

AMERICANdream

Has collecting “stuff” become a nightmare?

I’m taking my niece and nephew to the Columbia Airport after their three-week visit from Washington, D.C., and I wanted to leave 10 minutes ago. Instead, the three of us are digging through the recycling bin. Not the small, innocuous one under the kitchen sink but the actual can – the one in the backyard that’s been accumulating our trash for a week. What are we looking for? An empty Coke bottle.

That’s right, my nine-year-old niece refuses to go home without the “commemorative” bottle she received at the end of our World of Coca-Cola tour in Atlanta last weekend. She also insists on retrieving the bottle cap.

The source of my frustration with my darling little niece this morning is not just my intolerance for being behind schedule. Mostly, I’m disappointed with this child’s visceral need to cling to worthless tokens, a need I now understand is consistent with the habits of a vast number of Americans today. As a professional organizer, I have seen firsthand the extent to which many of us collect – even hoard – the meaningless objects with which we are bombarded daily, and the sometimes crippling effects that this compulsion can have on our quality of life. It’s something I expected from my grandparents’ generation, from people who lived through the destitute, uncertain years of the Great Depression. But after three years helping clients overcome their emotional attachments to the very items that interfere their enjoyment of life, I understand that even nine-year-olds with bedrooms jam-packed with every conceivable toy clutch in their small hands the inconsequential mementos of contemporary American existence.

Why is it that Americans, who tend largely to have so much at our fingertips, still seek to obtain and harbor every possible possession? My belief, having intimately dealt with these tendencies in several clients over the years, is that consumerism is to blame. Somehow the American dream became the American nightmare. Our drive to display our success through our purchases has backfired and many of us find ourselves barricaded from happiness by the piles of stuff with which we surround ourselves.

Now don’t think I’m just referring to “hoarders,” whose horror stories we’ve all seen on television, or super-rich folks who can’t remember how many houses they own. I’m talking about average, “99 percent” Americans who arrive late to every appointment, can’t keep track of their mail, search for their keys several times daily and never get around to doing the things they consider most important, whether it’s exercise, pleasure reading, quality family time or starting work on the next great American novel.

Certainly I’m no Spartan. I’m an aesthete and I surround myself with things I find beautiful, including an embarrassingly large collection of shoes. However, I have always loathed the superfluous and I manage my belongings in a manner that helps me constantly work toward my life goals. The moment I sense that a thing is inhibiting my personal growth, I donate/recycle/trash it. The work I do with clients to help them implement similar habits is some of the most rewarding of my life.

Which is why I so wish to pull my niece out of the recycling bin, sit her down and give her my spiel now, before she continues down the road of empty Coke bottles to utter chaos. However, we’re late for the airport – and I’m sure the last thing this poor girl wants after three weeks in our home is more instructions from her crazy aunt Marin.

So rather than lecture this poor child at this inopportune moment, I’ll be offering you, my dear

By Marin Rose

reader, my free, unsolicited – but expert! – advice in this column each month. See you here next time when I tackle holiday decorating on a budget.

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