

# COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET

## Page One

My essay, "COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET," has nothing to do with gender identity, nor with sexual orientation.

It does have to do with *Fibber McGee and Molly's Closet*.

*Fibber McGee and Molly* was a prime-time radio comedy series, popular and enduring from 1935 to 1956. The memorable running gag involved Fibber opening a closet, out-of-which cascaded an avalanche of his "stuff." Fibber swore his "stuff" was "arranged in there just the way I want it." One time he cleaned out the closet, but the closet soon became cluttered again, leading to many subsequent disasters! So, *Fibber McGee's Closet* entered our vernacular as a catchphrase synonymous with hoarding.

## WHAT IS THE FORMAL DEFINITION OF THE CLOSET?

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, Table 3.29 reads:

"Hoarding disorder is a persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value. This difficulty is due to a perceived need to save the items, and to the distress associated with discarding them."

Symptoms are:

**One:** excessively acquiring items that are not needed or for which there is no space;

**Two:** persistent difficulty throwing out or parting with one's things, regardless of actual value;

**Three:** feeling a strong need to save these items, and being very upset by the mere thought of discarding them;

**Four:** allowing hoarding to interfere with day-to-day living, including work or relationships with family and friends.

It is a compulsive behavior, an anxiety disorder.

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Another formal definition is, upon asking hoarders to make decisions about keeping or discarding items, that researchers found abnormal activity in the *anterior cingulate cortex and insula* of the brain, areas known for decision-making.

## WHY DO WE HAVE A CLOSET AT ALL?

Why do we own: possessions allow us to do or accomplish something  
-but hoarders have excessive volumes and variety of stuff they find as “useful”

- possessions provide a sense of security;
- possessions become a part of one’s sense of self
- preserving personal history (why downsizing is so difficult)
- demonstrating status.

It is unclear whether the acquisition of possessions is:

- instinctive/nature: as in “transitional objects” such as a stuffed toy
- cultural/nature: hoarding is not an exclusively culture-bound syndrome.

Closets are as old as time. Listen to Dante’s The Inferno:

“Here, too, I saw a nation of lost souls,  
far more than were above: they strained their chests  
against enormous weights, and with mad howls  
rolled them back, one party shouting out:  
“Why do you hoard?” and the other: “Why do you waste?”  
Hoarding and squandering wasted all their light  
and brought them screaming to this brawl of wraiths.  
You need no words of mine to grasp their plight.”

*Occasional hoarding* in response to scarcity is different from *classical hoarding*. This select kind of self-protection is hard-wired in our biology. Anxiety, uncertainty and fear will impact our buying decisions, but hoarding select items is just acting like normal human beings. There is a difference!

## WHO IS IN THE CLOSET?

A guilty and discouraged person.

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A very distressed person, feeling overwhelmed and embarrassed by their possessions.

A person ashamed, feeling remorse and depression.

A person at an average age 50, tending to live alone.

A person who is single, either because their behavior has driven away those around them, or has prevented them from forming meaningful relationships.

More than likely, a man.

A person able to keep an important secret.

A highly-perfectionistic and indecisive person, in spite of being highly intelligent.

A non-insightful person, who can't be helped unless he or she wants to change.

A person who describes himself or herself as an artist, because he or she are more creative---their worlds are filled with an appreciation of the physical world that most of us lack---they see beauty, utility and meaning in things!

A person who is excited about the connections with his or her objects, with intensely pleasurable feelings about the objects, like a drug high.

A person who sometimes can discard, but can't balance the volume that they acquire with what they do part with.

The current best estimate by the American Psychiatric Association of the prevalence rate of hoarding is somewhere between 2% and 6% of the population!

That's who is in the closet!

## **WHAT KINDS OF CLOSETS ARE THERE?**

First, there is the trash-hoarding type, in which potential use is vital;

Secondly, there is the shopping-and-hoarding type, in which kleptomania is a variant;

Thirdly, there is the sentimental hoarding type;

Fourthly, there is the animal-hoarding type, often the subject of an evening news story.

These four types of closets are remarkably common, far more widespread than the public might think.

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The trash-hoarding type often lives with mountains of clutter, garbage and junk that the average person would easily toss. “Just in case” is a tempting phrase; it’s an exact equivalent of an alcoholic’s “just one more.”

Some hoarders are discriminate in saving specific categories of items, for example, books, figurines, art, paper, or clothing.

The animal-hoarding type refuses to admit that the animals in their care are suffering.

These four kinds of closets present more than a mental health issue. These closets can become a legal, personal, and public health and safety issue. These with the four hoarding disorders are at high risk to experience further deterioration to both their mental health status, as well as their living conditions.

## WHAT OPENS THE DOOR TO THE CLOSET?

Hoarding appears to result from deficits in processing information, because making decisions about whether to keep and how to organize objects requires categorization skills, *and* requires confidence in one’s ability to remember, *and* requires sustained attention, *and* requires the ability to efficiently assess the utility or value of an object.

There are known risk factors, such as experiencing a traumatic event, and having a family member who also hoards.

Another known risk factor is the onset of a brain lesion, which can trigger the beginning of troublesome accumulation of useless objects:

    damage in a specific part of the frontal lobe called the *mesial/middle prefrontal cortex*, which acts as a normal overriding inhibitory system.

The door to the closet may be opened by a gene----a region on Chromosome 14, which has been linked to disorders such as Alzheimer’s and other cognitive impairments.

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Some think the door is wider because materialism and over-consumption are rampant, making acquisition more accessible. One example of the result is the increasing number of self-storage units that cater to an apparently insatiable appetite for keeping one's stuff! From my experience, the contents rarely have much value. The ease of online shopping certainly contributes to the open-door policy!

Today there are studies of all aspects of hoarding, including the disciplines of: neurobiology....neuropsychology...social anthropology...genetics.

HEREDITY/NATURE or ENVIRONMENT/NATURE---

---the verdict on what opens the door remains unclear!

### **CAN ONE CLOSE THE DOOR TO THE CLOSET?**

Therapy can help, using a cognitive-behavioral approach. However, this approach is time-intensive, and quite costly.

Medication does not appear to reduce the behavior, but it may reduce the often-present symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Treating of hoarding, that is, closing the door, remains very hard.

### **WHAT IS NOT A CLOSET?**

People who simply clutter do not have a closet. But, in time, a clutterer may progress to opening the door to the closet!

Collectors do not have a closet. To be a collector versus a hoarder:

- objects must be removed from every-day use;
- objects must be organized;
- objects are often on private or public display;
- objects provide pleasure, opportunity, comfort, safety, or identity

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-objects are often thought of as a legacy to pass on to heirs, and to the world....THANK YOU HARRISON EITELJORG AND ELI LILLY!

The attachments to objects among people who collect are not much different from the attachments all of us form to our objects: the difference lies in the scope and knowledge about the attachments.

The attachment to objects among people who hoard is abnormal in the intensity and extremely broad scope of the attachments.

Collecting is a creative art, with an intersection of appreciation and beauty.

Collections provide pleasure, and often symbolism with the past. There can be a motivating nostalgia factor, such as is present with collections of dolls, childhood toys, and the cars of our youth!

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) associated collection in adulthood with difficulties in toilet training. Freud must have had significant difficulty with his toilet training, because he was a collector of Greek vases, Chinese art, and more! Freud did not benefit from current scientific knowledge.

Some collectors have a different primary goal: making money through collection. Those of you who collect Indiana art and Japanese art have seen an increase in this asset class!

The drive to collect is rooted in our neurobiology. Here are examples of collections I have appraised:

**Seashells:** A collection of worldwide seashells, consisting of approximately 12,680 specimen lots. Donated to the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago;

**Salt-and-Pepper Shakers:** A collection of 7,000 pairs. The owners were striving to collect all ever made in the world, which they estimated at 10,000 pairs. Proudly displayed on custom-made wood shelves, from floor to ceiling;

**“Red” Skelton:** Awards, props, costumes, artwork, scrapbooks, show tapes, of Richard Bernard “Red” Skelton (1913-1997), famous comedian, actor and artist. Donated to Vincennes University;

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**Judith Leiber Purses:** A collection of 84 Judith Leiber purses, clutches and handbags, all with crystals made by Swarovski, of Wattens, Austria. Displayed in a well-lit, custom-made glass case;

**Glick Studio-Glass Collection:** The Marilyn K. Glick Collection, numbering hundreds of pieces, created in the cast, blown, laminated, fused, lampwork and slumped techniques. Now exhibited at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Glick Eye Institute and Ball State University;

**Britain's:** A huge collection of hand-painted, die-cast lead toy soldiers and military miniatures made by W. Britain. Displayed in Columbus, Indiana, on custom-made, narrow shelving;

**Batman:** An impressive collection of all things *Batman-ish*, totaling 1,542 individual items. Donated to the Childrens' Museum of Indianapolis.

All seven of these collections did meet the criteria for a collection by a collector: removed from everyday use; organized; on private or public display; thought of as being a legacy; and, lastly, bringing pleasure and satisfaction!

## MY HARROWING VISITS TO CLOSETS:

**THE HOUSE ON EAST 116<sup>TH</sup> STREET IN CARMEL:** With room-after-room filled with duplicate or triplicate QVC network items, by the many hundreds, purchased as "gifts;"

**DIE-CAST CARS:** This appraisal assignment was for a divorce in Kokomo, my client being a Registered Nurse. Her husband's compulsive hoarding disorder manifested itself in a two-car garage completely filled with thousands of die-cast cars.....which was why she was getting a divorce! He was to get the cars, and she the equity in the house. To do the calculation, I measured to see how many cars were in a cubic foot, and then extrapolated to a total!

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THE CLASSIC CASE: This was a 900-square foot house, and 900-square foot basement, in Broad Ripple, for an estate appraisal.

The deceased was a brilliant mathematician who helped the engineers at Rolls Royce. The nephew who hired me to finalize the estate told me he “just could not handle it,” and I was to do whatever it took. Upon arrival, I found a goat path from the front door to a bed, with another to the toilet. Every single horizontal surface, including the interior of the refrigerator and the oven, were filled with quality glassware, china, and pottery and porcelain. After creating a staging area, I engaged Ripley Auctions to come and get groupings of items. The resultant auction took a full three days because there were approximately 15,000 individual pieces!

### IN SUMMARY:

Thank you for visiting *Fibber McGee's Closet*:

.....the sources and purposes of Closets;

.....the types of Closets;

.....the characteristics of the denizens of the Closets;

.....comments on the Collector, who is NOT in the Closet!

.....and, finally, a few of my experiences with Closets!

J. Scott Keller  
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