

The joy of stuff: Incarnation and the KonMari method

KonMari approaches clutter by asking just one question: “Does this item spark joy?” But this isn't always a simple question.

by [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#) in the [March 30, 2016](#) issue

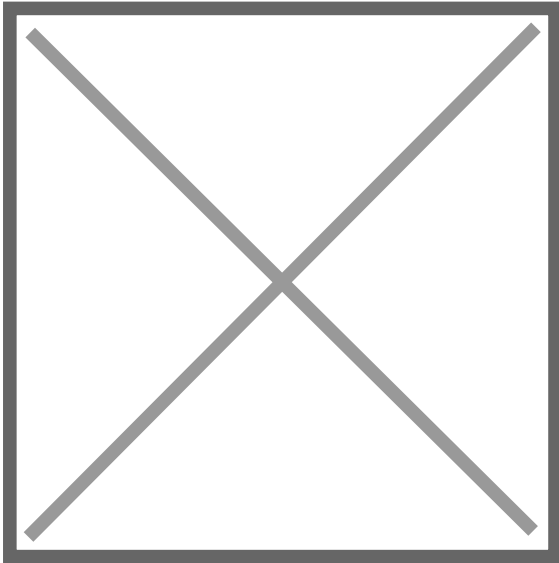


Photo by Liz West via a Creative Commons license

I stood in our kitchen holding three small cups and waited for my husband to speak. One cup was pewter with a slim handle and my husband’s initials engraved in an ornate script. Another was a porcelain demitasse with a Peter Rabbit design. The third featured a boy and girl painted on the side in a style and design neither of us recognized. (Jack and Jill? Dick and Jane?)

All three were cups from my husband’s childhood, sent to us by his mother during a recent fit of house cleaning. And all three demanded a decision as we prepared to move into a new house: Do we keep them or not?

“The pewter one I remember and want to keep,” Robert said. “The rabbit one—I don’t know. Our kids are too old for it, but wouldn’t it be nice to hold onto it and have tea parties with our grandkids someday? As for the third one, I have no knowledge or memory of it. But for all I know, somebody in my dad’s church gave it to me when I was born. Maybe it’s even hand-painted?”

“None of that matters,” I replied testily, my patience for these conversations at an end. “What matters is, does it *spark joy*?” I said this without feeling particularly joyful myself.

Devotees of Marie Kondo will recognize the question right away. Joy is the north star, the guiding principle of KonMari, Kondo’s wildly popular decluttering method. She outlines her technique in *The Life-Saving Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*, which, after taking Japan by storm, has lodged itself on the *New York Times* best-seller list for more than a year. The book has inspired KonMari Pinterest boards, Facebook groups, and blogs, featuring dramatic before-and-after pictures and rapturous testimonials from people who finally feel like they have a handle on their stuff.

Some decluttering philosophies ask you to consider nebulous questions such as, “How difficult will my life be if I don’t have this down the road?” (Many a pastor’s sermon archive has been sent to the big recycling bin in the sky on the back of that question.) Other methods want to know, “Can I still imagine a use for this?” If there were a Puritan method of home organization, that question would be at its center. The old buttons can be pressed into use in a Christmas craft, the nubby crayons melted down to make one mottled supercrayon. And the jars, oh the jars! There is a virtue in such industriousness—it’s good stewardship—but who has the time?

The KonMari method doesn’t concern itself with reusing and repurposing. It asks just one question: “Does this item spark joy?” If it does, you find a place for it (and Kondo provides guidance on this task). If it doesn’t, out it goes.

But the joy question turns out to be not so simple. My husband’s pewter mug seems like the most purely joyful of his three childhood cups; he has a memory of it and a fond connection to it. Peter Rabbit sparks no immediate joy, but the thought of having tea parties with grandchildren is a joyful one indeed, so does it stay? As for the Dick and Jane cup, it is more easily discarded. But where? Is it OK to throw it away, or could it spark joy for someone else? And who is that someone else—an extended family, a customer at the local resale shop, or a collector on eBay who recognizes it as part of a precious set?

During a recent move I was proud to find a good home for a watercolor of the chapel at Austin Seminary. While I have a connection to the place, I did not matriculate or graduate from there. The painting no longer brought me joy. But a pastoral colleague did her graduate work at Austin, and I loved the thought of the painting gracing her study.

My satisfaction soon turned to despair when I realized we had a hundred more things just like that—precious to someone, but whom? Friends told me to get a grip; we do the best we can. But I have preached and heard too many stewardship sermons to take the discarding task lightly. All that we have is a gift from God: our gifts, our resources, and—if I’m willing to go there—the collection of owl figurines that dotted my grandmother’s home.

I commend Kondo for focusing on joy rather than happiness. The former resonates on a more theological level than the latter, which can sometimes seem fickle and provisional. But is personal joy the right yardstick for deciding whether to evict a useful-but-not-aesthetically-pleasing item from my home? I made several trips to the dump during our move, and there’s a certain unease in adding your belongings to acre upon acre of discarded junk. When I returned to my home, now filled only with joyful things, I couldn’t get the image of the dump out of my head. As Christians who care about the planet, should we not also develop a relationship with our possessions that brings joy to—well, the world?

We’re told that millennials are postponing home ownership much longer than their parents did. This necessitates the kind of clutter-free existence Kondo preaches—there’s simply no room for tchotchkes or worn-out clothes in an 800-square-foot efficiency. Meanwhile, it’s probably no coincidence that KonMari’s rise has come while we’re losing members of the Depression-era generation at a rate of 600 a day. It seems everyone has a story of moving an elderly relative into assisted living and having to deal with decades of possessions. Some of these stories verge into TV’s *Hoarders* territory; others merely bespeak a life of meticulous frugality.

The impulse to save, to make do, to find a use for things, can get out of hand. And the irony of saving things is that we accumulate so much stuff that we forget what’s there and end up buying duplicates. Still, we dare not lose these Depression-era values completely. Along with encouraging thriftiness, certain items connect us with our loved ones in a very real way. As Faith Shearin writes in her poem “My Grandparents’ Generation,” “They are taking so many things with them / their sewing machines and fine china . . . their rotary telephones / and fat televisions, and knitting needles / their cast iron frying pans, and Tupperware.” (Then again, who needs good Tupperware when flimsier Glad food containers can be had for \$10 a pack at any grocery store?)

My mother-in-law kept a lot of her mother's crystal and china. After decades of chips and breaks and losses, she has a few items from each of several different sets. But when she hosts gatherings in her home, her guests delight over a beautifully set (albeit eclectic) table.

All these complications aside, Kondo's method for discerning joy is delightfully incarnational. Once you've scoured the house for anything and everything that fits a certain category, Kondo says, you should put it all in a single pile. Then, hold each item. Don't just let your eyes pass vaguely over the scene. Hold the things in your hand and see how your body reacts to them. (Take that, body/spirit dualism!) Listen to what each one says to you about joy. Talk back to it if necessary (maybe just if nobody else is in the room). Don't listen to music or watch TV while KonMari-ing. Just as we'd give treasured friends our undivided attention, so should it be with our things. It's a refreshing intentionality toward stuff.

Kondo even suggests that material possessions have feelings of their own. "I urge [clients] to try saying, 'Thank you for keeping me warm all day,' when they hang up their clothes after returning home," she writes. "Or, when removing their accessories, I suggest they say, 'Thank you for making me beautiful.'" Socks, she argues, take a beating day after day and deserve some R&R. So store them gently: "The socks and stockings stored in your drawer are essentially on holiday. . . . The time they spend in your drawer is their only chance to rest."

When you decide to get rid of something, according to Kondo, you should bid it good-bye. Thank it for fulfilling its purpose in your life, then set it aside for its journey to Goodwill, Craigslist, or the garbage dump. For many people, this internal dialogue is key to their success with the technique. A friend was finally able to get rid of mementos from a trip to Ireland with her mother, who had recently died. "I'd held onto them even though I never use them," she said, "and just seeing them in my closet made me feel sad. When I got to those items, I held them and gave myself permission to feel the feelings and miss my mom. Then I put them in the discard pile."

Other prospective KonMari-ers, however, roll their eyes at the idea of talking to their knickknacks. Some Christian writers have even criticized Kondo for perpetuating a sort of idolatry or panentheism. Instead of greeting our house when we walk in the door, they argue, we should be thanking God as the giver of that gift. Our possessions may be precious to us; they may even have a lot of power over us. But they are not animated by the *ruach* of God. (Kondo's background is instructive here—she spent time as a shrine maiden in a Shinto temple, and Shintoism is highly animistic.)

There is indeed something quasi-devotional about following the KonMari method. It tells us to "aim for perfection" with our efforts—no halfhearted tidying will yield the hoped-for transformation. It asks us to follow a strict order (clothing first, then books, papers, and miscellany). And the practice of clutching each item, listening for guidance, is downright liturgical. For many people, this approach—step by step, no room for error—is the key to the method's success. Kondo's fans may not worship at the altar of KonMari, but they could be said to follow the technique religiously.

It is perhaps a strange time for the emergence of KonMari, a method that ascribes so much value to material things. Global climate change is a reality, driven in part by a culture built on endless economic growth and production. Such a system cannot stand; it is literally killing us.

But is the problem that we like our stuff too much? Michael Lindvall, writing in the *Century* ("[Living in a material world](#)," July 13, 2010), says no. "Rather," he writes, "it's that we don't like it enough . . . We acquire things, but then quickly tire of the things that seemed so important when first obtained. We replace rather than repair because we have such fickle and passing romances with our things."

Meanwhile, we worship a God whose primary job title is "Creator." Robert Farrar Capon called God "the biggest materialist there is. He invented stuff." God gave us all the stuff we needed and then asked us to take

care of it—a task at which we failed miserably. It seems that ever since, we’ve been trying to get back to that perfect sense of provision.

Perhaps KonMari can be part of an ethic of responsible consumerism—our stuff is *more than just stuff*—but if so, we need to start the process earlier. We should be asking the joy question while we’re still standing at Williams-Sonoma or browsing Amazon. Does this item spark joy? Will it continue to do so when it’s no longer shiny and new, when it has taken up residence on the shelf or in the closet or on top of the coffee table? And more significant than joy is the matter of wholeness—for self, community, and planet. Kondo’s philosophy of taking our things seriously is a refreshing approach to organizing the stuff in our lives. But it’s only a beginning.