

A Guide to Getting Rid of Almost Everything by Patricia Marx (The New Yorker, 2/21/22)

Lately, I, a maximalist, have been yearning to be a minimalist. I am not alone. “People are stuck in their houses and sick of their stuff,” Randy Sabin, who runs estate and Internet sales, told me over the phone from Morris, Connecticut. “It’s staring them in the face. They have to dust it.” A survey conducted by the storage marketplace Neighbor found that quasi-house arrest has made seventy-eight per cent of respondents realize that they have more possessions than they need. What to do with this First World surplus? Your children don’t want it. The son of a friend, when offered his pick of items from his grandfather’s estate—an antique clock? an Emmy?—took a toilet plunger. In my apartment, it’s got so cluttered that sometimes, when I leave—usually to acquire more stuff—it crosses my mind that I should leave a “Dear Burglar” note, urging the intruder to help herself.

A few months ago, I decided to deaccession an assortment of my things by whatever means feasible: selling, donating, recycling, giving them away, losing them on the subway, or reserving a spot for them on the next Mars Explorer. I gathered my unwanteds and piled them in the living room. A fraction of what was in that jumble: seven antique glass cake stands that belonged to my mother; a dormitory’s worth of new sheet sets and blankets for a bed size that is not mine; a set of Lenox china that my grandmother gave to my mother, who gave it to me, and was never used; clothes galore; a Viking stove grate that arrived cracked, and which I saved because I planned to weld it into a sculpture someday, after I learned how to weld; several rolls of Trump toilet paper that I wrongly thought were amusing a few years ago. I wish I could have added my boyfriend’s too large Le Corbusier lounge. (There are Web sites, such as NeverLikedItAnyway.com, that will buy your ex’s leavings, ranging from engagement rings to “Rick and Morty” socks.)

Some will have you believe that the hardest part of parting with your belongings is choosing which items must go. Not so; saying goodbye is easy. Finding new homes for your stuff is the challenge. In December, a Brooklyn woman offered the entire contents of her closet (more than fifty pieces) to her online neighborhood network, much of it gratis. A month later, lots of her clothes were still available. Turns out people prefer cheap to free.

If Melania Trump can auction off the big white hat she wore when she met the Macrons (plus a watercolor of her in the hat and an N.F.T. of that watercolor) for a

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hundred and seventy thousand dollars, don't we all deserve a little something for our castoffs?

Tip No. 1: *Life is not “Antiques Roadshow.” The thingies you found in your grandfather’s drawer after he died are his dentures, not a valuable Jurassic-age fossil.*

The first thing I tried to unload was four folk-art handbags, each constructed out of braided cigarette-pack wrappers by incarcerated Americans in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. I'd amassed the collection in the nineties, on eBay, for reasons that now elude me. I consulted with Stan Jennings, a retired postal worker, for guidance on selling them. Jennings has been selling goods on eBay and Etsy for clients since 1998. I asked him: Should I list the purses as a group or individually? If you offer them as a package deal, he explained, you'll lose collectors, who prefer to cherry-pick; your likely buyer will be a dealer interested in reselling, and who therefore won't offer much. Should I auction the purse or sell it at a fixed price? For unique, rare, or high-demand items, Jennings said, choose the former—and hope for a bidding war. If items are readily available, go for the latter, which allows impulsive buyers to snatch them at the click of a button. (According to Don Heiden, who runs the Auction Professor channel on YouTube, fixed-price “Buy It Now” items tend to fetch a higher price than those at auctions.) Any particular words one should use in the description? “Unique.” “Conversation piece.” “Smoke-free home.”

Tip No. 2: *A good story can clinch a sale.*

Include the provenance and a heartwarming anecdote in your description. “This dried filbert nut,” you might say, “was Napoleon’s lucky charm. He carried the shell in his pocket during the Battle of Austerlitz and credits it with his victory.” Without that narrative, the nut is just a nut. As to why you are getting rid of this valuable heirloom, it behooves you to explain. Received one just like it last Arbor Day? Downsizing? Nut allergy?


My “Vintage Tramp Art Cigarette Pack Wrapper purse prison inmates 1960’s” was put up on eBay (“. . . a piece of history . . .”) for the site’s hundred and fifty-two million buyers for seventy-five dollars. I'd bought it for about that much. (Listing is free on eBay for your first two hundred and fifty items each month; the fee on sales for most categories is 12.55 per cent.) No offers. I added “Collectible” to the title

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and lowered the price to sixty-five dollars. Still no offers. I tried my luck on Etsy, a site that specializes in crafts, handmade jewelry, wedding accoutrements such as veils, vintage anything, and decorative stickers. If the TV show “Portlandia” were a Web site, it would be Etsy. (Twenty-cent listing fee; five-per-cent transaction charge.) No takers.

I shifted my attention to the heaps of clothes that looked better on my couch than on me. There are plenty of eBay alternatives specializing in schmatta. Depop is the cool-kids’ table in the cafeteria of e-commerce. Ninety per cent of the app’s users are twenty-five or younger, and the merchandise reflects this demographic: a goth corset bustier with boning (seventy-five dollars); a plush phone case in the shape of a panda (twenty-three dollars); rollerblades (twenty-two dollars and ninety-nine cents), with many items styled into ensembles. (Depop takes ten per cent of every item sold.) Poshmark, frequented by a slightly older buyer, sees itself as not merely a selling tool but also as a social stomping ground. Throughout the day, there are Posh Parties—virtual shopping events organized by sellers around certain themes: “Everything Petite Posh Party,” “Wow-Worthy Wardrobe Posh Party,” “Clothes I’m Now Too Fat to Wear” (I made that one up). During these virtual gatherings, members are encouraged to mingle. Here is some representative banter from a

cosmetics Posh party: “  Congrats on your host pick!! I’m

sharing with my followers and hope for a sale for you!! 

  cha-ching!!    

No thank you, Poshmark; all my friend slots are taken. (Twenty-per-cent commission for items over fifteen dollars.)

Are you the type who still ventures outdoors? The most expeditious way to discover whether your whatnot is worth something or nothing is to visit an actual consignment shop in an actual building. Not long ago, I lugged a few bags to La

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Boutique Resale, an establishment that occupies the second and third floors of a brownstone on Madison Avenue. Frank Aquino, a co-owner, scrutinized each of my offerings with the intensity of an F.D.A. inspector checking a hamburger patty for E. coli: a fur hat was found to have a small but fatal stain on the grosgrain interior band; a pair of beige linen Manolo Blahniks lacked enough of what Aquino called the “wow” factor; the dominant color in a clutch bag—let’s call it Grey Poupon—was unappreciated. I took home a receipt for four items (two scarves, a Krizia tweed suit, and a stingray-skin evening bag; respectively, forty-nine and fifty-nine dollars, a hundred and fifty dollars, eighty dollars). I’ll receive half of whatever sells within ninety days.

Closer to home—wherever you may live—you can sell your stuff to your neighbors via one of many online garage-sale platforms. I tried two of them—Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace. According to Jessa Lingel, the author of “An Internet for the People: The Politics and Promise of Craigslist,” they represent two different models of the shared economy. Craigslist has, by intention, remained a snapshot of the Internet from the nineties, a time when Web sites were less about making money than about fostering community. Craigslist has not gone public and has made only a small profit since its beginnings, compared with Facebook, which made eighty-six billion dollars in 2020, the vast majority in targeted ads. When you get rid of a couch on Craigslist, you are getting rid of a couch; when you get rid of a couch on Facebook, you may be saying goodbye to your data, too.

I listed thirteen items on Facebook Marketplace and Craigslist, and sold seven. Here’s what I learned: When it’s cold out, cozy bed linens sell like hotcakes. The transactions were speedy, and there were no commissions and no shipping fees, since the lucky winners pick up their acquisitions at a mutually convenient spot—for instance, the lobby of my apartment building. A nurse from Queens sent me a photograph of my erstwhile bowl displayed on her shelf, and the woman who came for the microfibre sheet set followed up with a thank-you message that included details of her sister’s weight-loss journey. It is the closest an adult can come to having a lemonade stand.

On the other hand, you’d probably make more money per hour by babysitting. My niece set out to sell a bunch of things that she’d used at her wedding. She started by

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listing a water cooler—original price twenty-five dollars—on Facebook Marketplace. “I received ten-plus inquiries, but many turned out to be no-shows and others tried to haggle,” she told me. “One guy asked, ‘Can you do it for seven?’ I had to coördinate a pickup time and place, and arrange for payment, and it was a huge hassle. I ended up deciding to give everything else away because it felt like way too much work for seven dollars.”

The gift economy—a system whereby goods are not sold but given away—has been around for as long as we’ve had things. Native Americans from the Northwest Pacific Coast held potlatch feasts at which property and goods were lavished upon neighboring tribes, mainly for the purpose of showing off wealth. Today, among the seventy per cent of respondents who said they got rid of stuff during quarantine, the majority donated them, according to Neighbor, a site billed as “the Airbnb of storage,” which enables you to rent space in neighbors’ houses to store your junk. (Who are these people with extra closets? I hate them.) The reasons for donating are manifold, ranging from the goodness of your heart to the goodness of a tax writeoff.

Let’s start with Freecycle and the Buy Nothing Project, two worldwide social networks (more than nine million and five million members, respectively) that operate on the local level, where members give away items they no longer want and request others that they are looking for. If you like extremely short stories, the entries on both these apps are rich with drama:

“My mother-in-law insisted I needed these jewelry boxes, but I really don’t. Do you?”

“Spray starch, typically used for Men’s shirts. Feels full. I think this might be left over from a former relationship. It should also move on.”

“We were totally unprepared for the possibility of our baby deciding to want out a few weeks ahead (on our living room floor into her father’s hands, no big deal) If anyone has preemie clothing/items they no longer need to help carry us the next

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few weeks to when she's hopefully grown enough to fit into what we have, I would be so grateful."

Tip No. 3: If you want to give away an assortment of things online, stipulate that the winner takes all. *Otherwise, someone will cherry-pick the Makita cordless drill and leave you with the rusty files, mauve bed skirt, and avocado slicer.*

Nobody on Craigslist, I discovered, cared to pay five dollars for three rolls of Trump toilet paper, still in the package. Over on Freecycle, there were seven requests within two days of my posting, plus one inquiry about whether I had any Biden toilet paper. A number of Buy Nothing members were interested in my good-as-new copy of "The Intelligent Person's Guide to Giving in New York City: How to Donate or Recycle Everything," by Lynn Savarese, published twelve years ago.

The etiquette governing whom to select among multiple suitors is discussed with Talmudic rigor on Buy Nothing message boards. Some favor letting the offer "simmer" (a Buy Nothing term), so that you have an opportunity to spend quality online time conversing with more neighbors. Others allow a Web site called Wheel of Names to randomly choose a winner. Then, there are those who ask would-be recipients to describe how they plan to use your gift, so that you can pick the most compelling story. Bear in mind that the object under discussion could, for example, be a partially consumed tub of cheese balls.

For those who would like to give less interactively and more anonymously, there are innumerable worthy charities. Goodwill was founded in 1902 by a Boston minister who collected goods from the rich, hired the poor to mend them, and then either sold them back to the rich or gave them to the poor. Today, Goodwill has more than three thousand stores across the country. Most of them are willing to take just about anything you'd give to a friend. The Free Store Project will accept most things except furniture, and you're welcome to permanently borrow what's there. ("Take what you need. Give when you can" is the slogan of this place; open 24/7; more than a dozen locations, across Manhattan, Queens, and Brooklyn.) There are lots of other obscure, specialized organizations. For instance, all those old, unusable mascara wands in your bathroom cabinet? Mail them to Wands for Wildlife, a nonprofit that

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started off as a program at the Appalachian Wildlife Refuge, in North Carolina. These will be shared with wildlife caretakers to comb away fly eggs, dirt, fleas, ticks, and larvae from the wings of birds and the fur of animals (wandsforwildlife.org). Fur coat? It is said that nobody wants fur these days, but animals do. Rehabilitators, like those at Sacred Friends, in Norfolk, Virginia, cut up old coats and use the scraps as little capes and stoles to keep sick animals warm (1sthawksnest@gmail.com). PETA wants your pelts, too. The organization donates them to the homeless (“the only humans with any excuse to wear fur,” according to its Web site), and lately it has shipped fur garments to Afghanistan and Iraq for use by refugees.

St. Jude’s Ranch for Children will accept any greeting cards, used or new, that you mail to the organization—except Hallmark, American Greetings, and Disney cards. Blame copyright laws. (100 St. Jude’s St., Boulder City, NV 89005.) That piano you thought you were going to play? Give it to someone who really will, or so he thinks (pianoadoption.com/free-pianos/). Never getting married again? Cash for your wedding dress here: stillwhite.com. Your old bras are welcomed with open arms at the Bra Recyclers, a Phoenix-based enterprise that has sent more than four million bras to homeless shelters, schools, foster programs, and other nonprofits all over the world. As Elaine Birks-Mitchell, the founder of the Bra Recyclers, explained to me over Zoom, bras are not just about fashion. For girls in developing countries, they make it possible to play sports and attend school without embarrassment.

What to do with your nine-foot-tall resin giraffe? The people at Burberry donate theirs, along with a couple of gorillas and some toucans (all are retired store displays) to Materials for the Arts—the largest creative-reuse center in New York City. The goal of the center, founded in 1978, is to provide art supplies to schools and creative types in underserved communities. Feel free to visit the organization’s thirty-five-thousand-square-foot warehouse in Long Island City to drop off your buttons and beads and bric-a-brac, where they will join an array of Winsor & Newton markers, jars from makeup manufacturers, Flavor Paper wallpaper, artificial Christmas trees, orange jumpsuits from “Orange Is the New Black,” office chairs from Bloomberg—and, soon, the broken grate from my Viking stove.

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Another good place to donate: the sidewalks of New York and many other cities function as smorgasbords of secondhand goods. A sofa that I couldn't give away online was snagged an hour after I left it at the curb. The Instagram account [StoopingNYC](#) photographically chronicles what's up for grabs on the streets in all five boroughs. No mattresses, though, since every city dweller fears bedbugs more than the Delta variant.

In the New York area, Renewable Recycling will pick up your mattress for a modest fee and repurpose its components, turning the padding into cushion fillings, the springs into appliances, and the wood frames into mulch. To find a taker or hauler near you, consult the listings on [ByeByeMattress.com](#) and [Earth911.com](#). If you have too many corks from wine bottles lying around, maybe recycling isn't your biggest problem. Nevertheless, two companies, Recork and the Cork Forest Conservation Alliance, will take your bottle stoppers, and make sure they find an afterlife in shoes, fishing tackle, model-train tracks, and more.

Electronics deserves its own paragraph, given that e-waste is “the fastest growing waste stream in the world,” according to the World Economic Forum. Always looking out for herself, Alexa informs me that it's illegal to throw out electronics in many states. Yet more than fifty million tons of the stuff is produced every year and only twenty per cent of it is formally recycled. (If you like to measure everything in Eiffel Towers, that's the equivalent of about five thousand of them.) Better to give your old tech items to Computers with Causes, which passes them on to people and organizations that need them, or to World Computer Exchange, an organization that refurbishes computers and then donates them to schools, libraries, community centers, and hospitals in developing countries ([computerswithcauses.org](#); [worldcomputerexchange.org](#)). If you'd rather sell your devices, Decluttr will give you cash; Amazon's trade-in program will compensate you in Amazon gift cards; and SellCell compares more than forty buyback companies so that you can get the most cash for your cell phone.

Finally we come to the heavy, bulky crapola, especially furniture, that is prohibitively expensive to ship, and not much fun to drag to a thrift shop. Most of it arrived in trucks and, I am happy to report, some of it can be taken away in trucks.

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There are many junk-removal services (1-800-got-junk?, Junk King, College hunks Hauling Junk & Moving), but I'm partial to the Junkluggers, because once it showed up with two trucks and swooped up mountains of castoffs (including a parking meter) from my boyfriend's storage unit; so far, the junk has never come back. (It charges around nine hundred to a thousand dollars to remove a truckful in the New York area.) Moreover, the organization tries its darndest to donate your junk to charity and give you a tax-deductible receipt. GreenDrop, which may sound like a square on the Candy Land board, is a donation dropoff-and-pickup service that serves the East Coast. You can designate which of the handful of charities it partners with you'd like your flotsam and jetsam delivered to. The organization accepts kitchenware, games, books, and small appliances and furniture. If you live somewhere outside the GreenDrop domain, you can consult the directory on the Donation Town Web site which suggests charities nationwide that pick up in or nearest your Zip Code (Donationtown.org). Other organizations that just might come for your stuff include Habitat for Humanity ReStores (home goods, including air-conditioners); and Pickup Please (easy-to-arrange scheduling and pickups, usually within twenty-four hours of request; helps American veterans).

Schedule permitting, volunteers at the House of Good Deeds, in New York City, will pick up whatever you have to give, in its graffiti-covered van or school bus. The aims of this nonprofit are to help those in need and to keep as much as possible out of landfills. The charity was started, in 2017, by Leon Feingold and his fiancée, Yuanyuan Wang, who was given a diagnosis of terminal endometrial cancer a few days after the couple became engaged. They were so moved by the kindness of strangers and friends, who, responding to a social-media post, helped not only with medical bills but also with all the wedding costs, that Feingold and Wang created the House of Good Deeds. Wang died shortly after the wedding, but the charity has flourished. Since its founding, there have been regular giveaway events, at which everyone is encouraged to take whatever he or she desires rather than leaving it for a hypothetical person who might need it more, and then to reciprocate the gesture later. "Let's say Bill Gates saw a belt buckle he liked," Feingold told me over the phone. "We'd want him to take it and pay it forward." Has Gates ever come to an event? "Not yet, but he's welcome to the belt buckle." Donations can be dropped off 24/7 at the House of Good Deeds office, which is also Feingold's apartment. If

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Feingold is away or asleep, you can leave them with the doorman (1 River Place, Suite 1406, New York, New York; 917-325-4548).

People divesting themselves of quantities of books (and this applies to LPs, too) often start by thinking, Oh, boy, I'm going to make so much money selling these precious volumes!, and end up saying, "I will pay you any amount of money to take this shit off my hands." A friend who specializes in rare books at a big auction house told me, "I get calls all the time from people who say, 'I have four thousand books, and I think they're valuable.' My first thought is: No, they're not. Usually, if a collection is valuable someone knows." To determine how much a single book will go for (not what you'll get for it), check the price of similar books on a site, such as AbeBooks, Alibris, or Biblio. If you have a huge library, Michael Pyron, a bookbinder and bookseller in Conshohocken, Pennsylvania, suggests putting together a representative box and taking it to a bookseller, who can then decide whether your collection warrants a house call. The Strand, in Manhattan, will accept walk-ins of up to forty books and will give you cash. (If you'd prefer store credit, you'll earn fifty per cent more.) As to what types of books are accepted, Billy Mowbray, who co-manages the buying desk, e-mailed to say that "a good guideline for most subjects is going to be titles which are considered classics or those published within the past year."

Tip No. 4: Be forewarned: Age doesn't make a book intrinsically valuable.

Nor is the worth of a book necessarily enhanced by its being a first edition. The first printing of the first London edition of the first Harry Potter book is "stupidly expensive" (one sold for around \$471,000), Pyron said, explaining that not many copies were printed because no one expected that it would become the Pet Rock of the publishing business. First editions late in a series can go for less than the cost of postage. The same supply-and-demand reckoning applies to signed copies. Hemingway? Yes. Updike? Not so much. It turns out he signed so many books that it's a mystery how he found time to write any.

"For me, the threshold is a book I can put a price of twenty-five dollars or above on," Pyron told me. "If a dealer is offering you a dollar a book, it's not worth

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shopping around,” he said. “If someone offers you a hundred and fifty dollars for a book, it might be worth getting another opinion.”

It’s probably time to throw your remaining books overboard—but throw them where they’ll matter. For instance, prison libraries

(libguides.ala.org/PrisonLibraries/bookstoprisons); Books for Africa

(booksforafrica.org); public libraries (betterworldbooks.com/go/donate).

The desperate go to the dump, which seems like a not-trying-too-hard euphemism for the landfill. What we used to call a dump—ripe rubble, rats, l’eau du rotten egg—has been illegal since 1976. The dump has been replaced by the transfer station, strictly regulated sites that operate as temporary repositories until the refuse can be transported to landfills. If landfills are the Las Vegas of waste management (what goes there stays there), recycling and transfer stations are communist utopias where givers are encouraged to be takers, too. Need some Christmas decorations, side tables, the contents of an old lady’s scarf drawer, perfectly good books, mulch?

As you surely have heard, the younger generations have no interest in inheriting the loot amassed by their materialistic baby-boomer parents. Silver, crystal, fondue sets, Ethan Allen hutches—they want none of it. Why are they looking gift horses in the mouth? A young friend tried to explain. “Our generation wants to feel like we’re in a space that we put together and designed ourselves, not a microcosm of our parents’ house,” he said. “Since so many of us were largely financially dependent on our parents into our early twenties, we want to feel like we built some aspect of our lives without help.”

A twenty-seven-year-old told me that she’s grown used to sharing six hundred square feet of space, “which involves a very defined stuff limit.” She added, “Also, I think our generation doesn’t have the expectation of owning a home or living in a much larger space, so we learn to buy things that we need and have space for, rather than accumulating a bunch of junk that will fit into some larger home that we’ll live in someday.” A friend’s twenty-eight-year-old son offered the most philosophical explanation. “Maybe we buy as much stuff as any other generation, but much of it is digital—in-app purchases or memberships or things to be stored in the cloud,” he

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said. “This allows us the illusion of being minimalist. We’ve substituted spiritual clutter for stacks of paper.”

Tip No. 5: A major perk of death is that you don’t have to clean up after yourself.

If you can’t muster the courage to deal with your three storage units, leave the contents to your heirs. Mention in the will that there’s something valuable in one of them. ♦