

Practices

Winnowing

Suzanne Matson

Winnowing



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Practices

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Winnowing

Suzanne Matson

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For my family, in all its generations



The art of losing isn't hard to master.

—Elizabeth Bishop, “One Art”

My greatest skill has been to want but little.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Journal 2*, July 19, 1851

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Stuff

WHEN I'M AWAY from home, living out of a small bag, or taking a hike with only what I can carry on my back, I feel returned to an essential balance, bipedal and unencumbered. I exist in a state of lightness. Being unweighted from goods feels like being unweighted from worries about past or future. As the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes in *How to Walk*, "We can arrive in the present moment with every step."¹

That lightness of journey is elusive; I don't remain nomadic for very long. Back home, in my home of many years, I am confronted with all the rest of my stuff. I don't have an extraordinary amount of clothes, but I have a closetful. I have a dresser full. The closet and dresser are full mainly because I had six feet of space to hang things up in, and five drawers to put things in. How could I not have filled them, over time?

We load our living quarters to the full volume of our storage space, and often beyond. A recent study by a building and design trade group found that one in five Americans rents storage

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units, with 40 percent of those renters citing as their reason not having enough space for their goods at home.² Sometimes we don't even know what we own because we can't see it to remember it. There is a book I want to get my hands on that I know I own. Because I don't have enough shelves to accommodate my books, I have stored some in cardboard banker's boxes, and these boxes are shoved in a deep recess of a closet blocked by other things. It will be a big project to find this book that I suspect is one of the ones stashed away, yet, if I want, I can order it for \$9.95 on Amazon and have it tomorrow. Then I will have two copies to store.

We suffer from overabundance in the West, even if our personal economic means are slight. We can spend a lot or a little, but the end result is the same: goods that have a tendency to layer up around us like sediment, until we can feel we are being buried alive by consumption. There is a chorus of ready advice to help us go about thinning our possessions to reclaim breathing room. Marie Kondo, in *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, urges us to only have things around us that “spark joy.” Margareta Magnusson, in *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*, speaks of the “exhaustion” that comes of having too many things and urges us to lighten the burden that will fall to those who have to dispose of our possessions when we die. The Taoist principle of feng shui, with its philosophy of releasing the flow of life energy by balancing and harmonizing the elements in one's surroundings, has been popularized into many guides for the ownership and placement of objects. And that original American declutterer, Henry David Thoreau, exhorted us plainly in the mid-nineteenth century to “simplify, simplify.”

I did begin simply, once upon a time, when single and unfettered, living in austere studio apartments, moving to France for a research year with one duffel that was small enough to stow under an airline or train seat. A friend visiting my grad school studio apartment for the first time, and taking in the minimalist arrangement of futon, bistro table, and desk, said, “You could move out of here in three hours, maybe less,” a comment that made me feel understood, and even complimented: I was nimble, ready to move on to whatever beckoned. Then attachments happened, human and material, and now I live in a house with a basement and an attic and the stream of objects left behind by three grown boys. My husband and I buried two sets of parents and emptied two houses that had been filled with the belongings of those family lives. There are boxes and bins of things.

Still, it's hard not to acquire even more, with media showing us what we should want at every turn, what will make our lives easier, more comfortable, or more fun. There will always be a manufacturer rushing to satisfy whatever whim or transitory desire the buyer has. You don't have to have much money to acquire stuff. Fast fashion can cost less than a large cup of coffee: A quick online search brings up T-shirts from Shein for \$4.29, a hooded sweatshirt from Temu for \$3.38, and biker shorts from H&M for \$4.99. Of course, there are real costs to all these cheap clothes, paid by the women and children laboring in sweatshops, and by all of us through the environmental degradation caused by irresponsible manufacturing. We have been paying these costs all along, but as consumers it's easy to look away. Meanwhile, our closets can fill up with impulse buys, and our kitchens become overrun with gadgets. You

could, for instance, dedicate a whole cupboard to making coffee: drip coffee maker, espresso coffee maker, cold brew coffee maker, bean grinder, and vast collections of commuter cups and mugs. Once we've acquired the goods, even if they struck us as amazing buys (fast fashion) or investments in future thrift (home-brewed versus Starbucks), it's hard to figure out what we really need from them, and how to discern an authentic economy to live by.

It's not easy to negotiate one's relationship to the material world. There are things we need, things we want, and things we are attached to because they are conduits to other places, people, and times through the associations they hold. Each of these factors generates its own type of magnetic field around objects. Even "need," a seemingly straightforward metric, is an unstable and shifting category blurred by considerations of time. If the thing is not needed now, maybe it will be sometime in the future?

Need. My son was recently packing for a two-year assignment in rural Honduras. He'd been told that the life he was about to lead would be especially hard on clothes. I normally advocate for packing very lightly on trips, and practice a one-bag rule myself, but he was *moving* to this place (and also needed to bring his own bedsheets and towels). I had temporary amnesia about my own year in France at his age, for which I'd brought only one small duffel, and urged him to buy multiples of necessary items. He finally consented to take a checked bag as well as a carry-on but was firm about bringing only the sneakers on his feet and the sandals in his bag. No extra shoes. He voiced the reasonable supposition that people in Honduras must regularly wear out their shoes and go to stores or markets to buy

replacements. He didn't let anxiety about the future produce a false version of need in the present.

Want. The writer and cultural critic Lewis Hyde, in his book *The Gift*, writes that “the desire to consume is a kind of lust. We long to have the world flow through us like air or food. We are thirsty and hungry for something that can only be carried inside bodies. But consumer goods merely bait this lust, they do not satisfy it.”³ It's easy to fall prey to the temptation to amplify ourselves—our status, our visibility, our feelings of self-worth—through buying more stuff, whether it's simply the pleasurable rush of getting something new or the imaginary fulfillment of owning a particular designer brand. There can certainly be an overlap between cost and quality, and sometimes spending more will get you something that is better made or longer lasting. But if we already have these items, in serviceable condition, do we really need “this season's drop,” or the “hottest new colors,” or the designer's name currently carrying the most cachet? The bait of recurrent merchandising is unending, mobilizing what the philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls “a frustrated desire for totality.”⁴ Once in a while, I am surprised to find something hanging in my closet I have never worn. Then I remember that at a certain moment, standing in front of a flatteringly angled dressing room mirror, I “wanted” it. But, evidently, I didn't need it.

Attachment. Just as the collections in public museums document our communal past and shape our cultural narratives, we order and preserve our family and personal histories through what we save. When my mother left her Mennonite family and went west to Oregon during World War II to live and work on her own, she saved menus, napkins, and coasters from her dates

with soldiers. She didn't do this forever, and stopped accumulating restaurant artifacts after meeting my father, but during that highly charged period of breaking free, she created a personal collection of exhibits documenting her emerging independence. Other exhibits comprising this "museum" of selfhood over the years included her book prize for good studentship in the second grade, her mother's handwritten recipe book, silk saris from her childhood in India as part of a missionary family, and her high school report cards from Peoria, Illinois. I inherited these collections, and I feel attached to them all. Her past comes alive for me in these tactile objects. Of course, I've also accumulated my own personal artifacts, and those of my children. It begins to be a lot, necessitating a curatorial process of choosing what gets to stay. At the root of the word *curate* is the Latin *curare*, "to take care of." We are all our own memory keepers, tending and sorting the richly imbued objects in our care.

I began with the idea of lightness, of feeling freedom and enjoyment in being unencumbered. That goal is the guiding light of this book. But it's not just about the aesthetic or spiritual satisfaction of unweighting. It's about shifting a whole mindset away from getting and owning, as well as loosening my grasp on (at least some of) the many possessions that speak to me through memory and attachment.

I would like to own only essential (useful, beautiful, meaningful) things, but stuff comes into the house nearly every day, and it takes will and action and time to remove it. During busy periods this doesn't happen. Over weeks and months and years of accumulation, the project of paring down can feel too large to begin. Or, if I do begin, I get stuck: I fixate on an object charged with personal significance, or I get caught in the

dilemma of feeling like the object will benefit “someone” in the family “sometime.” Instead of a brisk filling of boxes for the donation truck, I lose hours to the process and make little headway.

You could come to my house and not immediately feel that there are too many things. The living room is uncluttered (except scattered socks dragged from the bedrooms—my dog’s collecting hobby and her own version of object attachment). There is room to sit and eat around the kitchen table. Things are not stacked up in corners where you would see (except that one corner of the kitchen counter). But the bedrooms upstairs and the closets, cupboards, drawers, attic, and basement are full. Even when I’m not looking at the stuff, I’m somehow feeling it. I’m convinced that mental energy gets sapped by an excess of things around you. Though I try to get others involved, I’m the one most bothered by excess, so my role in the household has become the manager of these goods—the decider of what stays or goes, as well as how and where to store it. Those who live singly must grapple with the process themselves, unless the surfeit of goods becomes so burdensome that a rescuer needs to be brought in, as when a grown child helps an older parent.

In these pages I will write about how I got to this point of feeling weighed down, asking myself what deeper dynamics are at play and how I might arrive at a place that feels airier. I’m going to sort and give away, and log the process over several days, but it won’t be done then. As I winnow my things, I will remind myself that perfection isn’t required or even really attainable. For Sylvia Plath in her poem “Edge,” perfection represents the end:

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

We have come so far, it is over.⁵

I'd rather be "in process" than "over," aspiring to live lightly as an ongoing discipline, a continual recentering, or—nodding to what I found most useful from Marie Kondo's book—a way of identifying joy.

The word *winnow* means air moving through grain to separate the heavier kernels from the lighter chaff. It is a sorting action to keep what nourishes while letting what is worthless blow away. The Old English form is *windwian*: from wind. If anything is impermanent, unseeable except in its effects, a synonym for breath and spirit itself, it is the wind. If we are the winnowers, we join with the energy of the wind.

Winnowing is not a single accomplishment. It's not a checklist or a set of fixed methods. It's a way of being in the world that gives us personal freedom, spiritual calm, aesthetic pleasure, and agility in precarious times. Increasingly, it's a practice we must collectively develop in order to survive as a species on our burdened and beleaguered planet. Relinquishment isn't an action that can be finished; one can only begin it with fresh intention every day, every season, every new phase of life.

THINGS, ONE AT A TIME

A LOG

Day 1

The front hall is a liminal space where the outdoors meets the indoors. The mail gets pushed through the slot, packages are brought in from the front step, coats and umbrellas and dog leashes are hung or heaped, and car keys and oddments pile up on a little side table.

Because the objects in this space are not particularly fraught with sentiment or value, straightening out the entryway seems mostly a matter of organization and tidying up. I'm convinced it's a good way to ease into the winnowing.

And yet—I stall! For one day, two . . . I keep resetting my “day 1.” Every time I walk through this space—coming in or going out of the house, going upstairs—I make mental notes of what has to be done. I've made so many mental notes I've practically done the work, and yet it seems like pushing cement to physically get down to it.

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I begin with the welter of shoes. These are meant to be in a row on either side of the entryway, yet there are clearly too many. Two of my three sons have boomeranged home for some months before beginning their next phase of life—one heading out of state; another, out of the country. Athletic sneakers and work boots abound. My husband has three pairs here of his own. I have only two in this location, because most of mine are in a corner of my bedroom.

I pick out some tattered and sorry-looking size 13 sneakers and ask my son, who happens to be at home, if these are done for. Astonishingly, he agrees, and I feel a swell of victory. Something to purge! I throw them in a trash bag, then feel stricken that they will be going to a landfill. I'm sure I'm supposed to be doing something else with them. A donation truck is coming by tomorrow (another reason day 1 could no longer be pushed off), but these are not fit to pass on to anyone else. I lose several minutes sitting down and googling what to do. There is an organization, Helpsy, that will get me out of this, with bins around town. It accepts clothing and footwear "in any condition for all ages and genders so long as they are clean, dry, and odorless."¹ Shoes will be broken down, their components recycled. Now, another spinning of my mental wheels. The destroyed sneakers are dry. But are they odorless? They haven't been worn in a while; I sniff; they'll pass. But they need a bit of swabbing down. I take a wet paper towel and get all the loose dirt off. As long as it took me to write this, and for you to read it, know that it took much longer for me to actually do it. It's clear to me why I kept putting off this whole endeavor.

I do gain momentum, and rest assured, I won't narrate every single item I handled, but the exhausting thing about this

process is that you *do* handle your goods one by one, calculating, weighing, planning for its right place in the house or the right way to get rid of it. It's a lot of mental work. I move all the shoes out and sweep, put back the ones that belong, pull out some winter boots that need to go to the basement shoe rack, another pair of shoes for Helpsy, and line them all back up. It's good.

I unbox a bag of dog food that arrived from Chewy (and has been sitting in the entryway for days), pour the new kibble in its keeper, and break down the box for recycling. I unbox a bag of grass seed that arrived from Amazon and put it on the bench over the shoes beside my gardening gloves. I need to keep it in sight to remind myself to overseed some bare spots before the next rainy spell. I sort out the coats, including the ones hanging on hooks and those stuffed in the closet. I find two I can donate and several winter scarves I never wear to donate with them. There are some woolens that need to be stored in a zippered bag for winter, and I got to them just in time: Three moths fluttered up out of the basket where they were piled, though so far I see no holes gnawed through the wool.

On the floor of the coat closet lives the canvas tote for dog gear, and I take everything out and sort through. Some things were for our older dog, no longer living. Some things were for our younger dog when she was a puppy. I earmark a pile of stuff for our local Facebook dog group, where one woman collects items for a shelter.

I've dispensed with junk mail, put aside some woolen gloves in a pile to be washed and stored, and organized the closet. The hall looks airy, clean, and functional. When someone comes in, there are plenty of hooks to hang up their wraps. When

someone goes out, the bench is clear to sit on and lace up the shoes they'll wear. The small basket is empty of extra items, and ready to hold only car keys. The project took three hours but was a success.

Then I look at the piles littering the adjacent dining room table: one for handwashing, one for taking to the Helpsy bin, one for the Facebook dog group, one to be taken upstairs and stored in a mothproof bag. Some of it goes—you guessed it—down to the basement to be dealt with later.

When my husband comes home, I show him the selection of his wool scarves and ask if he wears them all. “They’re all nice,” he says (not what I asked). He fingers them, remembering who gave him what for which occasion, over the course of some three decades now. He decides to keep them all. “All six?” (I’ve counted.)

“Sure. Are six scarves too many for one man?”

I don’t know; you tell me.

Day 2

The second publicly visible cluttered space downstairs is a corner of the kitchen opposite the food preparation zone, tucked next to the refrigerator. Only people sitting at the counter or working in the kitchen have a direct view of it. A partial inventory of this corner: boxed roll of dog poop bags, bag of dog treats, dog brush and comb, dog balls; letter holder with coupons, city notices, business cards, and flyers; vertical paper file with shelves holding files for records ranging from receipts to warranties to Mail I Don’t Know What to Do With.

Some of this is easy: Cull the dog stuff and add to the shelter donation bag, toss the outdated coupons and notices, figure out which receipts I don't need to keep. Other stuff slows me way down to read and mull over. There are lots of folders to handle—one for each boy; ones for the insurance policies; one for Inkki, the dog we have, and one for Oscar, the dog that died. I could throw away Oscar's folder with his rabies certificates and city licenses and vet receipts, but it's a little like throwing him away, so I don't. All these folders need another few hours of evaluating and thinning, but for now the space is clean and organized, the main area of the counter clear again, and I have a refreshed memory of what's filed in case I want to find it. I haven't gotten rid of as many papers as I could (like "Current Physicals"—not current at all anymore, but they have my kids' growth charts in them), so at some point I either will, or I'll move them to a more permanent file cabinet upstairs (itself full to capacity at the moment). One pathetic little victory: I finally threw away every sheet of complimentary address labels that charities have sent me. I had a collection, just like my mother had, *yet had never used one*. Why did I keep them in the first place? I rarely send anything through the mail anymore, so their very existence was moot, but they had my name nicely printed on them, and they were free, and some charity had spent money on them.

I succumbed to several cheats and failures along the way: Screws got tossed into the house key cup. *Loose screws belong somewhere*, my thinking goes, *and the answer will reveal itself in time*. There is still mail I don't know what to do with that got returned to the now nicely reduced stack in the paper file.

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This corner was an Area of Chaos before, but I have tamed it into an Area Under Control. It took me three hours, and that has to be good enough for now.

Day 3

Today's space is a long storage nook to the left of the basement stairs. You have to be standing at the dim top of the stairs to rummage around in it, and if the stuff in it overflows, it will tumble down to the basement. We use the nook for cleaning supplies, mops and dusters, and, in the dark recess that's behind the wall, anything we want to shove out of sight.

I save plastic bags on a hook in this cubby, and that bag is bursting. I sort out the reusable shopping bags to put back but finally admit defeat with the plastic newspaper sleeves. We're down to one print newspaper every Sunday, so if I need these sleeves to pack shoes in for a trip, I'll be getting more. They're not great for dog waste because the equipment that's used to feed the newspapers into the sleeves makes small punctures at the bottom of the bag. So first I check to make sure they are not part of what's accepted at our town's recycling center (they're not), then wad up a big cloud of them to stuff in the garbage. They want to un-wad themselves, expanding to the top of the trash bin, like demonic ghosts reminding me that they will never go away. Still, they are out of the compressed bomb of a bag that has been trembling on its hook over the basement stairs, and I am glad to see them go.

It's fun to come upon things I forgot about, and already over the three days this has happened several times. I had been wondering where I put the attachments and replace-

ment bags for the small canister vacuum cleaner, and there they are, hanging in a shopping bag on one of the hooks in the recessed space. I totally forgot that we had some milky spore for the lawn ready to go, but we do. And more dog toys that I had taken out of rotation.

Unfortunately, I also discover a bag of documents someone gave me last fall when I read from my latest novel and discussed the archival research that went into it. A person from a local historical center presented me with a dense pack of Finnish immigrant letters, photos, and early twentieth-century memorabilia relating to my topic and said, “I don’t know of anyone better to take care of these.” He thrust the bag into my arms and practically ran from the room. The contents: day-to-day traces of someone’s life lived, which were then stored for posterity in an attic, then donated to the historical center, and then dumped on unsuspecting me. I’m sure there will be some interesting stuff inside, but it is a heavy bag—both in pounds and in responsibility. When I got home from the reading, I shoved the bag into the stairway nook. Now I find it again, consider the few hours it will take to go through it and the impossible decisions it will present, then put it back where it had been. I don’t want to give the parcel an entrée to the upstairs where my own books and files are jostling each other for all available space. This early twentieth-century Finnish farmer, who had typed a note of appreciation to a tractor company and received a personal reply, and who had saved photos and letters from relatives back home in Finland, was not going to be allowed to take up residence. But I wasn’t able to banish him out the door just yet.

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NOTES

Stuff

Epigraphs: Bishop, “One Art,” in *Geography III* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1976), 40–41; Thoreau, *Journal 2: 1850–September 15, 1851*, vol. 7. of *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, edited by Bradford Torrey (Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 319.

- 1 Nhat Hanh, *How to Walk*, 8.
- 2 Purcell, “1 in 5 Americans Rent.”
- 3 Hyde, *Gift*, 12.
- 4 Baudrillard, “System of Objects,” in *Selected Writings*, 28.
- 5 Plath, “Edge,” 272–73.

Things, One at a Time: A Log

- 1 “What We Accept,” Helpsy.

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