

My Husband's Under Here Somewhere: Collectors, Packrats, and Compulsive Hoarders

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Introduction: What a Dump!

“Trying to be happy by accumulating possessions is like trying to satisfy hunger by taping sandwiches all over your body.”—George Carlin.

The red T-shirt I usually wore on the job read, "Obey Me." And one time, I facetiously returned to a recalcitrant client's home flailing a cat-o-nine-tails. Yet, those whips and paddles in my arsenal were more figurative than literal, as I already held the upper hand.

A potential client dialing up Clutter Busters had already traversed the critical boundary to acknowledge their helplessness in the face of their amassed junk and clutter to voluntarily seek my authoritative cattle-prod. Willing to pay a professional organizer to help deconstruct their chaos, they actually tolerated my bossiness.

Given the operative words, *Obey Me*, my clients usually did. Although I joked around and tried to make the process fun, I could be unflinchingly strict when necessary.

Whereas mild collectors simply needed my assistance to clean out their garage, or to arrange a home office, or to sort through possessions after the death of a spouse, others were truly desperate. One gentleman shoved a dresser in front of a bursting closet to keep it shut; another rented parking space because he'd crammed his garage so full of newspapers and garbage that no car, nor even another twig could fit; another's husband gave her an ultimatum—her stuff or him.

Tellingly, she chose her stuff!

Early on in my clutter-busting career, it dawned on me that these worst-cases weren't just caused by lazy bums, but that something beyond run-of-the-mill human behavior was at play. So I should have been forewarned when one prospective client asked by phone if I had a pickup truck. When the door opened to his San Francisco flat, as if something dead lay waiting, the stench bowled me over.

Quickly recovered, I managed to summon my best Bette Davis voice to remark, "What a dump!"—It literally was!

Until one experiences a house like this, it's easy to deem my account more fiction than fact. Yet the five-room Victorian was only accessible via narrow trails that blazed through waist-high accumulations of garbage. The bed had disappeared beneath drifts of clothes, books, newspapers, and various unimaginable items. In the kitchen, dishes, pots, and pans, encrusted with blackened crud, lay heaped in the sink, then spilled onto all countertops, and onto the floor, as well.

Abruptly, a furry creature scampered, then disappeared beneath a box heap; I let out a squeak and shuddered. And the bathroom: well, I'll skip the details...

Turning to my prospective client, who perched atop what seemed to be a couch arm that jutted out from the junk, I blurted, "Really...just a pickup truck? I need a dump truck and bulldozer to excavate this!"

To this, the man blithely inquired, "Can you do it by Friday? My landlord's going to evict me unless it's all taken away."

When asked how he planned to pay me, he did a majestic arm sweep as he replied, "I figured there'd be things you'd want in trade."

Thinking I might have overlooked some fabulous treasure, as I scanned the room, it hit: This fellow wasn't the typical run-of-the-mill slob, someone with an aversion to the garbage pail. To his mind, ALL his stuff held value.

Annoyance waning, I wished him good luck, and departed. With the stench still lingering in my clothes and hair; I couldn't wait to get home to shower.



Who doesn't know someone—a kooky cousin, a dear friend, a reclusive neighbor, or, heaven forbid, a beloved spouse—who dwells in a purgatory of clutter, risks eviction, as well as ostracism, to say nothing of facing legal battles—all for the sake of their junk. These unfortunate souls, beset with the irresistible urge to fill their homes, garages, yards, and storage-after-storage space with infinite amounts of seemingly useless gewgaws are locked into an immense struggle.

While the public-at-large may deem them lazy, wacko, confused, or terminally indecisive, the extreme hoarder tends to be in the throes of a diagnosable illness and cannot help him or herself. These people cannot throw anything away, even if their well-being and life depend on it. In extreme cases, as John Gillette, M.D., staff psychiatrist with Santa Cruz County Mental Health can attest, it may boil down to precisely this: “Obsessive-compulsive hoarding is a confounding disorder that’s difficult to treat, and in severe cases, can be life-threatening.”

Scavenger, clutterer, packrat, and junkaholic are kindred terms for the word, *hoarder*, but the clinical appellation, *obsessive-compulsive hoarder*, fills a relatively new niche in psychiatric circles. With the 2013 release of the DSM-5—the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which is the venerated diagnostic standard used by mental health professionals—for the first time hoarding was classified as a disorder unto itself. Yet hoarding as a mental health

disorder remains little understood and has the dubious distinction of being the most challenging of the obsessive-compulsive spectrum disorders to treat.

Studies conducted by hoarding expert Randy Frost, Ph.D., along with another performed by the National Institute of Mental Health, estimate that between 2% and 3% of the U.S. population suffers from an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Though several types of hoarding exist, most appear to be a subset of OCD, with about 15% to 30% of OCD sufferers—roughly 2 million Americans experiencing hoarding as their primary symptom. As awareness regarding the nature and complexity of this problem grows, these numbers will likely increase.^{1,2}

Hoarders can be divided into two subgroups: *generalists* and *specialists*. *Generalists* collect any object known to humankind. They tend to acquire household items, clothes, trash, or freebies, along with readily available materials, including newspapers, junk mail, receipts, and magazines.

My first encounter with a hoarder was a *generalist* who also collected animals. Jean, a friend of my mother's, was intelligent, educated, and elegantly attractive. Despite many positives, however, love seemed to have eluded her. Eventually, I grasped why; a prospective suitor setting foot in her home no doubt got an eyeful and never returned.

Given all the clutter underfoot, it was tricky to walk about and her stairs were a hazard to climb. Her bed, covered with clothes, papers, dishes, books, and memorabilia, afforded little space to recline, which meant she slept upright in a chair alongside it.

Her status as an unrepentant hoarder notwithstanding, her life's mission, although admirable, involved the rescue of stray and unwanted animals. Any given week, five or six caged dogs barked and pooped in the kitchen, and dozens of cats swept through the house in a feline tide.

Unbearable stench aside, her living room's most impressive feature comprised a myriad of careening stacks of newspapers and magazines that covered all floors, tables, couches, and chairs. When I summoned the nerve to inquire why she kept all of it, she replied, "Someday, I plan to clip articles of interest."

Hoarders always intend at some future date to attend to their treasures. Yet that day never arrives.

"I stack papers atop furniture," she added, "to keep the cats from urinating on the upholstery."

My inquiring mind simply had to ask why one hideously stinky armchair remained unobstructed. To which she replied: "Ah, that's so my cats have a place to pee."

Thankfully, we soon retired to the porch for fresh air and refreshments.

The *specialist* accumulates one type, or a specific category of items. This may include mountains of books and printed materials; or boxes overflowing with electronic devices; or even a particular type of animal, *Manx* cats, rare birds, rabbits or horses, for example. Vintage autos give some a thrill, or another has a penchant for moldy vintage clothes. One hoarder's treasure consisted of the 46-year accumulation of soap remnants. Another odd one: Daniel's passion was lint.

How Daniel's attention riveted to lint, and what the appeal, eludes. Strands of thread peeking out from his sofa and mattress, and other threads and filaments spilt from drawers and cupboards, he constantly twined fluffy balls together.

Needless-to-say, he adored laundromats!

Then there's Norman. Gums denuded of teeth, he was the sweetest man ever. Back when McDonald's offered those colorful, quaint boxes for their Happy Meal burgers, he developed

such an affinity for them that they filled his entire home, which prompted his wife of twenty-six years to give him the boot.

In the extreme, hoarding can be associated with psychosis, brain damage, or mental retardation. Billionaire playboy Howard Hughes saved his fingernail and toenail clippings. Some treasure hair or skin flakes, as well. One elderly woman and her grown son, using a spare bedroom as the lavatory, accumulated years of fecal material. A former suffragette and poet aggregated her urine in murky gallon bottles; another kept poop in Tupperware containers; another fellow shat in socks, then tidily returned them to dresser drawers.

As the hoarder ages, he or she faces an escalating series of stressors—loss of control over bodily functions, the onslaught of illness, poor or limited finances, estrangement from self or from family, retirement, death of a spouse, social isolation, as well as the diminished ability to care for oneself. When such downturns occur, hoarding may escalate. A possible reason for this: the pastime may help create an imaginary line of defense against loss.

Rather than relinquish independence and surrender to the organizing services provided by retirement communities or convalescent facilities, increased numbers of Baby Boomers remain in their homes. This decision to “age in place” prompts experts to predict an increased prevalence of hoarding—in particular, dementia-related hoarding.

"The average age for those with hoarding problems is about fifty, yet many are older," notes Gail Steketee, Professor at Boston University. "There's a growing concern on the part of elder service workers about hoarding and how to manage its potential consequences, including fire and health hazards, risk of falling, and the inability to find medications."

Thankfully, public awareness regarding hoarding, as it relates to obsessive-compulsive disorders, is on the rise. Hoarders and hoarding have become a topic of cult fascination, as millions obsessively follow the television shows *Hoarders*, *Hoarding: Buried Alive*, and *Animal*

Planet's *Confessions: Animal Hoarding*. While many watch such programs to be entertained or grossed out, few can fathom how it actually is to live like that.

A glimpse is offered with regard to this by Sally Fields, who stars in the film, *Hello, My Name is Doris*, about an emotionally stunted older woman with a tendency to hoard. Years ahead of its time, there was also the TV series *Monk*. The detective in the show is beset with tics and compulsions—which are OCD behaviors—and his agoraphobic brother, played by John Turturro, hoards junk.

Indeed, hoarding is often a family affair!

As I embarked on my odyssey to try to understand this phenomenon, as well as the folks impacted by it, I enlisted the expertise of my sister, Janice Strubbe Wittenberg. With over thirty-five years spent as a mental health nurse, seventeen of them as Santa Cruz County's sole crisis outreach worker, she's encountered many a hoarder. Initially, I chalked up her fascinating peculiar tales about them as embellishment, but later apologized for doubting her. Her experiences working with these people are conveyed on these pages.

All incidents described are based on the authors' experiences, but in the interest of clarity, William's contributions are written in the first person, while Janice is identified by name when she gives input.

Although one individual who suffers from this disorder urged, "Please go ahead, it's important to tell our stories," there's a delicate balance between what can and cannot be said. To protect privacy—with the exception of certain professionals, along with the mention of real-life news stories—all names of clients and their families are changed. Additionally, each case described, including identifying details, is altered, fictionalized, and composited, to further render those involved unrecognizable.

While we hope to increase understanding as to this nightmarish problem, we don't envision this to be a self-help book. By no means is the material herein exhaustive, and it shouldn't pose as a substitute for seeking professional involvement.

We intend this work of lively observation and musing to prompt contemplation of one's own acquisitiveness and excess. In this process, it may become clear that one participates, contributes to, or adds to this mess, precisely as the hoarder does, or that one does so to a lesser extent, or perhaps not at all.

Chapter One: This Hoarder's So Called Life—A Purgatory of Stuff

“In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants and the other is getting it.”—Oscar Wilde’s Lament

My hoarding article, appearing in *Common Ground* magazine, spurred Patty to give me a call. In a-twitter as we spoke, she explains that she taught journalism and English, then became an executive secretary for a high-tech firm, and later supplemented her income as a psychic reader. During those happier times, she enjoyed brisk walks along the trails near her home and swam regularly at the public pool. Our conversation culminated when she insisted that I pay a visit to hear more of her story.

Intelligent and well-spoken by phone, with wide-ranging interests that include singing and juggling; I found myself hard-pressed to envision her as anything but normal.

Until I pulled up in front of her double-wide mobile home, that is.

Assorted objects jutting from beneath their folds, an ocean of blue tarps swaddle much of the property. Those tarps cover piles of boxes and hold newspapers in check to keep them from blowing about. As if a yard sale is in progress, all space not covered by tarpaulins is strewn with junk. An eclectic array of stuff spills onto the door stoop, spans her deck, and covers a side patio. The car, parked beneath the carport, is jammed to the hilt.

On approach, I spot a tidal wave of unidentified objects pressed and piled up against the front window, and brace myself.

“Howdy there, and welcome to my fantastic kingdom!” Patty calls out cheerily.

Garbed in a hibiscus-splashed mu-mu, Patty’s brown wig is slightly askew. As I resist an urge to adjust it, I shake her hand, and exclaim, “You’re right, it’s—er, quite a sight!”

“I’m such an extreme hoarder, I fear I’ll never control my life,” 62-year-old Patty confesses as we enter her abode. “I receive behavioral therapy, and also take medication to stop

the hoarding. Frankly, though, I'm not sure I'm ready to give it up. 'Cause, really, hoarding is my entire life."

Patty grew up in Oklahoma amongst an idyll of acreage comprised of lawns, vegetable gardens, and orchards, where she enjoyed pets and livestock and loved to loll about in the barn's hayloft. Although poor, her family rarely lacked the necessities, as they harvested fruit and vegetables, canning the land's bounty to fill the pantry and cellar.

Thanks to her resourceful dad, the family weathered the Great Depression without succumbing to the soup line. Despite a mere third-grade education, Patty's father worked thirty years as a heavy equipment operator for the gas company. Additionally, he fished, hunted, and was the consummate scavenger.

"Daddy used to answer the phone so cheerily," Patty recalls, "'*Johnson's Junkyard*.' Even after surgery to fuse his spine, he frequented the dump to scavenge and haul home trailer-loads of junk, which he then used to build and repair buildings on our property."

Patty lauds her eight-room playhouse, situated beneath a stand of elms, as the most amazing place. Her dad cobbled it together by fastening together wire cages, then affixing them with scrap board. The place was furnished with assorted reclaimed treasures. Dinged loving cups got used as dishes; with crates, vinyl car seats, and car hoods serving as furniture.

Like father like daughter, Patty's acquisitive nature seeded at an early age. Previously, I'd learned this was common, as the tendency to hoard is passed from generation to generation.

Typically, hoarding begins early in life; it's even noted in three-year-olds. For young ones, however, parents control what they possess and how cluttered their environment is allowed to become, so the depth of the problem may go undetected for a time.

What may be evident early on is the intense attachment youngsters develop to various objects and their tendency to apply human characteristics to them. In junior high, Patty ardently

clipped thousands of articles on grooming and etiquette, then pasted them into scrapbooks. Too busy to bother absorbing their contents, she busily collected and assembled more of them.

Hoarding becomes a moderate problem in one's twenties and thirties, and tends to bloom, full-tilt, as the individual approaches his or her forties and fifties. For some reason hoarding begins at a younger age for women than men, but more males hoard than females. Should it begin at late onset, hoarding tends to be coupled with loss of some kind: divorce, death, declining health, or reduced independence. Stress and trauma are commonly noted in the early lives of hoarders and the compulsion to collect tends to flare during rough stretches.

Patty's mother, I gather, was coldly remote, and had a terrible temper. "My mom was such a grump," Patty recounts. "She habitually tossed out a lot of the stuff Daddy and I collected so carefully. So basically, Daddy and I avoided her."

There are two types of hoarders: *primary* and *secondary*. Patty is a primary hoarder. *Primary* hoarding is generally characterized by people who have intense feelings for the objects they collect. As a result, folks like Patty are overly enamored with their junk and undergo extreme distress at the mere notion of its removal. And further, they're extraordinarily resistant to cleanup and intervention.

Secondary hoarders live in clutter and squalor as a result of a psychological or neurological malady, such as an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), or dementia, and they aren't particularly attached to their stuff. These folks face an additional constellation of challenges. Some fail to get rid of garbage as a result of mental decline, become unable to organize their surroundings, and don't usually grieve when hoarded objects are purged.

Back to Patty; books are her fondest treasures. "Open the cover," she declares, "and schwing...I go into a trance. As a girl, I adored envisioning the day when I'd have wall-to-wall bookshelves that overflowed with books!"

Unfortunately, dreams do come true; for there I stood, mouth agape, eyeing Patty's bookshelf-lined walls. Her book collection rivaled the stock found in many a bookstore, with shelves so numerous that no daylight could enter via windows, and precariously stacked tomes consumed all floor space.

“My guess, I possess some 60,000 volumes,” she announces, caressing several covers. “Their topics include psychology, religion, art, history, magic, conjuring, psychic phenomena, antiques, collectibles, biography, martial arts, and I can’t get enough about the lives of films stars.”

Although she rarely prepares meals, as her stove and oven disappeared long ago beneath heaped junk, ironically enough she’s amassed thousands of cookbooks that fill a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf that’s wedged sideways, to partially block access between her living room and kitchen.

Had her penchant been limited to books, her home might be livable, but here’s a partial list of the rest of her stash: she has phonograph records by the thousands; heaps of videos, audio cassettes and CD’s; a veritable mountain of computer software, which claims half a guest room; and computer manuals, along with old computers are crammed throughout. Several dozen radios and boxes, containing radio parts, also compete for space. One of several carport sheds is devoted solely to tools, none of which she’s ever used. Another shed contains craft materials, fabric remnants, beads, and board games—with original plastic wrap intact. Her bedroom is also jammed with “Stuff I’ve never bothered to deal with.”

Shoes, hats, gloves, scarves, purses, tote bags, assorted clothing—price tags dangling—are heaped where I suppose a bed might reside. With clothing sizes ranging from 10 to 24, Patty tipping the scales at 240 pounds, is loath to divest of any of them, as she chronically intends to slim down. She also keeps every pair of eyeglasses she’s ever owned, and then some...a whole lot of them!

Although she's never smoked, she has a sizable collection of ashtrays. Dearest to her heart, however, is her cat paraphernalia—Garfield the Cat is a particular favorite—kitty toys and silly cat ceramics abound. Interspersed throughout are cartoons from the Garfield comic strip that she clips and saves daily.

Patty has dozens of pairs of scissors for every imaginable function—ergonomic ones, those for cutting hair, scissors for manicures and pedicures, fabric pinking sheers, and a special pair for trimming eyebrows. Although unable to cook due to crowded conditions, she owns every kitchen appliance known to humankind, yet hasn't the foggiest idea how to use most of them.

"I have this thing for mirrors. Check it out..." We clamber over piles, and laboriously make our way. "Ta-da!" Proudly she shimmies aside so I can peek.

The bathroom wall is graced with antiqued stick-on mirror squares. "I love having mirrors in every room," Patty gushes, "but given the lack of wall space, they're pretty darn useless. Silly me, though, I keep collecting anyway. A bunch of my favorites are stashed away in boxes. Others, I stack against walls.

"Oh...and I just started collecting beer mirrors. You know, the kind that say Anheuser Busch, or Pabst. Man, I sure do love beer!" she chortles. "And I also like beer steins and all beer-related paraphernalia."

Several file cabinets overflow with news clippings pertaining to a vast array of topics that have briefly arrested Patty's interest. Stacked atop these cabinets are box-upon-box of photos with images that include family, friends, and a surprising bevy of complete strangers. "I'm ridiculously sentimental," she explains, "and went through a phase, where I took photos of everyone I met. Never mind that I didn't catch their names, I simply craved to memorialize them.

"I also keep pictures of celebrities and movie stars that I admire. Sorry to say, but I recently tossed out those of Roseanne Barr. I used to think we were a lot alike, but then she had

all that plastic surgery and turned fake. Besides, her voice started to grate, and mine is so much lovelier!”

Back outside, Patty rummages through yet another shed to unearth a binder filled with handwriting samples. “I amassed these,” she says, “thinking I’d try to master handwriting analysis. Sadly, nothing ever came of it.”

She hauls over an immense trunk, springs the latches, and juggling paraphernalia, as well as magician materials, spill forth. Latches are flipped to yet another trunk, this one full of martial arts equipment and dance videos. “This, here, is another of my detours. Seeking to stay mentally fit, I try to challenge myself to achieve new skills.” Exercise equipment is heaped in the next shed. “I’m pretty sure,” she jokes with a roll of the eyes, “that I’m exercise intolerant.”

As she regales me with story after story as to how and why she held on to certain items, I find her tales highly engaging. The reasons she gives for collecting particular objects and the value she ascribes to them tend to vary. Phone receiver and coiled cord held aloft, the rest of the telephone missing, she recounts, “Found this on the ground as I entered the pharmacy; it was the day I met Bernice. She’s Asian, works in a hotel and had fascinating stories about the rooms she’s cleaned and the celebrities she’s met. Oh...I could’ve listened for hours! She reminds me of a girl I went to school with, Betty. So you see, I can’t get rid of this, because I don’t want to ever forget her.”

Returned to the house, we shuffle through the entryway where numerous bags containing purchases she’s never opened are piled; again, many of them still have price tags intact. “These are gifts for family and friends. I buy them ahead of time to be sure I have them at the ready, should the need arise.”

As we crab-walk about, navigating sideways, traversing mounds, fumbling our way past chest-high, careening towers of magazines and boxes, Patty chatters, steadily. “I’d like to write

about my life, but doing so might exacerbate my carpal tunnel. I thought voice recognition software might make it easier, but heaven knows where that equipment's gone.

"Hmm," she pauses to cogitate. "I might've packed it away to make room for the recliner."

I scan about; any recliner present is undetectable beneath the junk heaps. I *do* spot a remarkably tidy corner, replete with printer, scanner and fax, and eye her, quizzical.

"I'm afraid if I hook it up," she admits, "that I'll waste paper. When I finally do get it up and running, I also plan to buy a digital camera, so I can sell some of my books and collectibles on eBay."

Good old eBay, I smile to myself—the hoarder's pimp and enabler!

In anticipation of an upcoming bonanza, Patty has collected free advertising art—including cardboard poster ads pertaining to cigarettes and drink: *Absolut Vodka*, *Got Milk*, and *Joe Camel* are some that she eagerly unearthed to display. "Advertising art is all the rage. Really, it's one of the hottest collectibles. A poster like this sells for \$2 or \$3 on eBay. A few nights ago, I noticed they offered 55,000 similar kinds of posters for sale, and they're *so* easy to ship by mail!"

All this booty, and so much more, is crammed within the single-wide mobile home she's dubbed the *Packrat Aversion Therapy Center*.

Despite a buried stovetop, she's managed to keep the sink available. "It's dandy that I don't have to use the bathroom to wash dishes or to get water. Recently, I located the microwave and cleared out its innards so I can heat soup and chili. Here—" she thrusts a scaly, noodle-filled bowl at me, "—want some?"

Stomach roiling at the kitchen's stench, I manage to fend, "Thanks, but no."

By her own admission, having so much stuff adversely impacts her life in myriad ways. Despite fears that the heavily-laden floor might cave in or that the Health Department or the landlord might evict her, Patty keeps right on accumulating. She once had a busy social life, took classes, and participated in church activities but, “Thanks to an abundance of insults,” as she puts it, “and after a series of mortifying scenes and rejections, I’ve developed a social phobia.”

There was a time when she loved to cook and to entertain, but guests fail to reciprocate and made excuses. “Eventually, I figured, since I never have visitors, why keep the place clean or bother tidying up? Also, several people I thought were my friends, stole from me. The last guy ripped off my car, took a bunch of money, and absconded with what little valuable jewelry I had. Sorry to say so, but I’m bitter and paranoid, and no longer trust anyone.

“When young, I collected men and interesting experiences,” Patty confesses. “I always had a husband or lover. We took amazing vacations and had wild adventures, but as I’ve aged and gotten fat, I no longer attract men. I’m pretty sure that’s why I started collecting whole-hog. My books, cats, TV, and the Internet are my passions now.”

Much of the clutter Patty attributes to depression, as well as to physical impairments that include a bad back and arthritis. Added to this, lack of energy after a day’s work at her temp job leaves her unmotivated. “When I get home, I like to watch TV, drink beer, and write in my journal, which means my life’s pretty dull.

“Did I mention my Internet addiction? I’m actually thankful there’s no man in my life; I’d be torn between the guy and surfing the Net.”

A while back, Patty took a tumble. With all 250 pounds of her weight torqued onto her left ankle, she severed a ligament and smashed her tibia. As a result, a metal strip and screws were inserted to bind the fibula.

Surviving on a miniscule Social Security check along with a small work-related pension and the occasional temp job, with no way to pay the unreimbursed portion of her hospital bill, she panicked and, thwarting medical advice, went home via taxi. Alas, as she exited the vehicle, she fell again.

Unable to stand up, she had to crawl. Ashamed to have neighbors glimpse inside her house, she then hailed a poor passerby, imploring him to carve a path to her bed. With no room to maneuver a walker or wheelchair, she was forced to hobble about.

Turns out, Patty's health insurance *did* pay for the bulk of her hospital expenses, but then declined to cover in-home assistance. “So,” she recounts, “I spent dozens of hours seeking volunteer help from various community resources, but came up with nothing. When I finally called my so-called friends, none responded.”

Help did arrive when a neighbor, with whom she'd barely spoken, brought coffee each morning, a sandwich at noon, and hot meal for dinner. “This gal was an outstanding cook, but she tended to hurry in, then leave without saying much. She'd been in my house back when it was neat and tidy, and I figured she now had plenty to report back to other neighbors. Oh, she's good-hearted and generous, but is also a vicious gossip.”

“As if I didn't have enough headaches.” Patty squinches her face. “Several weeks after my accident, the park manager stopped by to ask what I planned to do with the stuff on the porch. He called it a ‘stupendous eyesore.’ A day later, I received a warning from the Health Department; they say my junk poses a vermin and fire hazard. So I promised to take care of it as soon as my cast came off, but haven't yet done so. Now, I'm terrified that the manager or the County will evict me.

“I tell you”—she pats my arm—“I'm like that guy, you know...Job, in the Bible. Add insult to injury, just as my health improved, a swarm of mice ran roughshod through my place. Nested

in boxes and in the trash, their poop and smears blackened my countertops, shelves, and floors. I joked that they were my new pets. Really, it was kinda comical seeing them perform their theatrics! They ran up pull-cords, climbed walls, hung from the drapes, and swan-dove into boxes.

“I was reluctant to put out poison because of my cats, but finally, I covered the bait with wire, then set it in plastic baskets to keep my babies from getting at it. As a result, dead, rotting mice were everywhere. It took a while, but I eventually got that nastiness under control.

“Curiously, due to my leg cast, it had been months since I’d been out and about to acquire more stuff, so when the cast got removed, my craving to shop seemed to have diminished. As a result, figuring I might be cured of collecting, I decided to get my house in order.

“First off, I tackled the kitchen; it hadn’t been tidied in years. Trying to clean was such a joke. Due to my arthritic hands and carpal tunnel, I constantly drop things. Spilling and breaking happens so often, I rarely bother to clear the debris. Partly, it’s hard to grip the broom, and to bend down. One day’s work, I *did* remove three big bags of rotting food.”

“So now, I’m still at it.” Patty did a pirouette, spun, then took a modest bow. “I find the work tolerable if I give myself one bite-size task each day. Even then, I get overwhelmed and discouraged. While trying not to overdo, I start fresh come morning, and as a result, there’s been a smidgen of progress.

“At times, I backslide, buying stuff I can’t afford and have no place to stash. The goal that I’ve kept, I take out at least one bag a day. How do I remove it, you may ask? I fill it up, not too heavy, mind you, toss it down the hall to the living room, then out the front door. Sometimes I’m so winded, I ask a passing stranger to carry it to the dumpster.”

As I nod encouragingly, the image of emptying a swimming pool a single eye-dropper full at a time comes to mind.

“Hours on end,” Patty continues, “I try to sort through papers, but get overwhelmed. See...this is how I work.” She picks through a pile of news clippings. “I plan to give these articles on communication to my pharmacy clerk who says her teenage daughter won’t talk to her.”

She lifts a brown envelope from an immense paper pile. “This particular phone company claims to offer better service, so I can’t toss this until I check the details.”

Amazingly, she reveals an empty cupboard and drawer space. “If I put dishes and papers away,” she discloses, “I forget they exist.” If the folder with phone company pricing gets filed away, she fears she’ll forget about it, as well.

As she carefully examines each item, Patty appears incapable of determining its significance or what gives it importance, relative to other objects. Recently I’d learned this wasn’t uncommon. Every decision made as to what to save has to do with its intended future use. Ironically, given the myriad of heaped piles, nothing’s accessible anyway to be re-examined. So ultimately, even crumpled, blank scraps are kept, lest one run out of writing paper.

Patty’s face contorts as she contemplates tossing out a ragged T-shirt. The effort of decision making is megalithic as she cuddles and examines it, then drifts into a long, convoluted anecdote as to how it came to be acquired. Losing track of sorting altogether and overwhelmed by the effort, shirt is dropped in the saving pile, and she takes a break.

I’ve witnessed a process known as *churning*, which involves busily moving objects around, while not getting rid of, or accomplishing, anything. *Churning* is related to the difficulties hoarders have making decisions.

Patty attempts to recycle by giving junk to friends or donating to thrift stores. Inevitably, when she drops donations off at the Goodwill, she takes a look around, and cannot resist buying more.

“Yesterday, I paid my favorite thrift store a visit, giving myself five minutes inside to drop up donations,” she announces as she resumes sorting, “then I spotted a familiar face and to to gabbing and ended up staying at least two hours; it's the only way I socialize.”

“I try to be selective and to justify my purchases, but when I enter certain stores, like I did, I snap into this hypnotic trance and it's particularly bad when I see books. Despite lack of space, and the fact that I'll never read them, I returned home with five grocery bags.”

When able to drive again, she began to attend group therapy. “Though all group members are in the same boat as I am,” Patty recounts, “with houses full of junk, none admit to having a hoarding disorder. All of them seemed anxious and depressed, but I'm not sure any were suicidal, so I didn't discuss my attempts to take my life, or my hospitalizations. Really, my main goal in attending is to get my Paxil renewed. It lifts my spirits and reduces my anxiety, but doesn't impact my collecting and hoarding.

“One poor woman in the group is an obsessive-compulsive who fears contamination, so she washes and scrubs, till her hands blister up. If anyone touches her stuff, she goes nuts, hollers and panics, and deems it dirty. She even covers her handbag in plastic wrap and wears gloves to touch everything.—Whew, I'm thankful I don't have that problem!

“The public needs to know that folks like us aren't lazy or deliberately messy,” Patty continues. “Most of us have a chemical imbalance, and without proper medication and cognitive behavioral therapy, it's impossible to manage. Believe me, living this way is no piece of cake. Until medicine finds a better solution, I take my pills and cooperate by attending therapy. Mostly, though, I pray that someday my life will become manageable.”

Unlike most hoarders, Patty had insight into her problem. Yet, despite her best intentions, she's unable to cease collecting. As a result, her life continues to burgeon out of control.

“As I look around at all these piles and filth, I agonize,” she confides. “My mind screams and races; I’m so overwhelmed. Sometimes, I pray that I die in my sleep. But then I worry what might happen to my cats. Nobody loves them as I do.”

Raised Christian, after delving into other religions she now deems herself a mystic, and garners solace through the teachings of Religious Science and Buddhist meditation. She's even cleared space in her bedroom for an altar. A brass bell, shimmery scarf, offerings of fruit and rice, and a cherubic fellow’s photo are artfully arranged atop it.

Despite numerous challenges, she manages to find an upside, “I’m terribly lonely, but am glad my depression is finally under control, and that I have a sense of humor about my situation. And, heck, I'm extremely relieved that I’m not a compulsive counter, or a checker, or that I fear contamination. It would be unbearably awful to have obsessive thoughts—imagine thinking, over and over, that you've harmed someone!”

“I hold onto happy images, routinely say affirmations, and tell myself to stop with the negative thoughts. For example, I envision myself as being more attractive and growing thinner, to the point that I wear size twelve dresses again. Surely, all the boxes I heft help me to slim down. I visualize having a tidy, lovely home, and that I find loving, kind friends. Someday, I’m certain, all of it will manifest.”

Lest the reader feel exhausted from hearing this narrative, that's precisely the point; to grasp the convoluted and tortured world inhabited by a classic hoarder, where having stuff begets more stuff, which leads to myriad social, economic and health challenges. The problems hoarders face isn’t merely about their junk, it’s about a life gone to the dogs.