

What I found when I packed up my office

Some things are worth keeping precisely because they will soon turn to dust.

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [October 25, 2017](#) issue



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Last month I moved from a large, dusty office into a smaller one that promises to be friendlier to my sinuses and lungs. The move presented a daunting task: sorting through 25 years of books, papers, and memorabilia. Even with a dust mask on, I had asthmatic chest pains, headaches, and tearing eyes with dark allergic shiners. I looked like a raccoon who has been spending too much time poring through old

academic journals.

My subconscious got involved in the project, too. One night I woke up absolutely convinced that there was a five-drawer file cabinet next to my side of the bed. It was growing taller by the minute, like the Christmas tree in *The Nutcracker*. There never has been a file cabinet in our bedroom—let alone one tall enough to hit the ceiling or wide enough to keep me from rolling off the bed—but this image had come forth from a file cabinet in my own mind, with the sole aim of rebuking me for having collected so much stuff.

I got the message. I set out to perform what organizing guru Marie Kondo calls the “life-changing magic of tidying up.” I dutifully discarded a mountain of articles that had once seemed important to my research, along with some weather-beaten writings of my own: manifestos for liturgical conservation and spiritual renewal; reviews of books by radical theologians whose celebrity days are long past; proposals for books I no longer want to read, let alone write.

As Kondo’s KonMari method dictates, I focused on saving from landfill, shredder, and recycling bin whatever “sparks joy.” This included a drawing by one of our sons, dating back to his preschool days, of two stick figures set against a pastel field, with their twig-like hands just barely touching and the inscription (presumably dictated to his teacher), “I like to walk with Mommy.” Then there was a cache of several hundred handwritten pages of stories written by another son, arranged in folders sealed with duct tape and marked “TOP SECRET”—a buried treasure I discovered stuffed into the bottom drawer of a seldom-visited file cabinet.

There were also unclassifiable items—such as an article speculating about the acoustics of the Second Temple—that seemed more likely to provoke curiosity than to spark joy. I kept many things of this sort; my criteria were inevitably haphazard.

What struck me with the most force, as the mountain of discards grew, was the visceral awareness that so much of what we academics and writers pour into our books and articles is destined to crumble to dust. And why should we expect it to be otherwise? I could hear the words of the flood hero to King Gilgamesh: “Do we build a house to stand forever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time?” Yet some things are worth keeping precisely because they will soon turn to dust. I had no qualms about relinquishing books for auction, but I saved lecture notes from beloved professors—works that will never be published but are precious for being personal

and unrepeatable communications.

In the course of moving I also updated my computer. This meant a new version of Skype, now linked to my Microsoft account. In consequence I lost the voice of one of my dearest friends, a British Catholic writer who died three years ago. It was a recorded message he had sent me from his bed in an Oxford hospice. To think that I had lost the sound of my friend's voice, speaking to me directly as he approached his last days, was the saddest part of this move. No joy-sparking relics from my own past, I felt, could compensate for that loss.

I doubt that my friend would have minded the loss very much. Had he wished to do so, he could have stamped his voice and image all over social media; but he was innocent of the casual narcissism of our age.

And then, oh joy!, I found my friend's voice again. The old version of my Skype account was still active on a different computer. Once again I heard his typically tender yet matter-of-fact way of speaking: "Hi, Carol, I was trying to reach you. I'm in the hospice. Just happened to have Skype on. All the best—bye." The way he spoke made it seem as if "just happening" to be on Skype and "just happening" to be in hospice care were contingencies of the same order.

After recovering my friend's voice, I was anxious not to lose it again. "Can I unlink my Skype and Microsoft accounts?" I asked the Skype support page. "Unfortunately not at this time :(" was the answer. I downloaded an app to record the message, knowing full well that no storage system can promise to safeguard our keepsakes permanently.

Do we build a house to stand forever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time? This would be a far sadder thought if I did not believe that, even as I write, my friend remains the unique person God has called into being—and that this is one call that neither Skype, nor Microsoft, nor flood, nor fire will ever be able to delete.

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