

Why Do We Have So Much Stuff?

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At Quest Club

December 15, 2023

Americans live in abundance on today's interconnected planet with more possessions than any society in history. Average households contain **300,000 items**; yet we spend **1.2 trillion dollars** annually on non-essential goods. One in four U.S. homes have so much **STUFF** they can't fit a car in the garage. We have 3.1% of the world's children but 40% of the world's toys. But, Malcom Forbes is attributed with saying: *"He who dies with the most toys wins!"*

Most of us have an accumulation of personal 'STUFF'—ranging from material possessions, **to** mementos, video recorders, photos & videos, old magazines marking events of national importance and lots of saved computerized **STUFF**. It has become an ever-growing concern leaving us wondering: How did I get all of this **STUFF**? Why do I keep it?

The Christian apostle Saint Paul said in 1st Timothy: *"For we brought nothing into this world and it is certain we can carry nothing out."* But, **STUFF** is popular! I googled **STUFF** hoping to find a few topical articles. In **.33 seconds**, I found reference for 2 billion, 390 million items! I note that AMAZON, YouTube and Facebook are the top three searches. Hmmm, could there be a connection?

WHAT IS "STUFF"?

The word **STUFF** has over 40 meanings and is used to describe items, objects, substances, drugs, sex acts, medicines, worthless matter, nautical concoctions to lubricate sailing vessels, money, and unspecified things. **STUFF** is one of the most common nouns in speaking but is not common in writing. However, it can be found in the 14th century writings of poet Geoffrey Chaucer, who is often credited with 'inventing' English as we know it today.

STUFF has always been a part of the human existence. Our earliest ancestors carried their total belongings in hide bags. Even as America was settled, Conestoga wagons full of

important **STUFF** were necessarily abandoned at the gateway to the Rockies as pioneers moved West. This was **STUFF** they thought they could never do without, but alas did not really need.

STUFF is also things that one owns unavoidably or regretfully acquired by happenstance; such as holiday gifts or inheritances. You appreciated the thoughtfulness but they now gather dust in the attic.

STUFF can be an accumulation of items sentimentally purchased while on vacation; or because it might **gain in value**; or fear that we **will need it next week**; or panic that **we won't remember it**; or because it '**deserves** a good home'. How did we end up with this mountain of **STUFF**? What is its impact on our lives, self-worth and on the whole world today and tomorrow?

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH STUFF STARTS EARLY IN LIFE.

STUFF is bountiful: handbags, books, clothes, tools, toys, Christmas decor, letters, appliances, furniture, iPads, Easter décor, baseball cards, tickets, Thanksgiving dishes, old To-Do lists and phones. More than mere possessions, **STUFF** can become extensions of ourselves used to signal others **who** we want to be and **where** we want to belong. After we are gone, our **STUFF** becomes our legacy.

The idea that we can possess something as if a part of ourselves is one that children grasp by age two. By age six, they exhibit the 'endowment effect', placing extra value on an object simply by virtue of it being theirs – a favorite shirt or special toy.

With ownership comes **envy** as young ones discover other toys they would like to get their hands on! It's as if the children believe their special object has a unique essence, a form of

magical thinking. That specialness re-appears throughout adulthood in our treatment of heirlooms, jewelry, celebrity memorabilia, artwork, automobiles and various collections.

Materialism peeks in adolescence, just when self-esteem tends to be at its lowest and possessions act as a crutch for the self. Through the teen years, possessions increasingly reflect how young people would like to see themselves. In novelist Alison Lurie's book, *The Language of Clothes*, she observes: *"When adolescent girls exchange clothing they share not only friendship, but also identities – they become soulmates."* In interviews with teens, Ruthie Segev of The Jerusalem College of Technology found evidence that selecting and buying gifts for friends helps adolescents achieve an identity independent from their parents. Mutual exchange of the same or similar gifts between friends helps create a feeling of overlapping identities. This is one of our first experiences with influencing other people and **makes a strong imprint.**

In the transition from adolescence to adulthood, it is **the first car** that often becomes the ultimate symbol of emerging identity. Interviews with car owners found that young drivers were particularly likely to mark their territory by personalizing their cars with stickers, unusual number plates and seat covers. Research also found the more often young men saw their cars as extensions of themselves, the more trouble they took to wash, wax and care for them.

As lives unfold, possessions can embody our sense of self-hood and become external representatives for our memories, relationships and travels. Ph.D. Communications scholar Karen Lollar wrote in 2010: *"A house is not merely a possession or structure of unfeeling walls. It is an extension of our physical body and our sense of self -- reflecting who you were, are now and want to be."* Our possessions allow us to signal our importance to other people.

In our lifetimes, Americans have embraced that concept mightily. However, **STUFF** can stealthily overshadow greater life goals such as substance, relationships, virtue, and serving others.

A QUICK LOOK AT AMERICAN LIFE OVER THE PAST 113 YEARS

In 1910, the U.S. population was just over 92 million people and life expectancy was 48 years of age. With no monthly Social Security check arriving, households were multigenerational with incomes of \$750 (*\$24,300 in today's value*). Families parceled it out in four primary categories: Food, Housing, Apparel and Healthcare. There was little left for luxuries. Consequently, passing down personal belongings and household goods became a method of contributing to intergenerational wealth.

In the first 50 years of the 20th Century, America experienced two World Wars, the Great Depression and an enormous diversification of employment opportunities as laissez-faire capitalism chugged to its zenith. It was a period of uncertainty, fear, and a very changing society. A horse-drawn carriage was replaced with a car. A train moving at 50 miles-per-hour transported goods quickly across the country. Refrigeration preserved food for longer periods of time. The 1940s standardized plumbing codes paved the way for safe indoor plumbing and Bendix electrified home washing machines.

By 1950, American soldiers had returned to a country contrasting the one they left a few years earlier. Wartime production had helped pull America's economy out of depression and there was a remarkable rise in spending power. Jobs were plentiful, wages were higher, and because of the lack of consumer goods during the war, 158 million Americans were eager to spend. The average household income was \$3,300 (*\$42,000 in today's purchasing power*).

Young couples were marrying and having children at unprecedented rates. Expanded federal programs, including the G.I. Bill of Rights, allowed many young families to purchase their own homes, often located in rapidly expanding suburbs with flexible floor plans, garages, sidewalks, and indoor-outdoor living, .

The economy's share of farmers had fallen to 10%, due to the mechanization of the farm, led by the mighty tractor. At the same time, food was cheaper allowing more dollars for luxuries like televisions which entered our homes and transistor radios which we could carry with us on the go. These inventions introduced us – or I could say *seduced* us --to broadcast advertising and its power to influence our spending. *And spend we did!*

Consumer spending became the panacea for 50 years uncertainty and a means of 'keeping up' with the neighbors. 'The Good Purchaser' was devoted to 'more, newer and better' and was a good citizen for contributing to economic recovery. Disposable income grew. Nearly half of working men were craftsmen or machine-operators. Factory wages had grown by seven-fold. The U.S. was the *'making-stuff capital'* of the world, and its dominance felt indefinite. Half a century later, factories, just like farms before them would become the victims of American efficiency.

In 2023, work and attitudes in America are changing once again. The American population today is 3.6 times its size in 1910 and has aged incredibly – almost 1,000%. One in five residents collect Social Security benefits. Seniors aged 65 and over account for nearly 17% of our citizens and eight in ten live in their own homes.

Food production is more efficient, and we have offshored clothing production to other countries with cheaper labor. Compared with Americans in 1957, today we own twice as many

cars per person, eat out twice as often and enjoy endless other commodities that weren't around two decades ago -- big-screen TVs, microwave oven drawers, SUVs and handheld wireless devices, to name a few. **But are we any happier?**

IF YOU ARE NOT PAYING, YOU ARE THE PRODUCT!

The past 20 years have ushered in another new phenomenon: social media targeting. In the 80s, the average person saw between 500 to 1600 ads per day on billboards, newspapers, magazines, television, etc. In 2021, we began to see an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 digital ads every single day just by using online platforms such as Google and Facebook. As web-based media channels emerged for us **to use for free**, so did new advertising opportunities.

82% of Americans use some form of social media daily where the viewer is exposed to a new ad **every second**. There, each tempting advertisement is tailored to your personalized online profile of interests making it difficult for even Nancy Reagan to say '**just say NO**'.

Meta Platforms, Inc. is an American multinational technology conglomerate based in California. Meta owns and operates Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and WhatsApp, among other products and services. Meta sells advertising placements for marketers to reach individuals based on various factors including age, gender, location, interests, behavior and past purchases.

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg owns 14% of Meta. Facebook's business model consists of not just providing **a free platform to send** friends pictures of your grandchildren or last vacation – it is an **avenue to your mind and wallet** without you ever suspecting you are the target. Facebook controls 24.5% of the online advertising industry. Google holds 28% of the market. Other big players are Pinterest and YouTube.

There are ways to curtail this intrusion to your innocent online experience, but you need to learn to be a little Tech-savvy. However, as a matter of self-preservation, our human brains do adapt. Less than 100 messages make it past our “attention wall” each day.

However, the most interesting thing about shopping and buying is what is going on in our minds. In fact, Boston Sociologist Juliet Schor believes *“Marketers have less to do with what we want than our neighbors, coworkers or people we follow on social media.”* Sometimes we call this ENVY, not unlike the secret desires of our childhood selves.

MOVING FORWARD IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Today, the youngest segment of working age Americans are Millennials; born from 1981-1996. Millennials lived through the 9/11 attack; can remember when Amazon sold only books; and are also the first generation to know a childhood both with and without the Internet. Some tout Millennials as possibly the most educated generation in American history. Thirty-eight percent of them have a bachelor’s degree compared to fifteen percent of baby boomers at the same age.

The Millennial ‘new home profile’ focuses on mixed-use communities with neo-traditional designs in neighborhoods with smaller lots and narrower streets. They are integrated in live/work houses, near commercial centers, and are in close proximity to amenities and services to decrease transportation needs.

How do American Millennials spend their paychecks? They spend less on cars, clothes, housing and retirement plans than previous generations. They spend more on convenience, online shopping, eating out, travel, streaming services, reducing student debt, and more on social

impact by donating via buying from socially attached brands. Millennials have lived lives with a socially connected world at their fingertips.

In contrast, most of today's Seniors live in comfortable retirement and in unison with boxes of objects not just our own choosing but with our **STUFF** collected in a lifetime and handed down heirlooms from people whose names we scarcely recognize and whose lives we barely know. However, deep inside our psyches, lies **a compulsion to keep** and pass the **STUFF**.

A LOOK TOWARD THE FUTURE

However, there is a serious disconnect with the upcoming generations. America is once again quickly changing. Walt Whitman said, *"We were together. I forget the rest."* That seems true as we look among long-forgotten family possessions. Physical objects jog a memory or two but do not often pass on information about people, times or places.

Millennials are hesitant to take inherited **STUFF** because they lack sentimental attachment **or** it has no use today **or** immediate monetary value. Disposal of old objects is difficult, expensive and places a yolk of guilt on them. **STUFF** can accumulate quickly and Millennials live in smaller homes and apartments, not McMansions.

Today's young families differ considerably and often live across the country from parents and hometowns. Fewer couples are marrying, a third of them divorce within 10 years, half of today's children are born outside marriage and blended families are on the rise. These young families have their own **STUFF** **which rarely includes antiques**. No matter how valuable, how beautiful, how family-historic our **STUFF** is to us: **most millennials don't want it**. They

want their own **STUFF** with their own family memories. *Consequently, STUFF from your generation is like the Conestoga wagons left behind at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains!*

WHAT STUFF WILL YOUR FAMILY WANT TO INHERIT AND KEEP?

American writer Jodi Picoult has a good approach: “Have an honest conversation with your family about your end-of-life wishes while you are healthy. Ask them if there are particular things they would like to inherit. No one wants to have that discussion...but if you do, you will be giving your loved ones a tremendous gift. They will not have to guess what your wishes would have been and it takes the onus of responsibility off of them.”

As we grow older, having **STUFF** makes us feel safe and secure. Getting rid of **STUFF** initiates worry there won't be enough when needed. This ‘scarcity mindset’ keeps us hanging on to things, even if we don't use them or only look at them once every 10 years.

The world-wide-web is full of ideas on decluttering your house and attic. There are even experts you can hire to ‘cleanse’ your home. Here are some practical tips for getting rid of **STUFF** while keeping the memories close at hand. Make your home a *Living Space*, not a storage place.

1. **TAKE PHOTOS OF THE THINGS YOU LOVE!** Digitize them so everyone can have a copy. Display them on inexpensive video screen players for all to appreciate. This gives you the opportunity to sell your **STUFF** and recall it whenever you wish.
2. **TURN THOSE PHOTOS INTO MEMORY BOOKS!** There are several Do-It-Yourself sites online or you can hire an outside source. These books can include notations, dates, names, information and become wonderful replicable histories for future generations.

3. **CREATE A VIDEO OF YOURSELF TALKING ABOUT THE REAL THINGS YOU WANT TO LEAVE WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS!** Imagine... your journey, your regrets, your stories, your recipes reaching out to future family you may never meet.

The accumulation of 'STUFF' is a very complex issue influenced by a myriad of factors, from financial security to consumer culture to marketing to emotional and societal pressures. Its impact is far-reaching, affecting not just our personal spaces and mental well-being but to the environment at large.

However, just hauling our unwanted things to a charitable organization presents its own problem. In Chile's Atacama Desert, is a Textile Landfill of more than 66,000 tons of discarded clothes which is now visible from outer space. Goodwill receives 5.7 billion pounds of used goods each year? Americans alone toss away enough plastic bottles each year to circle the earth four times? Expecting things to change without any effort on your part is **like waiting for a Cruise Ship at the Airport!**

I LEAVE YOU WITH THIS THOUGHT...

As we navigate a world filled with opportunities to acquire, it becomes increasingly important to pause and consider the real cost and purpose of our spending habits as well as our attachment to personal belongings. Whether it is through mindful consumption, regular decluttering or a shift in societal norms, it is important as a country and as a citizen of the world to take responsible steps to create a more sustainable and fulfilling life for generations to come. **Why do we have so much STUFF? Alas, it is our choice.**

We are destined to leave the world ... and we take nothing with us. Perhaps the secret to a fulfilling life is to **DO More STUFF** rather than collect it. Because something made us happy

in the past doesn't mean we have to physically keep it forever. The more material objects we lose, **the less we have.**

*But in the end,
it may well be
that the less we have,
the more we ALL win!*