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THE HAPPINESS PROJECT**

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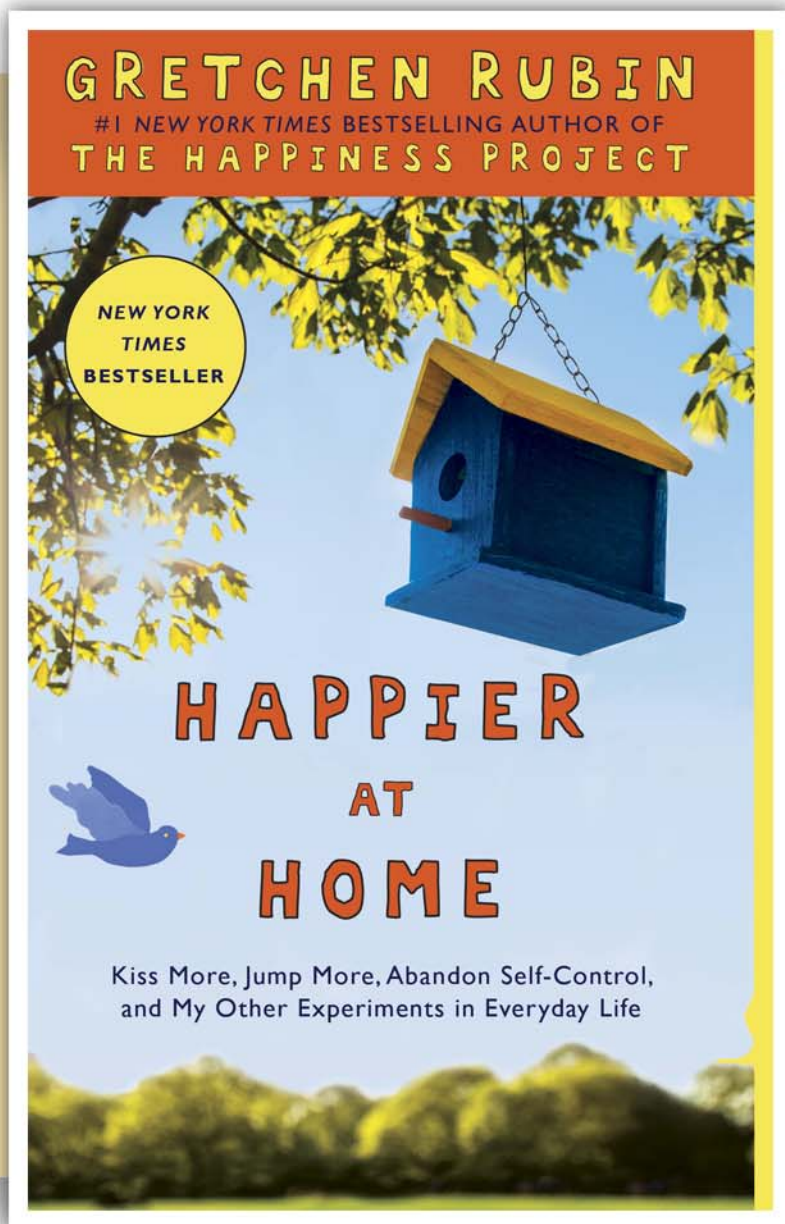
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September

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POSSESSIONS

Find a True Simplicity

We need to project ourselves into the things around us. My self is not confined to my body. It extends into all the things I have made and all the things around me. Without these things, I would not be myself.

—Carl Jung, *C. G. Jung Speaking*

- ~ Cultivate a shrine
- ~ Go shelf by shelf
- ~ Read the manual

Once the season of the harvest, now the season of *la rentrée*, September has always been a milestone month for me, and this September had particular significance: After the first week of school, Eliza walked to school alone. Although she has a safe walk of just nine blocks, we both were nervous the first time she left by herself, but after that morning, she was thrilled with her new independence. The change was bittersweet for me, because I would miss our time together.

Oh well, I comforted myself, Eleanor was just starting kindergarten; I still had many years of morning walks ahead of me. Last May, at the end of nursery school, Eleanor had seemed so big, but in her new school, she was little all over again. As I led her into her classroom on

that first morning, I loved seeing the construction-paper decorations, the block area and the dress-up clothes, the rows of carefully labeled cubbies. Already, I felt deeply sentimental.

When I considered how to be happier at home, I thought first of Eliza, Eleanor, and Jamie. The contents of my home and its architecture mattered much less than its occupants. But while home was the people in it, it was also the physical space and the objects that surrounded me there. I decided to start my happiness project with the theme of “Possessions,” not because I thought possessions were the most important aspect of my home—they weren’t—but because I knew that in many cases, my possessions blocked my view and weighed me down. Before I wrestled with deeper challenges that struck closer to my heart—in the months devoted to “Marriage,” “Parenthood,” and “Family”—I wanted to feel more in control of *stuff*.

My theme of “Possessions,” however, wouldn’t extend to furniture, wallpaper, bathroom tile, or any permanent aspect of the apartment. Although I knew that many people might be eager to address the home-decor aspect of home, I’d never been interested in interior design—window treatments, kitchen countertops, or anything else—that is, until I read the haunting, evocative book *A Pattern Language*. In it, visionary architect Christopher Alexander and his team identify 253 “patterns” that repeat through the architecture that people find most pleasing. As I read about these patterns, I began to fantasize for the first time about living in a dream house, one that incorporated patterns such as “Sleeping to the East,” “Staircase as a Stage,” “Garden Growing Wild,” “The Fire,” and “Private Terrace on the Street.” I wanted them *all*. But although Alexander’s grand system of archetypes enthralled me, our current apartment either had elements such as “Window Place” or “Sunny Counter,” or, in most cases, it didn’t. For this month of Possessions, I would limit myself to the movable objects inside our apartment.

Within the larger subject of happiness, the proper relationship of possessions to happiness is hotly debated. People often argue that possessions don't—or shouldn't—matter much to happiness, but I think they do.

Some research suggests that spending money on an experience brings more happiness than buying a possession, but the line between possessions and experiences isn't always simple to draw. The latest pair of skis is tied to the fun of skiing, and a fashionable dress adds to the fun of meeting friends. A camera is a possession that helps keep happy memories vivid—a big happiness booster. A dog is a possession, an experience, a relationship. Also, many wonderful experiences require, or are enhanced by, possessions. Camping is easier with a great tent. Throwing a Halloween party is more fun with wonderful decorations. Choosing postcards enhances the pleasures of traveling. Part of the fun of fly-fishing is picking out the equipment. Also, for many people, shopping itself is an enjoyable experience; acquisition of possessions is part of the fun, but not all of the fun.

People's desire for possessions can change over time. A friend told me, "For years, I loved the feeling that I could pack up my apartment in an afternoon, load it into my car, and drive away."

"Like that character in the movie *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, who said, 'I just like having the *one key*,'" I said.

"Exactly! I felt so free. I could do anything, go anywhere."

"Do you still feel that way?"

"No," he said. "Over time, I've started to want to have more things. I'm still single, so I can live any way I want, but now I want to be settled someplace, with my things around me."

We often deny the importance of possessions, or feel embarrassed by our enthusiasm for them, but the desire to possess has roots very deep in human nature. "Although there are a few societies in which notions of

ownership are absent or downplayed,” observe researchers Gail Steketee and Randy Frost in *Stuff*, “in most cultures the interaction between people and their things is a central aspect of life.”

Of course, the practice of denying the importance of possessions is also ancient, and many cultures extol the principle of nonattachment and the relinquishment of worldly goods. It’s certainly true that possessions, or the desire for possessions, can undermine happiness, and that some people are happier when they own very little. I once had a long conversation with a twenty-three-year-old guy who tried to convince me how happy I’d be if only I would downsize to one backpack of stuff. “I can’t tell you how much more serene I feel, now that I’ve gotten rid of practically everything,” he said earnestly. “It’s the *answer*.”

“For *you*,” I said, with a laugh. “But it’s not the answer for *everyone*.”

For me, I knew, possessions had a role to play. In fact, one of my goals for the month was to glean *more* happiness from my possessions.

The fact is, attachment brings happiness, and attachment brings unhappiness. Love—for people, for possessions, for a place, for an animal, for a house, for anything—exposes us to the pain of loss. It’s inescapable. We can mitigate that pain by moderating or even eliminating attachment, but while something is gained, something is also relinquished. I wanted to love my possessions, and yet not be mastered by them.

In the persistent debate over the proper role of possessions and spending, I often heard the argument “It’s awful; people are so materialistic. They think that money and buying things can make them happy, but they can’t.”

This statement contains more than one idea. The first idea is that “Money can’t buy happiness.” True, money can’t buy happiness, but spent wisely, it can buy things that contribute mightily to a happy life. People’s most pressing worries include financial anxiety, health concerns, job insecurity, and having to do tiring and boring chores, and

money can help to relieve these problems. Money can help us stay close to other people, which is perhaps *the* key to happiness. It can help us support causes we believe in. It can help us pursue activities that bring us happiness, whether raising children, planting a flower garden, or planning a vacation.

The second idea is that people (not us or our friends, of course, but *other people*) are too “materialistic,” that is, they place too much importance on owning things and showing them off. True, people who are materialistic tend to have unrealistically high expectations of the power of material things, and they seek to define themselves, or raise their status, or make themselves happier through possessions. Studies show that highly materialistic people are less happy, though which is the cause and which is the consequence isn’t clear.

However, in some situations, behavior that might outwardly seem “materialistic” has a nonmaterialistic cause. Conspicuous consumption doesn’t explain every flashy purchase. For instance, I have a friend who’s always the first to buy the latest gizmo—not to show that he can afford it, but to feed his fascination with technology. Clothes are a puzzle. Some people appreciate beautiful clothes for their own sake; it’s not all about making a display for other people, though that’s part of it, too. Virginia Woolf noted in her diary: “But I must remember to write about my *clothes* next time I have an impulse to write. My love of clothes interests me profoundly; only it is not love; and what it is I must discover.” Is this love purely “materialistic”?

For better or worse, buying things (or photographing them, cataloging them, or writing reviews about them) is a way to engage with the world. When we’re interested in something, we often express that interest by researching, shopping, buying, and collecting. People who love art go to museums, but when they can afford it, they usually want to buy art, too. People who love to cook enjoy buying kitchen tools

and exotic ingredients. The latest sports equipment probably isn't much different from what's already in the closet. We crave to buy and possess the things we love, even when it's not necessary. I'm interested in reading *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* only every so often, and my neighborhood library has two copies, yet I want my own copy. When we possess things, we often want to show and share them with other people. Is that necessarily "materialistic" behavior?

Many of the most precious possessions are valuable not because of their cost or prestige, but because of the meanings they contain; modest trinkets, homemade objects, worn books, old photographs, whimsical collections. (After someone's death, how strange to see the value drain away from his or her possessions; useful household objects such as clothes, or dish towels, or personal papers become little more than trash.)

Because we often want to deny the importance of possessions, and because we don't want to seem materialistic, we often don't spend *enough* time and attention thinking about how possessions could boost happiness—or at least I didn't. My possessions had a powerful influence over the atmosphere of my home, and they contributed to, and reflected, my sense of identity.

Was it possible to be happy with very few possessions? Yes. Were some people happier when they owned almost nothing? Yes. But for most people, including me, possessions, wisely chosen, could be a boon to happiness.

Possessions have a role to play in happiness, yet it seemed as though every time I visited a bookstore, turned on the TV, or picked up a newspaper or magazine, I heard the message "You'll be happier with less!" Whenever I fell into conversation with people about the subject of happiness at home, I often heard the response, "Oh, I need to *simplify*."

Some of the great minds in history urge us toward simplicity. Thoreau admonished, “Our life is frittered away by detail. . . . Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” This longing for simplicity is so powerful and complex that it needs its own term, much like *nostalgie de la boue* (yearning for the mud) or *wabi sabi* (the beauty of the imperfect and impermanent). When I asked on my blog if anyone knew a term to capture this idea, one reader coined the wonderful word “Waldenlust.” This longing takes several forms: fantasies of the freedom that dispossession would bring; nostalgia for earlier, supposedly simpler times; and reverence for the primitive, which is assumed to be more authentic and closer to nature.

I’ve often felt a yearning to escape from the ties of ownership. I’ve wanted to dump the entire contents of a chest of drawers into the trash rather than endure the headache of sorting the good from the bad. I often choose not to buy something useful or beautiful, because I don’t want the responsibility of another possession. Years ago, walking through a convenience store parking lot in some small, nameless California town, I had a sudden vision of abandoning everything, my possessions, relationships, ambition, to disappear, unencumbered. *What care I for my goose-feather bed?—I’m away with the raggle-taggle gypsies-o.* Sometimes, too, in an eerie, dark reversal, I love something so much that I feel the urge to destroy it, to be free from that attachment and the fear of loss. (I was so puzzled by this impulse that I wrote a book about it, *Profane Waste.*)

One friend had a particularly acute case of Waldenlust. He was headed to his parents’ house to go through the twenty boxes he’d stored there. “It’s terrible to say, but I really wish there’d be a fire or a flood,” he said ruefully. “Then I’d be done. I hate the thought of dealing with all that stuff.”

“Why are you doing it?”

“My parents are really annoyed. I promised I’d leave the boxes there just temporarily, but they’ve been there a year now.”

“If you haven’t needed anything for a year, maybe nothing’s important,” I said. “If you wish everything would get destroyed in a fire, maybe you could throw the boxes away, without going through them.”

“No, I couldn’t do that,” he shook his head. “I can’t just throw it all away, even if I don’t want it.”

I nodded. I understood the demands of those dusty cardboard boxes. Even though they sat neglected and unwanted, somehow they held pieces of—himself? the past?—that couldn’t be discarded recklessly.

In the past few years, I’d made great headway in conquering my own clutter, but I still wasn’t free from it. The press of superfluous possessions made me feel unsettled and harried, and the demands required by acquisition, use, maintenance, storage, and even relinquishment ate up my energy and time.

However, although I wanted to simplify, I also feared that I was *too* inclined to simplify. Of course, the virtues of simplicity lay far deeper than mere elimination, yet I saw a danger in my craving; I didn’t want to be tempted to cut away too much.

The first principle of my happiness project was to “Be Gretchen.” One important way to “Be Gretchen” was not to assume that virtues that *others* strive to cultivate are the ones that *I* should strive for. Others strive to save; I push myself to spend out. Others try to work more; I try to play more. Others strive for simplicity; I fight the simplifying impulse, because if anything, I cultivate *too much* simplicity—not a disciplined, thoughtful simplicity, but one created by indifference and neglect.

There’s a lassitude deep in my soul; I always have to fight my urge to do nothing. If I didn’t have to consider Jamie and my daughters, if I

didn't have my mother to coach me along, I'd be living in a studio with bare walls, crooked blinds, and a futon on the floor, forever. For some, that simplicity would seem attractive and perhaps even admirable, but not to me. In my case, it would be the simplicity of evasion and apathy, not the simplicity of beautiful emptiness or voluntary poverty.

I've always been this way. After I graduated from college, I lived in a house in Washington, D.C., with three friends. After the first year, one of my housemates said kindly, "The thing about living with you, Gretchen, is that you don't subtract, and you don't add. You never leave a mess, and you never bring home a dessert or call the cable guy." Which was so obviously true that it didn't even hurt my feelings.

I was always telling myself, "Keep it simple." But as Albert Einstein pointed out, "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." I was made happier by my decision to bring paper plates, not home-baked muffins, to Eleanor's start-of-school party, but "Keep it simple" wasn't always the right response. Many things that boosted my happiness also added complexity to my life. Having children. Learning to post videos to my website. Going to an out-of-town wedding. Applied too broadly, my impulse to "Keep it simple" would impoverish me. "Life is barren enough surely with all her trappings," warned Samuel Johnson, "let us therefore be cautious how we strip her."

When I asked a friend what things made her happy, she answered, "Dogs and fresh flowers." Dogs and fresh flowers! Two things I never brought into my apartment, despite their known happiness-boosting abilities. I didn't want a pet or houseplants—too much work. I never looked forward to traveling—too many details. I loved the idea of entertaining but rarely did—too much trouble.

In my home, I wanted the peace of simplicity, of space and order; but I had to guard against my impulse to toss out every item in the

refrigerator. I wanted the sense of ampleness and possibility, with beloved objects, plentiful supplies, and a luxuriant disarray. I would hold a place for that sixty-year-old tin Saltines box, just because I love its shape and colors.

Cultivating my possessions, then, wasn't a simple matter of organization, elimination, or accumulation; it was a matter of *engagement*. When I felt engaged with my possessions, I felt enlivened by them, and when I felt disengaged from them, I felt burdened. My craving for simplicity was provoked not by a profusion of too many loved things, but from a chaos of meaningless possessions (or relationships or activities, for that matter). Because I had stuff I didn't want or need, it felt like I'd be happier with less, but it wasn't the *amount* of stuff, it was the *engagement* with that stuff. The more things that I possessed without using, the more beleaguered I felt.

Engagement came in two forms.

First was the engagement that came with *use*. When I often used a possession—wore the purple coat, packed up the duffel bag, consulted the laminated subway map—I felt engaged with that object. On the other hand, neglected possessions made me feel guilty and overwhelmed. The uncomfortable boots I never wore, the board games we never played, the fancy white china that never left the cupboard—inanimate though they were, they seemed to reproach me. And then there were the things that were broken, or that didn't suit us anymore, or that I'd never really learned to operate.

Second was the engagement that came with *response*. Every time I walked by the shelf where we kept the handmade books my daughters made in nursery school, all swollen with glued bits of macaroni and cotton balls, I thought tenderly of those days. Standing on our kitchen counter were the three wooden models for factory gears that my mother bought us when we moved. Despite their industrial origins,

the shiny, worn wood pieces had a beautiful color and ridged shape that pleased me every time I looked at them.

To make home a place of comfort and vitality, I would strive not merely to eliminate. “Plainness was not necessarily simplicity,” Frank Lloyd Wright cautioned. “Elimination, therefore, may be just as meaningless as elaboration, perhaps more often is so. To know what to leave out and what to put in; just where and just how, ah, that is to have been educated in knowledge of simplicity.”

My goal, then, was to rid our home of things that didn’t matter, to make more room for the things that did. For September, I undertook two complementary tasks: first, to identify, arrange, and spotlight meaningful possessions; second, to get rid of meaningless stuff.

I had to try three pens before I found one that worked, but once I’d found it (and tossed the first two), I filled out the resolutions on the first page of my new Resolutions Chart. To give more prominence to precious possessions, I resolved to “Cultivate a shrine,” and as a counterweight, to get rid of unwanted possessions, I resolved to “Go shelf by shelf.” To increase my feelings of engagement with an unpopular class of objects—useful devices that I didn’t quite know how to operate—I resolved to “Read the manual.”

As I thought about my home and my possessions, a line from the Bible kept running through my mind. Jesus said: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” The relationship between my heart and my treasure was something I sought to understand more clearly.

CULTIVATE A SHRINE

With my resolution to “Cultivate a shrine,” I meant to transform areas of my apartment into places of super-engagement. I have a friend who

lives in an apartment that looks like a time-share condo: attractive, but so impersonal that it doesn't seem to belong to anyone in particular. I wanted home to feel like home.

Eleanor inspired this resolution. Throughout the apartment were jackdaw collections of her treasures, in little spaces she called her “areas”—on windowsills, behind her bedroom door, on the step next to Jamie’s desk, on her bedside table, behind the rocker in her room. In careful tableaux, she’d arranged huge assortments of china teacups, princess figurines, crayons, torn-up tissues, pretend food, scented lip balm, plastic phones, and glittering gimcracks. To the uninitiated, these areas looked haphazard, but Eleanor had a vision for each, and if anyone removed even a single item, we’d soon hear a cry of disbelief, “*Who* took the Tinker Bell doll from behind my door?” I’d hear her murmur, “I need the Super Ball with the polar bear inside,” and watch her dart off to retrieve it instantly from what appeared, to the untrained eye, to be a massive jumble of stuff. She played in these areas by herself for hours—talking to herself, running from room to room, moving the figurines.

“Doesn’t it drive you crazy? Look at all this!” asked Jamie one morning, pointing to some crowded windowsills before he left for work. “She *has* to put her stuff away. It’s everywhere.”

“I know, it’s messy, but she really plays in these areas,” I answered. “If we can stand it, I think we should let her keep them as long as she’s actually using them.”

Calling my own areas “shrines” sounded a little grandiose, but the word helped me approach the task more enthusiastically: Creating a shrine sounded more intriguing than sprucing up the apartment. By “shrine,” I didn’t mean a niche with candles, flowers, and a statue, but rather, Eleanor-like, an area that enshrined my passions, interests, and values. A shrine is arranged with care. It entices people to particular activities and moods. It’s a sign of dedication.



Some household places naturally become areas of super-engagement. Research suggests that no matter how big a house, people spend the most time near the kitchen, gathered around the closest flat surface—a kitchen table, an island, a nearby dining room table—or in rooms with televisions or computers. Our kitchen table, TV, and computers got

plenty of attention. I wanted to charge other areas with greater significance and beauty.

Just the sight of meaningful possessions gave me a sense of being surrounded by . . . well, if not by friends, by benevolent presences. I've never forgotten Elaine Scarry's observation in *The Body in Pain*, "Perhaps no one who attends closely to artifacts is wholly free of the suspicion that they are, though not animate, not quite inanimate." Beloved objects gave me a sense of real comfort.

I wanted to begin my resolution by creating a Shrine to My Family—and for that shrine, photographs would be most important. To eke out the most happiness from an experience, we must anticipate it, savor it as it unfolds, express happiness, and recall a happy memory, and photographs are a very helpful tool for prompting happy memories. As many as 85 percent of adults keep photos or mementos in their wallets or on their work desks, and happy families tend to display large numbers of photographs in their homes.

I already had collections of photographs in several places throughout our apartment, but I'd fallen behind with framing some new pictures. I dislike errands, but after some stalling, I took several photos to the neighborhood frame shop to pick out suitable frames. I arranged the frames more attractively on the shelves and moved some rarely seen photos into more prominent positions. I wasn't satisfied with this effort, however; because these photos were a permanent part of our apartment landscape, we usually walked right by them without seeing them. How could I focus our attention on our photographs? I had an idea. I'd create a new holiday photo gallery.

I'd already created one gallery: Every Halloween, I set out a photo display of the girls in their costumes over the years. The collection made a terrific seasonal decoration, and because these photos weren't always on display, we paid special attention to them.

Now I'd create a second gallery, from our collection of annual family Valentine's cards. (Instead of winter holiday cards, we send out Valentine's cards in February, because life is so crazy in December.) Over the next several days, I dug out the cards from past years. Each one brought back a flood of memories: five-year-old Eliza twirling in her blue dress with the cluster of cherries, which I loved more than any other outfit she'd ever worn; Eliza and Eleanor dressed in their flower-girl outfits for my sister Elizabeth's wedding; Eliza lifting Eleanor high, both of them wearing ballet clothes.

Once I'd collected the cards, I had to exert a considerable amount of self-coaching to drag myself back to that frame shop (I really do hate errands), but finally I had a pink, red, or white frame for every picture. I set them all out on a shelf and stood back to survey the effect—beautiful. I hated to store these beloved photographs until February, but I knew that we'd appreciate them more if they weren't continually on display.

Next, I considered objects that, like photos, powerfully reminded me of beloved family members. In a little-used cabinet in my kitchen, I came across the china pink flamingo that I'd taken as a keepsake from my grandparents' house after my grandmother died. An unlikely object, but I'd admired it so much as a child that it seemed like the thing I should keep. I took it down and set it on a bookshelf alongside the glass bluebird that my other grandmother had given me (oddly presciently, given that the bluebird is a symbol of happiness) many years ago. After all, I couldn't engage with objects if I never saw them. As I looked at the two bird figurines, it struck me as poignant that my long relationship with my beloved grandparents could be embodied in a few small objects. But the power of objects doesn't depend on their volume; in fact, my memories were better evoked by a few carefully chosen items than by a big assortment of things with vague associations. That flamingo

and that bluebird brought back my grandparents, those summer visits to Nebraska, the smell of Fort Cody—I didn't need anything more.

What should be my next shrine? Apart from my family, my most precious possession was my laptop, the indispensable tool for my work and my play. My most faithful servant and most constant companion, it was no mere machine. It had its own quiet personality, and I loved it like an old dog or a beloved stuffed animal.

My laptop sat on my desk, one of the vital centers of my home, like a hearth or marriage bed or kitchen table. And because my desk swallowed up most of my tiny office, I decided to make the entire room a Shrine to Work.

I loved my office because I loved working, but the room itself wasn't particularly pleasing. I'd never tried to make it beautiful and distinctive—for instance, its terra-cotta-colored walls were totally bare—partly because it's so small, just big enough for a built-in desk and a small chair, but mostly because I just never bothered. (Keep it simple, I'd thought when we moved into the apartment.)

I decided to make my office more shrine-like; after all, I probably spent more of my waking hours in my office than in any other room in the apartment. I was fortunate to have complete control over my office. A University of Exeter study showed that people who have control over their workspace design are happier at work, more motivated, healthier, and up to 32 percent more productive. Also, when I was working at home, I tended to pop up every few minutes to go to the bathroom, get a drink, or most often, retrieve a snack. A comfortable, inviting office would help me cultivate the *Sitzfleisch*—the sheer ability to stay in my chair—that every writer needs.

I surveyed the room from the doorway. I didn't mind having such a small office (except that I couldn't fit in a treadmill desk, which I badly

wanted), but lately I'd felt drained by it; although it was reasonably tidy, the narrow room felt overstuffed.

I started by pulling out the masses of folders crammed into the shelves above my desk. Although I wanted to keep some papers related to my clerkship with Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and my job at the Federal Communications Commission, and some materials I'd collected for unfinished book projects, those papers could be moved to an out-of-the-way closet.

Next I turned to the messy stacks of boxes that held supplies. I consolidated boxes of stationery to save space, I bought two attractive cardboard boxes to hold small office-supply items, and then, in a fit of obsession, I even lined up the labels on the spare reams of printer paper. For weeks, I'd been planning to buy pens, because I could never find one when I wanted one, but I discovered fifteen pens jammed in an overlooked drawer.

After some sessions of culling and organizing, the room looked more spacious, and I knew exactly what supplies I owned. Its new orderliness helped me feel focused and serene as I sat down to work. What else could I do to make the room more shrine-like?

Ideally, my office would have a view. Research shows that views of a natural scene, or even just a picture of one, calmed college students facing tough exams and helped surgical patients recover faster. (Also, surgical patients who received flowers had improved rates of recovery.) People in prison cells with natural views reported illness less often than those without views. Although I had plenty of light, so precious in New York City, my windows overlooked a tar roof and two air-conditioning units.

I remembered studies that showed that while it's common for people to decorate their walls with pictures of striking natural scenes, people

in windowless rooms are much more likely to do so. Well, I thought without enthusiasm, I could put up a photograph of a beach scene or a forest brook.

As I gazed absently at the bare surfaces, however, an idea struck me: *painted walls*. I've always loved painted walls and painted furniture, and at dinner at some friends' apartment, I'd admired the beautiful blossoming tree painted in their hallway. Maybe I could get something painted on *my* walls. Immediately the usual objections flooded into my mind: "Keep it simple!" "Who wants to deal with phone calls, decisions, and appointments?" "Why spend money on your office?" "You should be working!"

No, I told myself firmly, I'm making a Shrine to Work. I emailed my friend to ask for information, and much sooner than I would've thought possible, beautiful painted wisteria climbed the walls of my office. It was surprising how much more finished and complete the room felt. I'd never minded the bare walls—in fact, I'd imagined that their sparseness gave me a sense of calm—but my office became far more pleasant after the addition of flowering vines and a single hummingbird.

This exercise showed me that when I'm excited by an idea, a project seems easy, and I move quickly. When I'm not excited by an idea, a project seems tedious, and I procrastinate. If I'd pushed myself to put up a framed picture of a forest scene, I doubt that I would have made any progress.

I surveyed my office with satisfaction. It was now a Shrine to Work. My eye fell with particular fondness on my trusty book weight, a gift from Jamie. This slender leather strip has two heavy, bulging ends that I lay on top of a book to hold its page open as I type my notes. I used this book weight practically every day, and its suitability for its use delighted me. A well-designed workspace and well-made instruments made work a joy.



Shrine to My Family, Shrine to Work—what next? I stalked through the other rooms of our apartment in search of prospects.

A few years ago, following my commandment to “Be Gretchen,” I’d embraced my love for children’s and young-adult literature. Until then, I’d ignored my fanatical love for books such as *A Little Princess* (greatest vindication story ever), *The Golden Compass* (greatest animal character ever), and *Little Women* (greatest family story ever), because I’d decided that it didn’t fit with my self-image as a sophisticated, serious-minded adult. When I acknowledged my true likes and dislikes, instead of being distracted by what I *wished* I liked or thought I *ought* to like, I started a children’s literature reading group. This kidlit group proved so popular, and grew so large, that I had to start another group, and then still another group. And I’d believed I was the only adult who loved these books!

Belonging to these three groups ensured that I made time in my *schedule* to read and discuss these books, and I decided to make a physical *place* for this passion, as well. Instead of keeping these books scattered around the apartment, I would reorganize some bookcases to make a Shrine to Children’s Literature.

“What *are* you doing?” Jamie asked when he saw me sitting on the floor, surrounded by piles of books.

“I’m making a Shrine to Children’s Literature,” I answered.

“Oh,” he said, without a flicker of surprise. “I thought you did that a long time ago.” He vanished quickly, to avoid getting conscripted into book sorting, I’m sure.

As I alphabetized the books into unsteady stacks on the rug, it occurred to me that my personal commandment to “Be Gretchen” is so important that it deserved to be enshrined as the Fifth Splendid Truth: *I can build a happy life only on the foundation of my own nature.* A Shrine to Children’s Literature wasn’t a universal formula for happiness, but it made me happier.

It took me several days to finish, but soon I was gloating over my collection—all my beloved titles lined up together. Here was a shelf of nothing but *Harry Potter*, here, my worn copies of the Narnia books, there, my beloved *Little House* books (Santa Claus brought me one volume each Christmas for nine years). The Elizabeth Enright and Edward Eager books I'd read so many times. Mary Stoltz, who didn't get the attention she deserved. Streatfield, Barrie, Canfield, Collins, Cashore, Montgomery, L'Engle, Tolkien, Alcott, Konigsberg—so many wonderful books, all gathered together. The shrine's capstone was the gorgeous copy of *Four to Llewelyn's Edge*, the illustrated children's book I'd made with a friend. Inspired by J. M. Barrie's brilliant skeleton of a book, *The Boy Castaways of Black Lake Island*, in which photographs of the Llewelyn Davies boys sketch a pirate adventure, my friend and I made photographs of our children in Central Park and turned the pictures into a book. What a delightful shrine! Just standing in front of these shelves made me happy.

In a different room, a bookcase became the Shrine to Fun and Games. I filled its shelves with board games, puzzles, and five glass apothecary jars I'd filled with tiny toys that we wanted to keep but didn't belong anywhere (plastic animals, costume jewelry, marbles, erasers in whimsical shapes). I made a place on the shelves for several favorite toys that I'd saved from my own childhood. I'd been trying to find the right place for the lovely silver rattles that Eliza and Eleanor had received as baby gifts. They'd served their purpose well, and they made a charming collection, but I hadn't known what to do with them. Put them on the Shrine to Fun and Games.

I wanted my shrines to represent important aspects of my life; what about a Shrine to Law? Jamie and I met in law school, and we still have lots of law school friends and a great love for Yale Law School. But so few relics remained from those days: three thick volumes of bound law

journals, with “Gretchen A. Craft, Editor-in-Chief” embossed on the spine; Jamie’s massive final paper, “Neighborhood Resistance to Transitional Housing Facilities in New York State”; and our battered copy of the “Communications Act of 1934 as amended by the Telecommunications Act of 1996” (the size of a paperback novel) from the days when we both worked at the FCC. And we didn’t need anything more. Law was an important part of our past, but it didn’t warrant a shrine. In fact, I got rid of several weighty casebooks that we hadn’t opened in years, and seeing the newly open space on our crowded bookshelves made me very happy.

Once I started cultivating my shrines, I began to notice that other people, consciously or unconsciously, had constructed their own. One stylish friend keeps her necklaces in a beautiful display, spread out on a table instead of stored out of sight. A bookish friend organizes her books by color, in a band that circles her studio apartment. My mother-in-law, Judy, who has a strong creative streak, made a striking Shrine to Playwrights Horizons, the theater where she’s board chair, on the walls of my in-laws’ apartment. The next time I visited, I examined this shrine more closely.

“What do you call these . . . mini-poster things?” I asked, pointing to one of the walls. Each Playwrights Horizons show from the last decade was represented by what looked like a theater poster, but much smaller.

“Oh, these are mailers.” She walked over to stand beside me. “We send them out for each show.”

“And you’ve framed and hung them all?”

“Yes. I get such a feeling of accomplishment every time I put up a new set.”

Some familiar shrines are the Shrines to Music, Shrines to Travel, or Shrines to Tools. I still remember the imposing corner of my grandparents’ garage where my grandfather’s tools hung in their precise places.

A friend who loves arts and crafts transformed a large closet into a tiny room, just big enough for a chair and a narrow counter, with walls covered from top to bottom with racks, shelves, and compartments, each cunningly suited to hold its tool or supply. For many people, a car is an important shrine. A bathroom can be a shrine (a room, studies show, that women enjoy more than men), as can the basement (which men enjoy more than women).

There's no one right way to happiness, but only the way that's right for a particular person—which is why mindfulness matters so much to happiness. To be happier, I have to notice what I'm doing, and why, and how it makes me feel. Research suggests that mindful people tend to be happier, are more likely to feel self-confident and grateful and less likely to feel anxious or depressed, and have heightened self-knowledge. "Cultivating a shrine" made me more mindful of the possessions that were most meaningful to me.

While I was in the midst of this shrine building, I went with Jamie to a work event. Another guest and I struck up a conversation, and when he asked me what I did, I explained a little about the happiness project.

"I can understand about cultivating a shrine," he nodded. "My father has a crazy kind of shrine to wine—a whole room where he keeps a huge number of bottles *after* he's drunk the wine, all arranged on shelves along with his library of wine books, with maps of wine regions of France on the wall."

"That's a great shrine," I said.

"Yes, but do we overvalue possessions? *People* are important, but not things." He didn't sound very convinced.

"People make that argument all the time!" I answered. "But it seems like a false choice. People can be important to you *and* possessions can be important to you."

"True."

“I read a fascinating study about people’s relationships to their possessions, and in particular, what made a thing ‘special.’ What the researchers found was that usually it wasn’t the object itself that was so special, but the important memories or associations invoked by the thing.”

“So it’s not that my father is so attached to that bottle of wine, per se, but the bottle reminds him of a trip to a particular vineyard, or a great meal, or whatever.”

“Exactly.” I suspected I was on the verge of becoming a happiness bore, but I couldn’t stop talking about this research. “An even *more* interesting aspect of the study is the fact that one subset of people denied the importance of possessions. They insisted that things weren’t important to them, only people were important to them—but, in fact, they turned out to be the most lonely, isolated group. It just doesn’t seem to be true that valuing possessions means you don’t value people.”

Before long, our conversation drifted to other topics, but as soon as Jamie and I were home, I headed to my office to reread that passage from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton’s *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*.

Some of our respondents were upset by our questions about special objects and told us that they were not materialists, and things mean nothing to them. It is people, not objects that count. . . . This rejection of the symbolic mediation of things in favor of direct human ties seemed plausible at first, until we began to notice that . . . [t]hose who were most vocal about prizing friendship over material concerns seemed to be the most lonely and isolated. . . . Those who have ties to people tend to represent them in concrete objects.

This rang true for me. I certainly used possessions to memorialize important relationships and experiences. A mere accumulation of objects

was meaningless, though; a possession was precious only if I *made* it precious, through my associations.

GO SHELF BY SHELF

“Order is Heaven’s first law,” wrote Alexander Pope, and one thing that has surprised me is the significance of *clutter* to happiness. While positive-psychology researchers rarely address this topic, it’s a huge subject of discussion in popular culture.

For me, fighting clutter is a never-ending battle; although I’d labored to clear clutter as part of my first happiness project, I was eager to find additional strategies to stop its insidious progress. Inspired by William Morris’s rousing call to “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful,” I resolved to “Go shelf by shelf,” then drawer by drawer, then closet by closet, to consider each of our possessions. Did one of us use it or love it? Would we replace it if it were broken or lost? If so, was it in the right place? If not, why keep it?

Years ago, I started keeping a list of my Secrets of Adulthood—the large and small lessons I’d mastered as I’d grown up. Recent additions included:

- Just because something is fun for *someone else* doesn’t mean it’s fun for *me*.
- It’s enormously helpful, and surprisingly difficult, to grasp the obvious.
- You need new friends and old friends.
- The quickest way to progress from A to B is *not* to work the hardest.

- It's easier to prevent pain than to squelch it (literally and figuratively).
- Where you start makes a big difference in where you end up.
- The opposite of a profound truth is also true.
- A change is as good as a rest.
- It's more important to say *something* than to say the *right* thing.
- The best reading is rereading.

One of the most helpful of these Secrets of Adulthood holds that “Outer order contributes to inner calm.” Why is this true? Perhaps it's the tangible sense of control, or the relief from visual noise, or the release from guilt. In the span of a happy life, having a messy desk or an overflowing closet is clearly trivial, and yet creating order gives a disproportionate boost of energy and cheer. (Of all the resolutions that I've proposed, which one do people most often mention that they've tried, with great success? The resolution to “Make your bed.”)

This month, the resolution to “Go shelf by shelf” would make me feel calmer, and also make my life easier. Professional organizers estimate that the average American spends almost an hour a day searching for things, and for the average home, according to the Soap and Detergent Association (in a seemingly unself-serving conclusion), clearing clutter would eliminate 40 percent of housework. Nevertheless, procrastination expert Piers Steel points out that clearing cluttered spaces is one of the activities that people most often put off.

I weighed two approaches to my resolution to “Go shelf by shelf.” Should I go systematically shelf by shelf through my apartment, starting at one end, ending at the other, taking a few hours each time? Or should I go shelf by shelf in a more scattershot way, taking advantage of loose bits of time?

My instinct to be methodical was very strong, but in the end, I decided to tackle clutter opportunistically. I didn't want this to be a one-time exercise, helpful for a brief time, until the clutter crept back in (as it always does). Instead, I wanted to train myself to use this approach for the rest of my life. For that, I'd have to set the bar low.

As I walked around the apartment, I tried to see it with fresh eyes—the slightly panicky way I see it just before guests arrive, or when my parents are coming to visit, or after we've returned from a week's vacation. I noticed the dusty glass of the sconces, the fingerprints on the doorjambs, the broken knob in the bathroom, the empty box of cereal in the fridge (for reasons lost in the mists of time, we store our cereal in the refrigerator).

I'd become a bit of a clutter-clearing nut, so I didn't expect to find much—I'm the kind of person who makes the bed in a hotel room, even on the morning of checkout—but when I really looked, I found a shocking number of things that had been plunked down in the wrong place, sometimes *for years*. For instance, four years ago, to listen to a hypnosis tape, I'd pulled out my old-fashioned tape-playing Walkman. After I finished, I absentmindedly set the Walkman on top of some books on a bedroom shelf. And that Walkman was still there, exactly where I'd left it. I saw two clocks with dead batteries, a pile of unread books stacked on the floor in a hallway corner, a mirror leaning against a wall, unhung.

In any serious battle against clutter, I always start at the same place: my clothes closet. Fortunately, my mother was coming to town. I have a blind eye for fashion, but my mother has a beautiful sense of style, and she could decide what looked good. Also, when I like a piece of clothing, I keep it too long; she tells me if my favorite T-shirt belongs in the trash.

Hanger by hanger, I tried on practically everything in my closet for my mother. Did it still look good? When was the last time I had worn it? Realistically, would I wear it again?

“I thought these blue pants were uncomfortable, but they’re fine,” I told my mother. “This white shirt—I like it, but I’m worried that I’ll stain it.”

“Wear everything, as much as you can,” she advised. “Wear it out! It’s not doing any good hanging in your closet. And instead of wearing the same few things over and over, try to wear *all* your clothes.”

Also, as I was straightening up my closet, I noticed that some prime closet real estate was occupied by a few scarves. They were beautiful, but I never wear scarves. Never. “I could put these on a high shelf,” I reasoned, “or, even better, maybe my mother wants the scarves!” And she did. In one stroke, I freed valuable closet space, gave my mother something nice, and relieved myself of the twinge of guilt I felt whenever my glance fell on the neglected scarves.

As I continued to work my way shelf by shelf through our apartment, I adopted several catchphrases to make the shelf-by-shelf exercise more effective.

Clean as I go. When I found stale corn flakes in a silverware drawer, or a clump of toothpaste dried to the medicine-cabinet shelf, I took the time to clean up, instead of making the empty promise “I’ll deal with that later.”

Abandon a project. One very effective way to complete a project is to abandon it. A source of clutter in my apartment, and worse, in my mind, was the uncomfortable presence of unfinished projects. While going shelf by shelf through our toy closet, I spotted a kit for making a miniature mountain scene that Eliza and I had planned to build together. In the store, it had looked fun, but we’d opened the box to find several closely printed pages of confusing instructions. “This looks

hard,” I’d said, feeling defeated. “We’ll do it another day.” There it had sat for months, opened but untouched, a reproach. Now, I removed the useful materials, added them to our art supplies, and threw away the box.

Buy what I need. Often, making a purchase just made clutter worse, but then again, sometimes a purchase helped. As an *under-buyer*, I often delay buying things, and when I do buy, I buy as little as possible. I buy one bottle of contact lens solution at a time. I resist things with highly specific functions, such as a computer carrier or rain boots. Instead of using a ladylike toiletries kit, I reuse a Ziploc bag. (Having an appreciation for well-designed tools doesn’t mean that I buy those tools.) I often decide “Maybe we don’t really need this” or “I’ll buy this some other time.” I suffer needless annoyance because I don’t have what I need or I’m using something that isn’t exactly suitable. By contrast, *over-buyers* tell themselves, “We can probably use that.” “This might come in handy, someday.” “Why not get one in every color?” Over-buyers suffer needless annoyance because of the time, money, energy, and space necessary to support their over-buying.

I finally prodded myself to buy a new toaster.

Ignore feng shui. People often told me, “You should study feng shui!”—the Chinese practice of positioning buildings and possessions to boost energy, prosperity, and harmony. While some feng shui teaching is sensible (throw out dead plants, toss an ex-boyfriend’s photograph), I wasn’t persuaded by its more doctrinal suggestions. To me, putting lots of purple in my apartment’s Prosperity area seems less constructive than other changes I might make with the same time and effort. But I understand the appeal of feng shui. Like Manichaeism, karma, and the Law of Attraction—true or not, it *feels* true.

Clear surfaces. During a visit to my sister, Elizabeth, in Los Angeles, as I was helping her clear clutter (I didn’t suggest it; she did), I noticed

that while her kitchen counters were crowded, her dining room table was beautifully bare, in a textbook illustration of the principle that clear areas stay clear, and messy areas become messier. Surfaces should be used for activities, not storage, I instructed myself, and I cleared surfaces wherever possible.

Think about appearances. I wanted my apartment to be less cluttered, and also to *look* less cluttered. As our messy piles of T-shirts showed, I'd never gained the knack for folding items properly. (I've also never learned to tie my shoes the right way but still use the babyish "bunny ears" method, to my mother's chagrin and my daughters' glee.) One of my Secrets of Adulthood is "It's okay to ask for help," and I knew just whom to ask for a folding tutorial. A friend had worked in a children's clothing store during high school, and I'd heard her boast about what a good folder she was.

"Hey," I told her the next time we met, "I need a lesson in folding." I pulled out the white T-shirt I'd brought with me.

"Why?" she laughed. "You actually brought a T-shirt?" She held it up and eyed it critically. "Hmm, this one isn't good for folding, the fabric is too thin. It's not going to hold its shape nicely."

"Well, just show me what to do. I'm no good at it."

She held up the T-shirt, with the front facing her, then flipped the width of the left sleeve toward the center, then the right sleeve. Next, holding both sides flipped in, she lay the T-shirt down and folded it in half. She was *fast*.

"Practice a bunch of times," she said, "it'll get easy."

I practiced, I folded all my T-shirts, and I got a real charge from seeing the smooth, flat piles. There's a surgeon's pleasure that comes from sheer order, from putting an object back neatly in its precise place. For the same reason, in the kitchen, instead of keeping measuring cups and spoons loose among the coffee mugs, I gathered them in a plastic

basket. It was really no easier to find them, and yet the appearance of greater orderliness was satisfying.

Beware of problem objects. I also looked for patterns of likely clutter, so I'd more quickly spot and address problem items such as:

- “Cute” kitchen objects that didn't work very well.
- Broken things. Why was it so hard to admit that something was broken—say, that defective toaster, Eliza's frog clock, our three crippled umbrellas, the cracked vase? Ditto with tech gadgets that we'd replaced yet, inexplicably, also kept the broken or outmoded version.

- Things that seemed potentially useful but somehow never did get used, such as an oversized water bottle or complicated corkscrew. Or duplicates—how many spare glass salsa jars can we use?

- Things I wanted to “save.” Often, this made no sense. What's the point of fancy bath gel if it never leaves the container? Why was I “saving” those colorful tin trays from my grandmother? A friend confided ruefully, “I saved my expensive truffle oil so long that it spoiled in the bottle.” Spend out, use things up.

- Beautiful, useless things. Eliza and Eleanor each had a set of china baby dishes. Lovely, but what to do with them? (I never did come up with a satisfactory solution and just stuck them at the bottom of a little-used drawer.)

- Things meant to encourage me to undertake disagreeable activities. Years ago, I bought a digital recorder, because I hoped that if I had the proper tools, I'd do interviews. But I didn't really want to do interviews, and having the recorder didn't change that fact. I have several friends who were convinced by the same faulty logic to acquire expensive exercise equipment.

- Things that were neatly put away. No matter how nicely organized, useless things make clutter. In a way, we were lucky not to have

much storage space. No attic, no storage unit, no utility room, just part of a storage bin in our building's basement where we stored holiday decorations, spare air-conditioner filters, and some plastic children's chairs. No garage, either, which many people use for storage; in fact, the U.S. Department of Energy estimates that 25 percent of people who have two-car garages don't park their cars inside.

- Items introduced under the Grandparent Privilege. Just as the grandparents set their own rules for bedtime, snacks, and TV watching, they get to buy whatever they want for Eliza and Eleanor. While my mother-in-law would never buy novelty items for herself, through the girls, she indulges her secret love for solar-powered prisms, sets of miniature colored pencils, and the like. These things were fun, but had to be rounded up regularly lest they spread into every corner.

- Things we never used. It was time to give away the rice cooker I gave Jamie for his last birthday. Alas. He loves to cook, and I'd thought it was a brilliant idea for a present, but he never used it.

As I went shelf by shelf through the apartment, however, I struggled most to decide what to do with things we no longer needed but had once been precious or much-used. As philosopher Adam Smith explained:

We conceive . . . a sort of gratitude for those inanimate objects, which have been the causes of great, or frequent pleasure to us. The sailor, who, as soon as he got ashore, should mend his fire with the plank upon which he had just escaped from a shipwreck, would seem to be guilty of an unnatural action. We should expect that he would rather preserve it with care and affection, as a monument that was, in some measure, dear to him.

That explained the mystery of why I'd kept my old laptops. Like the rescued sailor, I found it hard to part with the four outdated machines that had served me so loyally and traveled everywhere with me. But now it was time to say farewell. I took a photograph of the laptops, to remember them by, and Eliza took them to school for an electronics-recycling drive.



I also felt a powerful connection to things I associated with my daughters. Occasionally, getting rid of a childhood relic was a joy—I took a picture of a smiling Eleanor next to the diaper pail on the day we threw it away forever—but more often, I felt a sense of loss. Eliza didn't care about Mr. Chicken anymore, and Eleanor would never use her beloved purple sippy cup again. Both girls had outgrown the mermaid and Dorothy costumes that had seen so much wear. "Years as they pass plunder us of one thing after another," wrote Horace with piercing truth. But what should I *do* with these objects?

I'd better decide what to keep, *now*. The longer I held on to things, the more sentiment would attach to them, and I couldn't keep every toy or book my girls had ever loved. And not only toys and books. On one shelf-by-shelf expedition, I unearthed a tube of Baby Orajel left over from teething days, and I found it surprisingly hard to toss this artifact of babyhood.

The most ordinary things made me wistful. "Mommy, look at this video of me when I was little!" Eleanor shouted as I walked in the door from a meeting. "Ashley found it on her laptop." She pulled me toward the kitchen table, where our babysitter Ashley's laptop sat, glowing. "Come on, watch! I'm wearing my flowered nightgown. Where is it? I want to wear it!"

"Ah, look," I answered, as Eleanor, Ashley, and I peered into the screen. "I remember that little nightgown. Ashley, when did you take this?"

"I think it's from three years ago," Ashley said. (Ashley, young and hip, is very tech-savvy; in fact, it was the thrill of seeing pictures on her phone that finally inspired me to start taking pictures with my phone.)

"Eno, you look so young, but you also look exactly the same. And right, you're wearing that nightgown you loved."

"That's my *favorite*," Eleanor declared, of a garment she hadn't worn in years. "We still have it, don't we, Mommy?"

"Sure," I fibbed, with the hope that she'd never remember to ask to see it.

That nightgown had vanished long ago, but some things I would never give up. Eliza's first pair of glasses, with the bright blue and yellow frames. The "Candyland" shoes that Eleanor had worn so often. The mermaid costume. The girls' (admittedly only half-finished) baby books. But how would I organize and protect these things? Then it hit me: Start a memory box for each girl.

Conveniently, as a consequence of an unrelated shelf-by-shelf exercise, I'd just cleared out two plastic storage bins, so I labeled a box for each girl and combed through their rooms for items to add. I expected the boxes would be packed full, but in fact, I chose sparingly. The girls were intrigued with the boxes, which they dubbed their "memorandum boxes," and they each added a few things.

While considering whether to keep items as mementos, I noticed that when I consciously permitted myself to save a particular thing, I was able to get rid of more stuff; because I knew I'd saved one Polly Pocket doll and dress so we'd never forget that long era, I was able to get rid of the rest of our hoard. Carefully preserving a few pieces of artwork meant that I didn't have to keep every drawing. Also, although it usually pained me to relinquish toys and books outgrown by the girls, I was able to surrender them cheerfully if they were going to Jack, my sister's adorable baby; I sent him two big boxes of board books and the plastic shopping cart, filled with plastic food, that he'd loved during his visit. Knowing that Jack would enjoy these things eased my sense of loss. (But what would I do when Eleanor, like Eliza, outgrew the battered wooden kitchen set that had seen so much use? *It* certainly wouldn't fit in a memorandum box or in the mail—but how could I bear to part with it? I'd have to find a way.)

As I went shelf by shelf, I became increasingly cowed by the power of the "endowment effect." This psychological phenomenon means that once I own an object, I value it more. I might not have particularly wanted that purple freebie coffee mug, but once the mug was mine, I'd find it hard to give it up. The endowment effect meant that objects I owned—even ones I'd never much liked or used—made a claim on me, and the longer I owned them, the higher I perceived their value to be.

For that reason, I became more cautious about what I acquired. I turned down conference swag. I ignored bargain-buying opportunities.

Fortunately, I never had the urge to do travel shopping; such purchases, I knew from observing my friends, were rarely as enticing at home as they were in a faraway place. The fact is, accumulation is costly at any price. Possessions consume time, space, and energy, which are very precious. And even if I manage to shake off the endowment effect, I then have to figure out how and where to get rid of possessions.

I told a friend about my shelf-by-shelf exercise and she nodded. “Oh, I know the feeling,” she said. “My apartment is packed with junk.” (True. And I also happened to know that she had storage units in *three states*: one in the town where she grew up, one where her grandparents had lived, and one forty minutes from her apartment.) “One of these days I just have to get organized.”

“Oh, don’t get organized!” I said quickly. “Don’t worry about organization at this point!” I stopped myself. I didn’t want to sound rude.

“What do you mean?” she asked in surprise. “You’ve seen my place! I *desperately* need to get organized.”

“Well,” I suggested cautiously, “you might try getting rid of stuff, first. Then you won’t have to organize it.”

“What do you mean?” she asked in a suspicious tone.

“If you don’t actually need those papers, you can toss them instead of filing them. If you never wear a lot of your clothes, you can give them to Goodwill, and then you don’t have to find room for them in your closets.” I didn’t mention her storage units. Some depths are better left unplumbed.

“Oh, I use most of my things,” she assured me. “I don’t need to get rid of much. I just need to buy some supplies so I can have a better system.”

I didn’t trust myself to answer.

No surprise, I’ve noticed that it’s the people with the worst clutter problems who have the instinct to run to buy complicated hangers,

elaborate drawer compartments, or color-coded plastic boxes. Organizing supplies can be wonderfully helpful—as long as they actually create more order with necessary objects, and don't merely enable us to jam more clutter into place.

When I know exactly where to find the things I'm looking for, and I can easily fit a letter into a folder or a towel onto the shelf, I have a comforting (if illusory) sense of being more in control of my life, generally. Eliminating clutter makes the burden of daily life feel lighter, and when a friend confided, "I cleaned out our closets, and I feel as though I lost ten pounds," I knew *exactly* how she felt.

As I went shelf by shelf, I worked through a quick checklist: Do we use it? Do we love it? As I applied the checklist, I recognized the important difference between something that *wasn't used*, and something that was *useless*. Eliza didn't use her tiny animal ink stamps anymore, and I didn't use the gorgeously bright vintage paper hats that my mother gave me, and we never used the obsolete slide rule that sat on our bookshelf in its cunning leather case—and yet these things were precious in their way. I wanted my home to be filled with objects of symbolic and sentimental attraction as well as practical value. These things, unlike the (now-departed) heart-shaped pancake mold, kept their place.

READ THE MANUAL

While handsome, well-made tools are a joy to use, confusing devices are a drain. Too often, things once easy to operate—TVs, irons, dishwashers, alarm clocks, washing machines—are now humiliatingly challenging.

Cognitive science professor Donald Norman points out that when we expect that a device—such as a bathroom scale or a hotel room's

light switch—will be fairly easy to operate, but we have trouble with it, we tend to blame ourselves, not the object. One Sunday afternoon, as I was frantically trying to synchronize the data on my laptop with my desktop, I kept getting strange error messages. In desperation, I asked Jamie if he could take a look. “Umm, our Internet service isn’t working,” he announced after fifteen seconds on the computer. I’d assumed *I* was doing something wrong.

Somehow, I’d become surrounded by several common household appliances that I hadn’t quite mastered. I was pretty slow with the DVR. I didn’t know how to use the “mute” function on our landline phone. I struggled to upload photos from our camera. I felt powerless in a confrontation with my laptop’s temperamental wireless mouse. I bought from iTunes so rarely that I had to figure it out anew, each time.

Adding to the complexity was the fact that Jamie was an “incomplete upgrader.” He’d get inspired to replace a device, but he didn’t always take the time to master the replacement, or if he did, he didn’t have the patience to show me, and I didn’t have the patience to figure it out. For instance, to celebrate a big work victory, he bought a coffeemaker that, weeks later, I still couldn’t face. I just made myself tea instead.

However, I had to admit that I was contributing to my own frustration, because I almost never bothered to read the instruction booklet. I resolved to “Read the manual”; when I acquired a new gizmo, or had trouble with an old gizmo, I’d push myself to learn to operate it.

First on the list: I mastered the coffeemaker (which wasn’t that hard). Next, I considered our new video camera. When Jamie brought it home, I’d ripped it out of the box, threw away the packaging, flipped through the manual, and started pushing buttons. Now I’d try a different way. I waited until I had some time and patience to spare (several days passed), then pulled out the manual and sat down with the camera

in my hand. I read the instructions carefully. I looked at the labeled diagrams and at the camera. I experimented to make sure I knew how to use it. Suddenly, the video camera seemed much less confusing. (However, I still resented the fact that I had to read a manual several times to learn to use a *toaster*.)

My First Splendid Truth holds that to be happy, we need to think about *feeling good*, *feeling bad*, and *feeling right*, in an *atmosphere of growth*. Even a small step toward growth—such as learning to use a new camera—gives a boost. And eliminating the feelings of frustration and incompetence is a happiness booster, too.

“Read the manual” was helpful on a metaphorical level, as well, to caution me to make necessary preparations and not to expect instant mastery. Did I have the tools I needed, and did I know how to use them? Was I actually looking for the pull tab or the “tear here” mark that would allow me to open a package easily instead of struggling needlessly? Was I giving myself time to study and learn? Too often I skimmed on preparation time, whether designing the online invitations for Eliza’s birthday party or learning a new word-processing trick. “Read the manual” reminded me to take time to prepare.

I picked up a useful term from the world of cooking: *mise en place*, French for “everything in its place.” *Mise en place* describes the preparation done before starting the actual cooking, such as chopping, measuring, and gathering ingredients and implements. *Mise en place* ensures that once a cook has started, there’s no need to run out to the store or search for a sifter. *Mise en place* is preparation, but it’s also a state of mind. Nothing is more satisfying than working easily and well.

Little things, very little—nevertheless, they made a real difference to my comfort with my possessions.

. . .

The resolutions to “Cultivate a shrine,” “Go shelf by shelf,” and “Read the manual” made me feel both more engaged and more in command of my things.

Sometimes I felt deafened by the clamor of ads trying to convince me that I’d be happier if I’d buy some *more* stuff. And I often heard the contrary message, that I’d be happier with *less*. But September’s efforts had proved to me that happiness is not having *less*; happiness is not having *more*; happiness is wanting *what I have*. And this truth has an important corollary: If I don’t want something, getting it won’t make me happy. I don’t love listening to music, so getting a superb set of ear-phones won’t add to my happiness.

Declaring that we’d all be happy with more, or with less, is like saying that every book should be a hundred pages long. Every book has a right length, and people differ in the number of possessions, and the types of possessions, with which they can meaningfully engage. One person is happy living in a sparsely furnished yurt, while another person is happy adding to a collection of fine porcelain. There’s no one right way; I must decide what’s right for *me*.

When I told my sister about my newfound respect for the importance of possessions to happiness, Elizabeth said, “It’s kind of ironic that *you’re* the one making that argument.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because compared to most people, you’re not very interested in possessions. You dislike shopping—”

“By the way,” I interrupted, “did you know that people shop for an average of six hours each week?” I can never resist supplying a recently learned happiness-related fact.

“You dislike shopping,” she continued, “you don’t have many clothes, you don’t like fixing up your apartment, buying furniture, that kind of thing. You don’t care about nice jewelry or other things

that lots of people love. You don't collect anything. And you're on a constant mission to get rid of stuff!"

"Well, I sort of collect bluebirds."

"Maybe, but you're not going to antiques stores or flea markets, or looking on eBay. People give them to you."

"True."

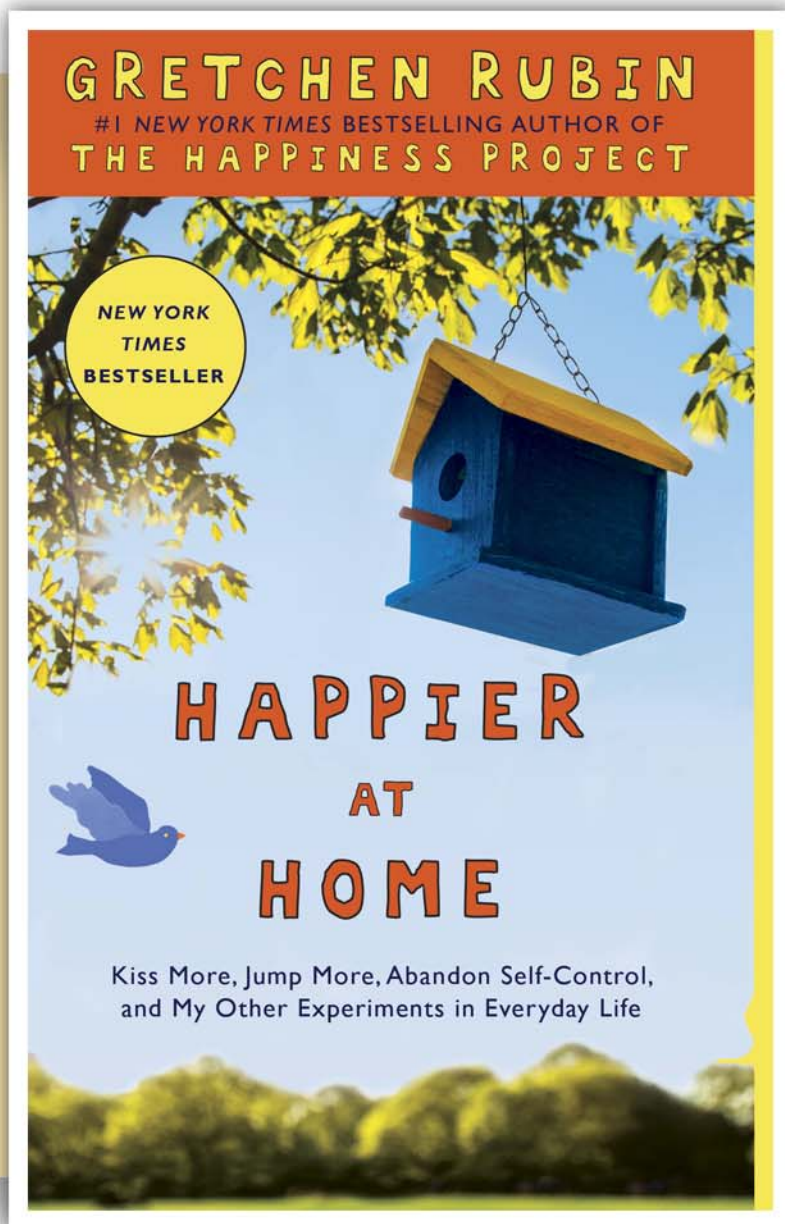
"So it's just funny to me that now you're the big defender of possessions and happiness."

Elizabeth knew me well. I have a lot of room in my closet. I don't actively collect anything (not even bluebirds). I never shop if I can help it. I have seven pairs of earrings, of which I wear one pair 95 percent of the time. Other people, however, can sustain much higher levels of engagement. A friend has so many cardigans that I feel panicky when I look at her shelves, but she enjoys them all.

I have a fairly low tolerance for stuff, and I'm happier when my home reflects that—yet possessions play a real role in my happiness. As William James observed, "Between what a man calls *me* and what he simply calls *mine* the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves."

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