

MAX PARADOX

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

Self-Help with a Sense of Humor ;)

I Can't Throw Things Away Because I Might Need Them Someday

**How to Reclaim Your Home from
Cables, Boxes, and Plastic Bags**



We have a problem. Relax. We can solve it—and have a laugh along the way.

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INTRO

You are standing in front of a drawer that technically contains useful things. There are batteries, three instruction manuals, a key that definitely opens something, a charging cable from an extinct civilization, two tiny screwdrivers, a restaurant loyalty card from 2017, and a mysterious plastic clip whose purpose has been lost to history. You pick up the cable. You have not used it in six years. You no longer own the device it charged. You are reasonably sure the company that made the device no longer exists. Still, a thought appears immediately: I might need this someday.

So you put it back.

The drawer closes only after you press down with both hands.

This is how perfectly ordinary homes slowly become museums dedicated to hypothetical future emergencies. Nothing is useless because everything comes with a story about what could happen. That cardboard box? Excellent box. Very sturdy. You may need to ship something. Those twelve smaller boxes? Also potentially important, because apparently one day you will open a mail-order business without warning. The plastic bags under the sink are obviously valuable because bags are useful. There are now enough of them to survive a national bag shortage, but that is beside the point. Preparedness has been achieved.

The strange thing is that most people who struggle to throw things away are not trying to become collectors. They are trying to be sensible. Throwing away something potentially useful feels wasteful. Keeping it feels responsible. A spare cable costs nothing while it sits in a drawer, so why not keep

it? A glass jar could store something. An old towel might be useful for cleaning. A nice shopping bag could carry another thing someday. And suddenly half your home is being reserved for objects that have very impressive future careers but currently contribute nothing except volume.

Your possessions have better retirement benefits than you do.

The problem is not simply that you own too much. If it were, the solution would be easy: take everything you do not need, throw it away, admire your empty shelves, and spend the evening drinking tea in a home that looks like a furniture catalog. Unfortunately, the actual problem begins about four seconds after you touch the first questionable object. Your brain stops evaluating what the thing does and starts inventing situations in which getting rid of it could become a terrible mistake.

"What if I need this adapter?"

For what?

"I don't know yet."

When?

"Possibly later."

For which device?

"Let's not get trapped in details."

This is an extremely effective argument because the future is unlimited. Almost anything can become useful if you are allowed to invent enough circumstances. A bent spoon could theoretically help you retrieve something from behind a radiator. A shoebox could become emergency document storage. An old bedsheet could protect furniture during a renovation you have not planned. Give the brain twenty

seconds and it can produce a disaster movie in which throwing away one empty cookie tin leads directly to financial ruin.

Meanwhile, the cost of keeping things feels invisible. You already own the item, so keeping it seems free. But it is not free. It takes space. It makes useful things harder to find. It creates piles that need moving, sorting, cleaning, and thinking about. It turns closets into negotiations. It makes drawers annoying. It creates the fascinating household phenomenon in which you own six versions of something but cannot find a single one when you actually need it, so you buy another.

Then you keep the packaging.

Of course you do.

There is also a powerful little fear hiding underneath all this: regret. Nobody wants to throw away a cable on Tuesday and desperately need that exact cable on Thursday. That would be unbearable. You would stand over the trash can like a tragic hero and whisper, "I knew it." Never mind that you kept the cable for eight years without using it. Those eight years would instantly disappear from the evidence. Your brain would remember only the one dramatic moment in which the object finally became useful shortly after you removed it.

Human beings are excellent at remembering the one time keeping junk paid off and surprisingly relaxed about documenting the other 2,763 times it did not.

There is another reason clutter survives: decisions are tiring. Keeping something postpones the decision. You do not have to determine whether the object matters, whether it can be replaced, whether someone else could use it, whether it belongs somewhere, or whether you are realistically going to repair it. You can simply say, "I'll deal with that later," which is

one of the most efficient methods ever invented for transferring problems to a future version of yourself.

Future you has received a remarkable amount of work.

Future you is expected to organize the garage, sort the photos, learn Spanish, use the fancy notebook, sell the old electronics, repair the chair, identify seventeen unidentified cables, and finally discover why there are four empty phone boxes in the closet. Present you, meanwhile, is tired and would like to watch something.

This book is not going to tell you to become a minimalist who owns one bowl, two shirts, and a morally superior houseplant. You are allowed to own things. You are allowed to keep backups. You are allowed to save objects that are genuinely useful, difficult to replace, sentimental, expensive, or connected to a realistic plan. The goal is not to create an empty home. The goal is to stop sacrificing real space to imaginary usefulness.

We are going to separate "I use this" from "this could theoretically become useful during an unusually specific Tuesday." We will deal with duplicates, mystery objects, packaging, sentimental items, unfinished projects, cables, bags, containers, old technology, backup items, and the objects you keep because getting rid of them feels strangely irresponsible. You will learn how to make decisions faster, how to reduce regret, how to set practical limits, and how to stop turning every object into a courtroom case.

Most importantly, you will not need to clean your entire home in one heroic weekend.

Those weekends usually begin with motivational music and three empty storage bins. By Saturday afternoon, the bed is covered with everything you own, you have rediscovered a

birthday card from 2009, and you are sitting on the floor reading it instead of organizing anything. By evening, most of the objects are back where they started, except now you are exhausted and one drawer no longer opens.

We can do better.

The aim is to build a system that works when you are busy, tired, sentimental, indecisive, or temporarily convinced that seven identical takeout containers represent strategic reserves. You will not have to become ruthless. You will have to become clearer. There is a difference.

And if one day you throw away a cable and later discover that you need it?

We will survive that too.

Probably for \$8.99.

Chapter 1 - The Museum of Maybe

You pick up a small black cable from the back of a drawer. One end looks vaguely familiar. The other end looks like technology from a period when phones still had removable batteries and people printed directions before driving somewhere.

You do not know what it belongs to.

You have not used it recently.

You cannot identify a single device in your home that requires it.

And yet throwing it away suddenly feels reckless.

"What if I need it?"

This question has saved more useless objects than recycling programs have ever removed.

The important word is not need. It is might.

"I use this every week" is useful information. "I might use this someday" is not. Someday has no date, no plan, no location, no device, no task, and apparently no obligation to provide evidence.

Someday is where clutter gets diplomatic immunity.

This is the first mechanism you need to understand: potential usefulness is practically infinite. Almost every physical object can be useful under some imaginable circumstances. A cardboard tube could protect a poster. A chipped mug could hold pens. A takeout container could organize screws. An old T-shirt could become a cleaning rag. A cracked bucket could hold garden tools. A wooden board could become a shelf if you suddenly develop carpentry skills, buy the correct hardware, find a wall that needs a shelf,

and become the sort of person who spends Saturday morning installing it.

Congratulations. The board has been acquitted.

The question "Could this ever be useful?" is therefore hopeless. If you ask it, the answer is almost always yes.

Could you need seventeen rubber bands?

Certainly.

Could civilization collapse tomorrow, leaving your household entirely dependent on its accumulated rubber-band reserves?

Less certainly.

A useful home cannot be organized around theoretical possibility. It has to be organized around probability, frequency, replacement cost, space, and actual plans.

That sounds more complicated than it is.

Instead of asking, "Could I use this someday?" ask:

"Can I name a realistic use for this in the next year?"

Not an imaginary use. Not "maybe for something." A real use.

"I'll use this extension cord when we put the Christmas lights up."

Good.

"I'm keeping this box because I'm moving in three months and need boxes."

Excellent.

"I'm keeping this adapter because my work laptop uses it when I travel."

Perfectly reasonable.

"I'm keeping this yogurt container because containers are useful."

The defense rests.

Notice that none of this requires you to become ruthless. The point is not to throw away anything that fails to produce a scheduled appointment. The point is to move from vague possibility to reasonable expectation.

There is a substantial difference between having a spare HDMI cable because you own several devices that use HDMI and keeping a drawer of eleven unknown cables because one of them may become important during a future archaeological emergency.

The easiest way to start is with what I call the Specific Use Test.

Pick up an uncertain object and complete this sentence:

"I am keeping this because I will probably use it for ____."

The blank must contain an actual job.

If you say, "something," the object has failed.

If you say, "in case," the object has not even attempted the exam.

If you need thirty seconds of creative writing to justify the thing, that is also information. Objects you genuinely use usually explain themselves rather quickly.

You do not hold your frying pan and think, "Interesting. Could this perhaps serve some purpose in my future?"

You make eggs in it.

Clutter is full of items whose usefulness requires a presentation.

There is another problem with "maybe": it ignores quantity.

One reusable shopping bag is useful.

Five reusable shopping bags may be useful.

Thirty-seven reusable shopping bags have formed a population.

At some point, the decision is no longer whether the category is useful. The decision is how many useful objects you realistically need.

This is where people get trapped. They look at each bag individually and think, "But this is a good bag." Correct. So are the other thirty-six. The bags are not on trial for poor moral character. You are simply deciding how much of your kitchen belongs to them.

The same applies to jars, boxes, gift bags, plastic containers, old towels, charging cables, pens, notebooks, screws, spare buttons, packing material, and the tiny Allen keys that reproduce mysteriously every time you assemble furniture.

Useful things become clutter when their quantity exceeds their realistic role.

That means your next question should be:

"How many of these do I actually need?"

Do not ask how many you can physically fit into the cupboard. Cupboards are dangerously cooperative. Given enough pressure, they will accept terrible decisions.

Suppose you regularly reuse shipping boxes. Great. Decide on a storage limit: perhaps five good boxes that nest neatly together. Once the space is full, another box can enter only if one leaves.

No debate.