 items that make you happy" and that's it for ever.' She adds that our home is a highly emotional space that attracts all of our habits and hang-ups, and nowhere is more vulnerable than the wardrobe. 'That's your emotional baggage hanging on those hangers – the dodgy purchases, the things with tags on. There's guilt, shame and fear there; sometimes also pride and nostalgia.'

STUFFOCATION

Trend forecaster James Wallman has come up with a term for this emotional connection to over-consumption – 'stuffocation' – and has written a book of the same name (Penguin, £9.99). 'What's stuffocation? It's a personal thing, it's an emotion – it's that feeling when you open your wardrobe and it's stuffed full but you can't find a thing to wear. Or, say you urgently need to find a tool or a cooking implement and you have to fight your way through mountains of stuff just to get that one thing. Stuffocation is that frustration when your life, home, car and cupboards are stuffed to the brim. It's about this crushing sense that materialism has failed

us and is not working any more.' But why do so many of us hoard stuff we know we're never going to use? 'There is always a lot of sadness and lost dreams underpinning why people won't let go of stuff,' O'Connor says. 'Perhaps there's unresolved fear, for example the fear of not finding another relationship. We fear by letting the stuff go, we're letting the dream go. But by putting that old concert t-shirt from 20 years ago in a binbag, it doesn't mean you're letting go of the dream relationship, it's just a t-shirt! Get in touch with the present. Sometimes dreams are, in fact, lost, and that's because it's time to create new dreams. Ask yourself what is really important to you right now.'

WANT AND NEED

There are other reasons for streamlining belongings beyond getting in touch with your authentic self.

Consuming more consciously can lead to a more ethical, environmentally friendly lifestyle. That's a view endorsed by Francine Jay, author of *The Joy of Less* (Chronicle Books, £10.99). 'I think the act of consuming should never cause harm to another person or to our environment. We should consume mindfully. Liking the colour of an item or being seduced by an advert are not good reasons to buy something. You should buy something because you need it.'

I strongly suspect that Jay may not agree with my definition of 'need'. Items I've 'needed' to buy in the past month include a set of designer kitchen utensils (to replace the ones Kondo encouraged me to bin), a designer gym bag (to tidy my kit away) and a coffee table book on the history of the typewriter. With a sinking feeling, I realise that, in my mind, the line between need and want has become hopelessly blurred. It's a conundrum that's vexing many. Earlier this year, Steve Howard, head of Ikea's sustainability unit, said: 'In the West, we have probably hit peak stuff.' When even iconic retail giants are telling us we don't need more throws, it's probably time to pay attention.

Jay began her decluttering journey when her now-husband's job relocated from the USA to the UK. Before leaving, they sold everything and decided to only buy new things as and when they needed them. 'We would say "OK I think we need a saucepan". I started the Miss Minimalist blog about our experiences, never

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PHOTOGRAPH: JENNIFER TABBY/GETTY IMAGES

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>>> thinking I'd get more than a handful of readers. It snowballed from there.'

Research from Cornell University recently revealed that we derive greater happiness from experiences than material possessions, and not surprisingly Jay is an exponent of this idea. She also suggests that the more stuff we own, the less time we have to devote to creating experiences. What is the link between time and possessions? 'Shopping in itself is time-consuming, you have to research prices and information, retail outlets, etc. Then once you own the new thing, you have to maintain it, clean it, store it. If it's valuable, you insure it and worry about it.'

WAR ON CLUTTER

Perhaps, for this reason, she frequently refers to our attempts to master clutter in terms of a 'war'. 'Round up the intruders, establish a holding cell. Don't be tempted to leave them in place and deal with them later; they'll escape to other parts of the house as soon as your back is turned.' Refreshingly though, Jay has no patience with complicated folding or storage strategies. 'Don't organise your clutter!' she warns. Why? 'Because once you give something a cosy abode, it can be hard to get it to leave.' Other tips include having a zero-tolerance policy on freebies – make-up samples, three-for-two offers, corporate gifts like branded pens, calendars, and bags-for-life must be politely but firmly declined. I am really astonished I never considered this before; even post-Kondo, I discover that I still have dozens of such free items hiding in plain sight.

While Jay likes much of KonMari's oeuvre, she doesn't go along with the idea that decluttering is a one-off event. She advocates constant vigilance and believes it's best to adopt a 'one in, one out' policy when buying anything. 'If you already own the item, then you can't buy another until you're willing to give up something in place of it. If it's better than something you have, then by all means replace it. But otherwise you're just going to be adding and adding to an ever-growing pile.'

O'Connor posits that people go through an 'emotional decluttering arc' from trepidation to motivation,



where finally you understand the long-term benefits of having a more mindful connection with material possessions. At the end of my own heroic declutterer's journey, I know exactly what she means.

SECRET YEARNING

There is one thing that none of the experts mention however; all that stuff we never wear or use might contain vital clues about the life we secretly yearn for. I unearthed two yoga mats, boxes of formal dinner crockery, more than 100 cookbooks and three leather jackets. Rather than beating myself up, might it be time to unleash the 'secret selves' that Julia Cameron works with in *The Artist's Way*?

Making a priority to entertain more, do yoga at home and see more live music feels more life-enhancing than filling yet more binbags. 'Yes you can work with secret selves, they can help us through life when we're looking for escapism,' advises O'Connor. 'Just don't let your wardrobe be a portal to another universe – you don't want to end up in Narnia.'