

Anyway, I think that decluttering our shelves, cupboards and living areas every once in a while has the potential of freeing both our space and our souls. It is somewhat similar to practising meditation; eventually and little by little we declutter our minds from the many unnecessary thoughts or internalised messages or stories and create more empty space for calm and new ideas to arise. 'Clutter is not only physical stuff, it's old ideas, toxic relationships and habits' (Eleanor Brown) and as we go about living each day, interacting with others and various environmental stimuli, if we can dedicate some time at the end of the day to meditation we may often find that we can release toxicity that we may have absorbed from others, shift our perspective, gain deeper insight and a sense of spaciousness and restore calm.

I think that we often keep things we may not need or even like very much because we are attached to the past or we have not yet dealt with something we need to. In her book: *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*, Marie Kondo writes that 'when we really delve into the reasons for why we can't let something go, there are only two: an attachment to the past or a fear for the future'. When I finally, gave up teaching, I found myself with tonnes of books, videos, tapes and material, which I didn't really need anymore, but I was not able to let go of it all at once and so a lot of this material was stored along with a few boxes of small gifts, cards, drawings and letters from students, which were of sentimental value. A few years later I finally decided to tackle the stuff because I think I was ready to explore some of the emotions and deeper reasons and also re-evaluate my decision to close my business and give up teaching all together. Letting go of all the material at that point was quite liberating; however, when the time came for me to throw out the boxes of memorabilia I found that I was more sentimentally attached to this material. Eventually I realised that they too had fulfilled their purpose and it was time for me to say goodbye and let go. Interestingly, I have observed that once I recycle or throw things out I rarely ever think about the stuff or regret parting with it. Marie Kondo writes that 'the process of assessing how you feel about the things you own, identifying those that have fulfilled their purpose, expressing your gratitude, and bidding them farewell, is really about examining your inner self, a rite of passage to a new life'.

Collections are also a good place to start when we are considering decluttering or recycling. Our collections probably say a lot about us and our experiences. In the past I had collected things, like stamps, bowls and enamel jugs or cheap second hand glassware, but I had never really been serious about anything and after a while I would always stop adding items to each 'collection'. I also observed a pattern and realised that almost every single one of these small collections had started either from many similar gifts being given to me by others or had grown into a collection because I would receive many similar gifts after I had acquired a few items on my own. For instance, my sister had initiated my stamp collection and then I just mindlessly got into the habit of saving stamps, which eventually all found their way into journal pages and craft items. I had also acquired a collection of porcelain dolls, because students and friends thought that it was the perfect gift for me, even after my interest in them had waned and I ended up with a small collection that I would not have otherwise chosen to build up in the first place. Seeing things around our house as if for the first time and mindfully observing

them can give us clues to what we really like and can increase conscious living. Donald Altman suggests we notice things in a room as if for the first time, which not only allows us to perceive them in a new way and to create new positive memories, but also increases our hippocampus volume. It reminds me of the comedy *the Runaway Bride*, where the main character had to take a step back and reflect in order to find out how she preferred her eggs, what she really wanted to do, and ultimately, who she really wanted to marry. Being more mindful of our living and environments allows for deeper knowing and alignment with our personal tastes, interests and values.

Anyway, in the fall of 2015 I survived a difficult experience, which I have written about in previous posts, and during which I decided to deal with this particular collection since it resided on the shelves of a cupboard in my bedroom, which is otherwise very sparsely populated, without much furniture or stuff in it. Marie Kondo writes that 'the best criterion for choosing what to keep and what to discard is whether keeping it will make you happy, whether it will bring you joy'. I suppose my asthmatic and bronchitis state of being were conducive factors to my deciding at that particular moment to declutter my already decluttered bedroom, and without being familiar with Marie Kondo's ideas or advice at that time, I took out all the dolls and explored both my reasons to keep them and my desire to recycle them. It was not easy because they were linked to so many people and past events and anniversaries, and lots of emotional stuff came up. After all objects become containers of experience and can trigger emotions and memories. Moreover, some of the dolls were expensive, especially, the ones that had come from an old client's shop and which had been given to me instead of monthly fees, but I took the plunge anyway and bid them all farewell that evening. The dolls had simply felt like baggage from the past with no real purpose to serve at that point. Marie Kondo suggests that 'When you come across something that you cannot part with, think carefully about its true purpose in your life. You'll be surprised at how many of the things you possess have already fulfilled their role. By acknowledging their contribution and letting them go with gratitude, you will be able to truly put the things you own, and your life, in order. In the end, all that will remain are the things that you really treasure. To truly cherish the things that are important to you, you must first discard those that have outlived their purpose'. So in 2015 I parted with all the dolls except for one, and she is the reason for this post, which now both records her existence and holds the memory of the event when I received this thank you gift in 1997. This particular doll was missing one leg, was not expensive or special, but she had students' wishes and thank yous written all over her chest, as you can see in the photo below, so I felt kind of bad about throwing it out at the time. Then a few days ago I found her sitting alone in the back of a cupboard and she reminded me of the little lame child who had been left behind in the *The Pied Piper's* story. I picked her up and dwelled a bit on what might have led my students to buy a new doll with a broken leg in the first place. Who knows, perhaps they had felt sorry for her; in any case, I think she has served her purpose and it is time for me to part with her because as Marie Kondo writes 'the space in which we live should be for the person we are becoming now, not for the person we were in the past'.



Once or twice a year I also tackle my bookshelves and I find that there is always something one can let go of, like the books that you only got half way through because they didn't really speak to you and were not a good match to begin with, then there are the books that you know you will definitely never read again, and the ones that reflect past interests or beliefs that have also now become outdated for you, the books that friends have given you and are a reflection of their interests and likes rather than yours and then there are the ones whose content may be somewhat toxic for you, the books you bought on the boat or airport just to while the time away because you had not remembered to bring your book along, and finally, there are simply the books that others might find useful or enjoy as much as you did. Again with books 'the best way to choose what to keep and what to throw away is to take each item in one's hand and ask: "Does this spark joy? (Marie Kondo) and if not joy, at least does it hold meaning for me and does it expand my knowledge of human experience (Tonya Alexandri, August 4th, 2017).