

ZEN AND THE ART OF CLEANING HOUSE Less Costs More

Recently I inherited two pieces of furniture from my husband's family, and, while I was grateful, our apartment felt crowded. I asked Lucia, a friend with a keen eye for interior design, to help me figure out how to accommodate my new treasures. Her answer was simple: some things I already owned would have to go. I agreed—having just spent four days cleaning out my deceased mother-in-law's house, I was determined not to leave behind anything that would cause my heirs to ask, as I had so many times that weekend, “Why on earth would someone keep THIS?” or, more likely, “What in the world IS this?”

Lucia said I should not be hasty, that unburdening myself of stuff my husband and I had accumulated over twenty years of marriage and a dozen years in the same apartment would not be as easy as relegating someone else's stuff to the Goodwill pile. When I was ready, she said, echoing the Zen saying, the teacher would appear. She would be my teacher.

Lucia's own condo is simple but not sterile. Persimmon walls embrace earth-tone leather couches; a single pottery bowl accents a beveled glass table. She is clutter-free. She will help me, but I must trust.

Surveying my apartment on the appointed morning, Lucia says I will have to be tough. "You display some of this stuff because people gave it to you, not because it works in the room or you particularly like it," she says, psychoanalyzing my existing interior decorating efforts. "You will have to be ruthless," she says. "I don't care where you got it or how long you've had it, it either belongs or it doesn't."

She explains that she "cured" a particular friend of hers from giving her things by not displaying them; when her friend would ask where that decorative plate or Hummel figurine or dried flower arrangement was, she would say that while she appreciated the gesture, she just didn't have room for such gifts anymore. Of course, her friend was miffed, but the good news was that eventually she'd stopped giving her stuff.

I look around our L-shaped living and dining room and see the ledges of our tenth-floor apartment lined with things of sentimental value: a mustache cup from one of my husband's grateful patients; a painted wooden lizard I'd given Bill for a birthday; a set of shaker boxes he gave me (I think) for an early anniversary; a tall blue glass vase in the shape of a wide-mouthed fish gaping at the ceiling, a present from my sister.

Worrying at the offense I might give, I say, "Some of these things my family gave me."

Lucia says dryly, "They shouldn't have."

Lucia and I toil for the entire morning, storing Waterford pieces in cabinets and boxing up lamps, baskets, bowls, vases, and decorative bottles for a trip to the Goodwill

in Wisconsin, where we have a summer house. I am allowed to keep a glass bowl hand-blown by a friend, a model ship made by my father, and, to my surprise, my husband's elaborate 1950's toy fire truck. I'd warned Bill that morning that this was likely to be one of the first things Lucia would banish. A student of Zen, he'd said he'd be happy to let it go: he could remember his childhood without it. The truck is two feet long, a real dust-magnet, but Lucia thinks it has a certain cachet and will work on top of a tall bookcase—where, by the way, it is certain never to see a duster.

Lucia prunes my dozen raggedy plants down to three, and she trims the survivors to a modest size. I bite my lip, take the rejects, including an overgrown corn plant I've had for nearly thirty years, to the trash room (where I hope the building staff will adopt them), and don't look back. Like a midwife, Lucia encourages me, "You're doing great, kiddo. You're doing great."

When we finish, I am elated, physically lighter. I love the grown-up, sophisticated feel of our streamlined space. I also feel a sense of freedom, the kind that comes from confessing your sins or giving up a bad habit like nicotine or chocolate, the freedom described in Zen that comes from not clinging to things, ideas, people, self-images. I've let go my excess stuff, and, with it, a little pride and ego and worry over what friends or family will think.

In Wisconsin that weekend, I deposit my boxes at the Goodwill, overcoming one last cling to a plant stand I've had forever, and that's it.

The next week, my sister comes to visit. A theatre director and actress, she takes in my living room as if it were the set for her newest production, stiffens, and says, "What happened to the fish?"

“The vase?” I stall for time, mentally rehearsing Lucia’s reply. “I really liked it, you know. It was fun. But I just had too much stuff, so, I had to give it away.”

“To the Goodwill?” she says. There is no good will in her voice.

“Yes.” As previously instructed, I do not say more.

“Didn’t you like it?”

“I loved it. It was really darling.”

“I spent a lot of money for it.”

“I didn’t know that,” I say apologetically.

“I don’t have a lot of money, but I try to give you nice things,” she says with a dramatic tremor. “How much do you think I spent?” she asks.

Lucia hadn’t prepared me for this question.

“Thirty dollars?” I venture, although I realize now I should have said, “I don’t know,” or “You shouldn’t have.”

She turns to stare out my window, out to the elegance of Lake Shore Drive, Grant Park and Lake Michigan. “A hundred and twenty-five, no, maybe a hundred and seventy-five,” she says.

“I’m really sorry,” I say. Lucia has left some gaps in my learning curve. “I wish I’d known.” I don’t add that I didn’t think the vase was worth more than fifty.

I’m feeling a little guilty, though, because I had thought of asking her if she wanted it or any of my other stuff, but then I made the not-very-Zen-like judgment for her that she had enough stuff of her own, and, except for a few items (like a coffee table that I gave to my college-age niece), she didn’t need mine.

Perhaps because she has three teenagers, my sister doesn't hold a grudge as long as she used to. I buy her dinner that night--she orders the twelve-dollar shrimp cocktail--and we move on. Still, I had unwittingly insulted her and her taste in objets d'art, and, because she is herself a consummate bargain-hunter, I know it bothers her that someone is going to buy the fish vase for a couple of dollars.

The next week, when we arrive in Wisconsin, I head immediately for the Goodwill store. I figure I will buy back the vase, display it at my summer cottage (which I have not yet declared a clutter-free environment) and all will be well with my sister. The Goodwill store is huge, with aisles of clothes on one side, arranged in racks by color and size, and household goods and furniture on the other. I stroll the three aisles of glassware and decorative items. The fish is not there. Of course not. It is cute, and highly appropriate for a resort community. Someone snapped it up.

I start to leave the store, relieved, to be honest, that I don't have to buy it back, but pleased that at the very least, I can tell my sister, by way of further apology, that I tried. I am walking by the check-out counter when I see a glass case that displays the Goodwill's most precious items. For the sake of completeness, I stop, but don't expect to see the vase: after all, by my own under-estimation, it does not require the protection of lock and key.

And there it is. Its now-precious mouth gapes up at me.

"My sister gave me that!" I say to the lady behind the counter. I have the idea that if I explain the situation with just the right amount of panic, they will give it back to me. "I brought a lot of stuff here last weekend, and when she found out that I'd given it

away, she was really angry with me.” I go on and on about how I had cleaned out my mother-in-law’s house and then got started on my own, and how in my frenzy....

The woman behind the counter interrupts me. “Do you want to buy it?”

My theatrics must not be very convincing. “How much is it?”

“Seventy-five.”

Serves me right. Feeling very foolish, I take out my credit card. Now that I have the opportunity, I am willing to pay this price for peace in the family. She is my only sister; perhaps I will give it to her for Christmas.

Driving home with the vase wrapped in newspaper, I fluctuate between exhilaration for having retrieved it and shame for not having sufficient courage to let go and stick to it. I worry that my slip will lead to an apocalyptic relapse into clutter. What will Lucia, my guru, say?

She’d warned me not to be hasty. She’d told me to be ruthless. A chastened student, I already know her reaction. She will smile like the Buddha and offer a koan of delicious ambiguity: “You shouldn’t have.”