

The Last Temptation of Things

By [Edward Curtin](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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"I cling like a miser to the freedom that disappears as soon as there is an excess of things."
- Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*.

Let me tell you a story about a haunted house and all the thoughts it evoked in me.

Do we believe we can save ourselves by saving things?

Or do our saved possessions come to possess their saviors?

Do those who save many things or hoard believe that there are pockets in shrouds? Or do they collect things as a magical protection against the shroud?

These are questions that have preoccupied me for weeks as my wife and I have spent long and exhausting days cleaning out a friend's house. Many huge truckloads of possessions have been carted off to the dump. Thousands of documents have been shredded and thousands more taken to our house for further sorting. Other things have been donated to charity. This is what happens to people's things; they disappear, never to be seen again, just as we do, eventually.

Tolstoy wrote a story - "How Much Land Does A Man Need" - that ends with the answer: a piece six feet long, enough for your grave. As in this story, the devil always has the last laugh when your covetousness gets the best of you. Yet so many people continue to collect in the vain hope that they are exceptions. Ask almost anyone and they will reluctantly admit that they hoard to some degree.

In capitalist consumer societies, getting and spending and hoarding not only lays waste our powers, but it is done on the backs of the poor and destitute around the world. It is a system built to inflame the worst human tendencies of acquisitiveness and indifference since it teaches that one never has enough of everything. It denies the primal sympathy of human care for all humans as it teaches that if you surround yourself with enough things - have ten pair of shoes, twenty shirts, an attic filled with things in reserve - you will be safe from the fate of the majority of the world's poor who have next to nothing. It is an insidious

form of soul murder wherein one pulls the shades on the prison-house, counts one's possessions, and shakes hands with the Devil. And it is sadly common.

From attic to cellar to garage, every little cubbyhole, closet, and drawer in this relative's house was filled with "saved" items. Nothing was ever thrown away. If you walked in the front door, you would never know that the occupants were compulsive keepers. While there were plenty of knick-knacks in evidence like so many houses where the fear of emptiness rules (the emptiness that is the source of freedom and creativity), once you opened a drawer or closet, a secreted lunacy spilled out seriatim like circus clowns from a small car. Like all clown shows, it was funny but far more frightening, as though all the saved objects were tinged with the fear of death and dissolution, were futile efforts to stop the flow of time and life by sticking a finger in a dike.

Let me begin with the bags. Hidden in every corner and closet, there were bags stuffed in bags. Big bags and little bags, hundreds if not thousands, used and unused, plastic, paper, cloth bags with price tags still on them. The same was true for boxes, especially empty jewelry boxes. Cardboard boxes that once held a little something, wooden boxes, cigar boxes, large cartons, boxes from every device ever purchased - all seemingly being saved for some future use that would never come. But the bags and boxes filled each other so that no emptiness could survive, although desolation seemed to cry out from within: "You can't suffocate me."

Tens of thousands of photographs and slides were squirreled into cabinets, closets, and their own file cabinets, each neatly marked with the date and place of their taking. Time in a "bottle" from which one would never drink again - possessing the past in a vain attempt to stop time. These photos were kept in places where their taker would never see them again but could find a weird comfort that they were saved somewhere in this vast collection. Cold comfort by embalming time.

It so happens that while emptying the house, I was rereading the wonderful novel, *Zorba The Greek*, by Nikos Kazantzakis. There is a passage in it where a woman has died, and while her corpse lies in her house, the villagers descend on her possessions like shrieking vultures on a carcass.

Old women, men, children went rushing through the doors, jumped through the open windows, over the fences and off the balcony, each carrying whatever he had been able to snatch - sauce pans, frying pans, mattresses, rabbits Some of them had taken doors or windows off their hinges and had put them on their backs. Mimiko had seized the two court shoes, tied on a piece of string and hung them round his neck - it looked as though Dame Hortense were going off astraddle on his shoulders and only her shoes were visible....

The avidity for things drives many people mad, to get and to keep stuff, to build walls around life so as to protect themselves from death. To consume so as not to be consumed. Kazantzakis brilliantly makes this clear in the book. Zorba, the Greek physical laborer and wild man, is different, for he knows that salvation lies in dispossession. One day he encounters five little children begging in a village. Their father has just been murdered. "I don't know why, divine inspiration I suppose, but I went up to them." He gives the children his basket of food and all his money. He tells his interlocutor, a writer whom he calls "Boss," a man whom Zorba accuses of not being able to cut the string that ties him to a life of living-

death, that that was how he was rescued.

Rescued from my country, from priests, and from money. I began sifting things, sifting more and more things out. I lighten my burden that way. I – how shall I put it? – I find my own deliverance, I become a man.

In the jam-packed attic where there is little room to move with boxes and objects piled on top of each other, I found a large metal four-drawer file cabinet packed with files. In one file folder there was a small purse filled with the following: four very old unmarked keys, six paper clips, two old unworkable watches, a bobby pin, a circular case that contained what looked like a piece of a human bone, a few old medallions, tweezers, four buttons, an eye screw, a safety pin, a nail, a screw, two ancient tiny photos, and a lock of human hair. Similar objects were stored throughout the house in various containers, bags, boxes, the pockets of clothes, in old ancient furniture in the basement, on shelves, in cigar boxes, in desks, etc. Old receipts for purchases made forty years ago, airline baggage tags, ticket stubs, school papers, jewelry hidden everywhere, old foreign and domestic coins, perhaps twenty-five old unworkable watches, clocks, radios, clothes and more clothes, more that anyone could ever have worn, scores of old pens and pencils, hand-written notes with no dates or any semblance of order or meaning, chaos and obsessive account-keeping hiding everywhere in contradictory forms shared by two people: one the neat freak and the other disorganized. One dead and the other forced by fate to let her stuff go, to stand naked in the wind.

How does it help a person to record that they bought a toaster for \$6.98 in 1957 or a bracelet for \$20 in 1970 or that they called so-and-so some undated time in the past? What good does it do to save vast correspondences documenting your complaints, bitterness, and quarrels? Or boxes upon boxes of Christmas cards received thirty years ago? Or brochures and receipts from a trip taken long ago? Old sports medals? Scrapbooks? Photos of long dead relatives no one wants? Fashion designer shoes and coats and handbags hidden in a dusty attic where you don't even know they are there. An immigrant mother's ancient sewing machine weighing seventy-five pounds and gathering dust in the cellar?

Nothing I could tell you can come close to picturing what we saw in this house. It was overwhelming, horrifying, and weirdly fascinating. And aside from the useful things that were donated to charity and some that were taken to the woman's next dwelling, ninety percent was dumped in a landfill, soon to be buried.

In his brilliant novel *Underworld*, Don DeLillo writes about a guy named Brian who goes to visit a collector of old baseball paraphernalia – bats, balls, an old scoreboard, tapes of games, etc. – in a house where “a mood of mausoleum gloom” fills the air. The man tells Brian:

There's men in the coming years they'll pay fortunes for these objects. Because this is desperation speaking Men come here to see my collection They come and they don't want to leave. The phone rings, it's the family – where is he? This is the fraternity of missing men.

Men and women hoarders, collectors, and keepers are lost children, trying desperately to secure themselves from death while losing themselves in the process. In my friend's house I found huge amounts of string and rope waiting to tie something up neatly someday. That

day never came.

Zorba tells the Boss, who insists he's free, the following:

No, you're not free. The string you're tied to is perhaps no longer than other people's. That's all. You're on a long piece of string, boss; you come and go and think you're free, but you never cut the string in two. And when people don't cut that string

It's difficult, boss, very difficult. You need a touch of folly to do that; folly, d'you see? You have to risk everything! But you've got such a strong head, it'll always get the better of you. A man's head is like a grocer; it keeps accounts. I've paid so much and earned so much and that means a profit of this much or a loss of that much! The head's a careful little shopkeeper; it never risks all it has, always keeps something in reserve. It never breaks the string. Ah, no! It hangs on tight to it, the bastard! If the string slips out of its grasp, the head, poor devil, is lost, finished! But if a man doesn't break the string, tell me what flavor is left in life? The flavor of camomile, weak camomile tea! Nothing like rum - that makes you see life inside out.

On the way out the door on our final day cleaning the house, I found a beautiful boxed fountain pen on a windowsill. I love pens since I am a writer. This one shone brightly and seemed to speak to me: think of what you could write with me, it said so seductively. I was sorely tempted, but knowing that I didn't need another pen, I left it there, thinking that perhaps the next occupants of this house would write a different story and embrace Camus' advice about an excess of things.

Perhaps.

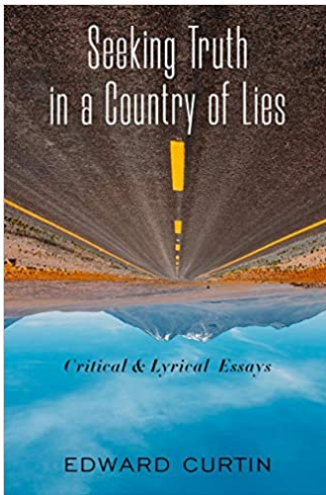
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Featured image: Zero Waste Solution, Wareham, MA (PHOTO: DAVID RATCLIFFE)



He is the author of *Seeking the Truth in a Country of Lies*

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