

Hooked On Recovery

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The Cycle of Stuff

“A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you're taking off in an airplane. You look down, you see everybody's got a little pile of stuff. All the little piles of stuff. And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn't want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff. They always take the good stuff. They never bother with that crap you're saving. All they want is the shiny stuff. That's what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get...more stuff!” –George Carlin

Our house is medium sized. Not too big, not too small. Well, maybe it's getting a little small. We have two boys (ages 11 and 3) in one room and two girls (ages 9 and 1) in another room. The girls' room is pretty small, it would be small for one girl, and both of them are crammed in there. And Joshua is starting to grow, really grow. So their room is getting a little tight. It's obvious that the drawers in both rooms must be full because the clothes are always all over the floor. I think all the storage spots in the house must be full, too.

The other night, I was doing my best to help pick up and in frustration I said to Sandy, “I have no problem helping you pick up, but there's no place to put it!”, like somehow it was her fault. She just gave me a look. I'm surprised she didn't say, “You're so cute.” In 12 years of marriage, I've just recently figured out that “You're so cute” really means, “I love you very much, and part of your charm is that at times you really can be an idiot”. The degree of my idiocy can be measured by the sweetness in her voice and the width of her smile. If I get a “You're so cute” in a really sweet voice with a really big smile, oh boy have I been an idiot. Back to the stuff.

I have studied our stuff, really, I have. By my calculations, 89% of our stuff comes through the front door, 7% through the back door, and 4% just materializes on its own. Most of our stuff comes from stores where we actually pay good money for it and another good percentage comes from well meaning family and friends who give stuff to us. I am close to proving a theory that some stuff does reproduce. For example, multi-colored plastic objects definitely have lives of their own. They continually escape from their containers and are highly mobile. They go forth and multiply. I've found multi-colored plastic objects in the VCR, in my coffee cup, in my pillow case, in the toilet, in the ashtray of my truck and in my tackle box. I'm convinced that every night they lie in wait and crawl under the cover of darkness onto the path to the bathroom. I check every night before I turn off the light, but still they end up embedded in my foot.

There have been times in our house where we have accumulated so much stuff that the basement is completely full, like a huge giant Chucky Cheese ball pit. Except our basement isn't filled with multi-colored plastic balls (completely anyway), it's filled with stuff. At first you start off taking a box down into a corner and stacking it nicely. Soon the corners are filled and the piles of stuff have taken over more of the basement floor. This is the phase where you've established pathways through the stuff. I start to get annoyed when I have to turn sideways several times to get to my fishing gear. Our house gets to the point where you open the door and throw something down the stairs. That's when it's bad. When opening the door to the basement reminds me of Professor Phineas J. Whoopee looking for his 3-D chalk board (hint: Tennessee Tuxedo), I make my move. I sneak in through the hatchway and start dragging stuff out. Where do you think I bring all this stuff? That's right. To the garage.

Now the garage has the same function as the basement. It holds all our stuff, except the stuff in the garage is not as important as the stuff in the basement. It's been relegated to a lower position out of the house. What's frustrating about storing a lot of stuff in the garage is that obviously a car can't fit in there. In fact, I don't think a car has ever been in our garage. Our garage can get so full that it takes 30 minutes to get the lawnmower out. I get really frosted when I trip over 74 things to get a snow shovel.

What happens once the garage gets overstuffed? The stuff ends up on the curb or in the dump. We've put a lot of stuff on the curb and someone will drive by within minutes and stuff the stuff in their car. I've watched some of them; they act all sneaky like they're stealing my stuff while I'm in the house whispering, "please, please take it... that's good, get in the car, now drive away ...yes!!!! Ha ha ha!" That stuff is gone! We've had dressers, pools, carpets, broken bicycles, assorted toys, tables, games, lamps, TVs all disappear from our sidewalk. We consider it one way to donate to charity.

Recapping the cycle of stuff: first it comes into the house through the front door. After we've played with it a while and grow tired of it, we store it in the basement where we can dredge it up in case we really need it. Once it begins to take up too much room we move it out of the house and into the garage until we finally take it to the curb where it will get carted away. Could this be the same as the human condition? In the above analogy, replace "stuff" with resentment or any other kind of emotional toxin. We take resentment into our mind willingly, when we're tired of it we store it in our basement only to dredge it up when we "really need it". Then we might move our resentment out into the garage where it's still available if we "really, really need it". Finally, the healthiest move is to take our resentment to the curb and let God cart it away. We all get stuck in varying degrees in different places in the cycle. When my house was really crammed with resentment I had to drink and drug to ignore the mess. Through recovery, I was able to clean the house, and then work some on the basement and even some on the garage.

I still have stuff come in the house but not nearly as much as I used to. My house is somewhat in order. When it does come in it seems to move through a lot faster. I've cleaned my basement and I can move around down there. I've worked in the garage and can't say that I can fit a car in there yet but it's looking better. And I think about all the stuff my God has already carted away and it inspires me to bring even more of my stuff out to the curb.

I like my house uncluttered and clean. Leaves a lot of room for the Spirit.

Hooked on Recovery is a biweekly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, a father of five and just another surf fisherman. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.