

Shelf space

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 15, 2014](#) issue



Thinkstock

I once had the privilege of presiding at the wedding of a seminary president and a professor of homiletics. I said in the homily that I wasn't concerned about the longtime viability of their relationship, but I was worried about how they would manage to combine their personal libraries.

I'd like to claim that idea as my own, but it was inspired by Anne Fadiman's essay "Marrying Libraries," in her book *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*.

Fadiman wrote that it was good that the Book of Common Prayer didn't say anything in the marriage vows about marrying libraries and throwing out duplicates. "That would have been a far more solemn vow, one that probably would have caused the wedding to grind to a mortifying halt."

I reread that essay recently when my wife and I moved, and it became apparent that the time had come to weed out books from my library. I knew that day would come, but I dreaded it. I love books. I love owning them. I like to hold them in my hands. When I visit other people's homes, I cannot keep my eyes off the books they are reading. I like to see what my seatmate on the plane or the woman sitting across from me on the bus is reading. I keep books for work in one place and books read for pleasure in another. I have a special place for big books of art, photography, and travel and always several books on my bedside table.

Now it was time to decide which books I could live without. I looked at each title on a shelf, sometimes opening it to see what I had underlined or written in the margins.

Inevitably I decided I couldn't part with it. An hour of scanning books usually resulted in a paltry two or three volumes to be given away. I kept at it, becoming more ruthless with each pass. Finally I had a number of boxes ready to be taken away. But I still had most of my books.

The ones I kept included Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*, the reading and rereading of which taught me that faith is far more than intellectual assent. I've kept half a shelf for works by Kathleen Norris and Barbara Brown Taylor. Frederick Buechner, Harvey Cox, and William Placher easily made the cut. Martin Marty's entire shelf remains, and it felt downright insensitive and irresponsible to consider letting go of Joseph Sittler's few small volumes. I kept Gustav Aulén, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich—even though I never made it past page 50 of Tillich's *Systematic Theology*.

I may have at it again sometime—but I doubt it. I have committed myself at least to keeping a state of equilibrium: every new book must occasion an old book's departure. What will be done with all the books that remain? It's a problem that I really don't mind leaving to my children and grandchildren to resolve.