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OPINION COMMENTARY

David McGrath: My clutter is no match for my wife's superpower



Marianne McGrath packs dishes and utensils for Habitat for Humanity. (David McGrath)



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My wife's superpower is decisiveness when it comes to getting rid of things.

Call it common sense or call it ruthlessness. Marianne shows no hesitation at tossing a red woolen sweater in the Goodwill bag if she hasn't worn it in three years. Or the stuffed brown teddy bear that our granddaughter snuggled with as a baby, now that Summer is 8 years old.

In fact, her decluttering prowess is so feared (by yours truly) and envied (by everyone else) that relatives regularly seek her help when any of them is moving, redecorating, making space or having a garage sale.

In the past year, as I found it more and more difficult to find the things I need, whether it be the drill bits I bought recently at Home Depot or the warm gloves I received for Christmas, I would ask Marianne if, by chance, she had picked them up and put them away in the wrong place.

“Don’t you dare blame me,” she would say.

She noted that with the clothes I have stuffed into drawers and the spare bicycle and engine parts, electronic gadgets and leftover scraps of building materials I have stuffed into boxes and cabinets and on shelves, it is a wonder that I can find anything at all.

Somewhere in between her frank reminders was a salient point, backed by what psychologist Diane Roberts Stoler [wrote in Psychology Today](#) in 2023: “Decluttering increases self-worth, creates healthy habits and boosts productivity.”

What better time, therefore, than at the start of the new year, for all of us to clear our heads and move forward in our lives by draining our swamps of excess possessions and donating or discarding them!

My darling wife recommends a strategy of attacking one room at a time, starting with the smallest.

Marianne slid open the door to my closet. “Do you really need all these suits?” she asked.

In truth, I own just four: one charcoal, one gray, one tan and the blue pinstripe I bought for my College of DuPage job interview 34 years ago. But after she prodded me to recollect that in the last five years, I’ve worn a suit only once on the occasion of my niece’s wedding, I acceded to donating three of them to Goodwill, keeping the pinstripe for the next wedding, funeral or Pulitzer Prize ceremony.

“What about these hats?” she asked.

What? Like they take up any space?

One can never have enough ball caps. What if I were to leave one on a park bench? Or another blew away in my boat?

“You have at least 20 hanging here, and I only ever see you wearing the newest.”

Again, she was annoyingly correct. And while my giving up 15 of those caps felt like a betrayal of old friends, the opportunity to buy a new one without feeling guilty makes up for it.

The next day, Marianne invaded our garage where an entire shelving unit is chock-full of old things that I replaced but have been keeping for spare parts, such as a ceiling fan, a kitchen faucet and a 12-volt battery charger.

Toss it all, she said.

She reasoned that when something like a faucet breaks, it's easier for my caliber of handyman to buy a replacement rather than to try to repair the old item. I found her argument appealing. Liberating, in fact!

I dropped the battery charger in the trash barrel and set the ceiling fan and faucet in the pile for Habitat for Humanity.

Next, she directed me to clear out an entire row of containers of paint I'd been saving for touch-ups. Since all of it had sat for a year or more, it

likely had congealed, not to mention that there's no longer a need to keep originals, thanks to color-matching technology available at big-box stores.

Resting on the floor in front of the paint shelves were a lawn edger, a weed whacker and a power washer, none of which I used anymore. We earmarked them for donation.

Since the remaining wall in the garage held all my fishing rods, we were done, and I headed for the kitchen for something to drink. Marianne, however, lagged behind.

She asked: Why 13 fishing poles?

Never mind, I said. Fishing is my pastime. Like with my neighbor Frank who has eight guitars because his passion is music.

She shook her head. Employing her enhanced interrogation techniques, she established that I only ever use half a dozen at most. I objected and said extras are needed for when people visit or if a good one breaks.

But the woman will stop at nothing, and she played the kid card.

“Don’t you think some young boy or girl would be thrilled to have one of those?”

I had no defense for that, and we bundled seven rods and reels for the Salvation Army.

Afterward, I felt physically lighter, freer and even a little noble for the surge in our charitable donations. To make the feeling last, I resisted the temptation to restock by avoiding clicking on Amazon.

The new year feels good already. And I take comfort in the fact that my blue pinstripe suit, safely protected by the dry cleaner’s plastic cover, has the back of my closet all to itself.

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