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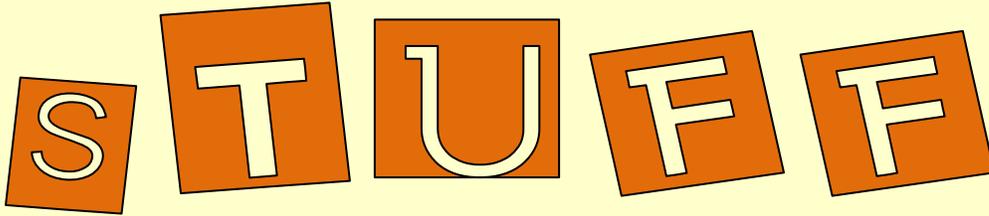
Philosophy for the Modern Age

©2009, Glenn Campbell, PO Box 30303, Las Vegas 89173
glenn@kilroycafe.com www.KilroyCafe.com



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The Tragic Burden of



By GLENN CAMPBELL

Humans are natural packrats. Back in our prehistory it was logical to horde food and tools in case they might be needed in lean times. Naked animals that we were—without fur or claws—we couldn't live without possessions. When your survival depended on a spear or piece of clothing, you didn't lose track of it and were loathe to abandon it even when you had more than you needed. To stay alive, you always knew where your stuff was and you guarded it jealously.

In modern conditions of plenty, that impulse has become dysfunctional. We have way more stuff than we need while our urge to collect it is unimpeded. It's like our lust for sugar and fat even when we have had enough to eat. Today, we suffer not just obesity of the body, but obesity of ownership, to the point where we are crippled by our stuff and our true quality of life is sacrificed.

Some possessions, no doubt, are valuable tools. Take, for example, the fork: unquestionably a useful eating utensil. The personal ownership of a fork is not unreasonable. You use it, wash it and use it again. Owning twenty forks, however, does not add any utility to your life, only obligation and complication, yet few people would divest themselves of extra forks if they weren't forced to. The first fork is useful, but the others are programmed by our packrat genes and are justified only by excuses.

If you own multiple forks, then you can employ a mechanical dishwasher to clean them—a supposedly labor-saving device that has to be fed, serviced and housed. Soon you're buried in such ancillary obligations when a simple fork was all you really needed. Multiply this

complicating process by the thousands of objects in one's life, and you can see how people imprison themselves in their stuff as soon as they have the means to do so. Whatever resources one has, they are quickly absorbed by possessions and their maintenance.

Businesses, honed by the pressures of the marketplace, are relatively lean in their use of stuff. A machine has to prove itself in stark monetary terms or it's out the door. The same cannot be said of individuals, who will acquire tools and supplies they use only rarely and decline to get rid of them. They will also accumulate vanity objects of no practical value, seeing these possessions as a measure of their own worth.

At the same time, business is utterly relentless in its attempts to sell us stuff we don't need, because that's where the greatest profit lies. You don't just need a fork, they say, but a jewel-encrusted fork. You need a fork with special qualities you never knew you needed until advertising told you about them. Since advertising is the dominant voice in our culture, it's hard to resist the commercial message: Buy more stuff! There's no money to be made in encouraging thrift, only in promoting obesity, so that's what most of us are: big fat possession hogs!

And "stuff" isn't limited to physical objects. There's also mental stuff congealed around us—accumulated habits, projects and activities of little practical value that tie up our time like possessions monopolize our space. If Tuesday nights are dedicated to a certain activity and Sundays are occupied by another and every year a certain holiday must be celebrated in a certain

way, soon your whole life is pre-programmed and there is no opportunity left for growth or change. Mental stuff is having prior commitments and perceived necessities occupy all your future time, so your opportunity for creativity is low. The world changes but you can't, because you are already committed to certain entrenched ways.

It's easy enough to take on new habits or obligations but often painfully difficult to withdraw. If you volunteer for a worthy cause, they soon depend on you. If you start growing a plant that needs your attention every day, how can you let it wither and die? Things like this may occupy your time, but they aren't necessarily the best use of it. You could be doing something more meaningful, but your calendar is already filled.

The accumulation of stuff—both physical and mental—is the primary burden of old age. It isn't the deterioration of the body that makes us old but the accumulation of possessions and preconceptions. Even if our lifespan was 500 years, the problem would be the same: After a few years of prosperity, we become ensnared in a web of our own stuff. We can't move because we can't bear to part with the objects and habits that no longer serve us.

Thankfully, we don't live 500 years. We'll die soon enough, and when we do our stuff will be quickly dispersed in some undignified garage sale. Our heirs will shake their heads at all the crap we accumulated as they crudely perform our downsizing for us.

It would have been better had we controlled our stuff on our own. If we had held the line on acquisitions and conducted our own garage sales before they were necessary we might have remained young forever. Sure, the body would have given out eventually, but there's no physical reason you can't be productive and adaptive until the very end.

Only your stuff holds you down.

—G.C.

www.Glenn-Campbell.com