

5 January 2011



In the Santa-believing parts of the world, some tens of thousands of Santa suits have gone back into storage, along with fake sleighs and stuffed reindeer, tinsel, baubles and strings of lights, as well as all the flashing Santa displays and plastic Christmas trees. That must require millions of cubic metres of storage space.

Those thousands of unsold chocolate Santas in supermarkets can now be sent back to the factory to have the foil removed and replaced with new foil to turn them into Easter bunnies. Maybe the unsold chocolate reindeer can be refoiled as chocolate poodles for Mother's Day.

If only we could so easily re-image all those obsolete objects around us, which we now hold on to, stowed away in boxes in the garage or attic or in dark corners of wardrobes. How many millions of cubic metres do we – the well-off in the 'developed' world – dedicate to hold things we will never use again? How many people keep, for instance, their wedding dress or wedding suit, never to wear them again? If they ever get remarried, they probably won't fit and will probably be out of fashion. If they still fit and are still in fashion, you are probably getting remarried too soon.

From my parents, who went through the second World War and the post-war period of limited resources, I inherited a propensity to hoard things that may come in useful some time in the future, and to accumulate things such as bits of string, scraps of leather, rubber bands, plastic bags and buttons from worn-out shirts. The upside to this is that I can often find just the right bit of metal to repair something or a few bits of leather to make a novel hinge for the dog door I am making.

Many old things I have held on to are definitely no longer useful, such as the 30 MB IDE hard drive I used to use to test computers I built or repaired (more than fifteen years ago). The other day I found a box of computer memory cards – 560 KB each – which once cost a lot of money, which is why I hadn't ditched them. At least I can now take them somewhere where they will be stripped down for recycling.

I have a stack of video tapes and no VHS player; a collection of vinyl LPs and no working turntable; boxes of compact cassettes and no tape player. I have even come across several reels of super-eight films and a tin of sticky, triangular 'photo corners' for mounting photos in albums. Are photo albums with black cartridge paper pages still available?

I have thousands of 35 mm slides which I started to scan years ago, but it is a mammoth task and I wonder if it is worth the effort. Who am I doing it for?

I still have a set of tools specifically for working on bicycles, but I haven't owned a working bike for over a decade and I haven't owned a motorbike for more than two decades, so maybe I can offload the sets of unused sparkplugs I found in a crate that moved with me more than fourteen years ago and which, until last week, I hadn't opened since the move.

In the same way that I hold on to outdated, obsolete and useless things, I also tend to store outdated, obsolete and no-longer-useful ideas. I value them because they *were* once valuable, or at least useful. These include: remembering the cost of the train fare in 1967 from St Kilda to Flinders Street (that railway line is no more and I think the fare would have increased by now); how to convert pounds, shillings and pence to dollars and cents; how to operate a manual telephone exchange (I used to occasionally man the one in the Fitzroy Town Hall in the early 1970s); the salient details of the *Matrimonial Causes Act* (superseded long ago); how to operate the stage curtain in the assembly hall at my old high school; the postcodes of most Melbourne suburbs. There must be hundreds of such examples taking up multiple thousands of neural connections and pathways.

It takes determination and effort to keep the accumulating clutter to a minimum, including emotional energy: discarding things brings back memories and sometimes a lump in the throat. Those things that were once cherished, important, useful, essential even, are now just so much junk. So much was invested in them. But just as replacing old body cells with new ones does not change who I am, I could look at objects in my life in the same way. Maybe it is time for me to throw out all those unmatched socks lurking in the bottom of the drawer – I will probably never find their partners after all these years.