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My Best Hour of the Week

Bob De Smith

My garage is a mess. Anyone who has seen my desk—at either home or office—will not be surprised by this. But still, the family van has been parked outside its stall for the last month. Having been raised in a family of car guys (my brother is known to wash any car that shows up on his driveway of a Saturday), this is unfathomable. Things are out of hand.

Now, explanations are not far to seek. I've mentioned one already: I just work best around piles of stuff—more or less always have. For example, writing an essay for me is really an exercise in creating unsteady piles of papers, books, notes, and food items. It's a kind of writer's voodoo: if I get all the stacks right, the paper takes care of itself. At least that's how it looks from the outside. And during a semester of teaching, the growing disorder in my office is actually a sign that I'm humming on all cylinders—or so I like to think.

It's not that I don't like order: in fact, yesterday afternoon I methodically worked my way around my office, putting away files, re-shelving books, sorting piles of mail. I even cleaned up my electronic mailbox. It felt good—and it's a feeling I'll get back to. But first we must get back to my garage. By analogy to my desk space, my full and disordered garage could simply be a reflection of the way I approach most tasks. And it does work, mostly, but I think I was better at locating a new season's tools (a center punch in summer, say, or the anti-freeze tester come fall) when I was 30 than 50. "Now where would I have put that last spring?"

Along this line, I am famous for misplacing my gloves. I wear work gloves regularly for outdoor

tasks—it's a compromise between my usually soft-handed life as a professor of English and the rough surfaces of shingles, mower blades, and wood-handled shovels. Was a time I was proud of my rough calluses: they were badges of my handiness and my work-a-day upbringing. It's not hard to bait me into silliness by appealing to this part of me, by the way. Just hand me a stuck jar or tell me that the urinals in the bathroom are gushing without ceasing and I'll wade in. My gloves? See, I lost them already. But I do leave them everywhere, usually with a resolve that the current place is either obvious or blatantly logical. Yes, I have found them in my back pocket, and, yes, I have lost them for a week or more. They are, in case you wondered, always where I put them last.

So maybe disorder for me is defined by some equation where the variables include personal preference, a real or imagined sense of my creativity, habit (both good and bad), and those tiny little holes in memory that even (I trust) healthy brains begin to show at 50. But there may be other explanations as well.

To begin with the obvious, my garage is too small. Of course it is. It's a one-and-a-half stall, wood-framed, detached affair that was probably moved on site sometime after the house itself was. There's room for one car and space along the passenger's side for shelves, a bike or two, lawn chairs, the recycling bin, and an aisle to walk—or slide shuffle. But there's no room for a proper workbench or the kind of storage space requisite to my needs and wants. It's a bad day when in winter I find I need to change oil or replace a starter indoors: I get claustrophobic.

So I admit to envy, though of a particularly righteous kind: I pass by new homes being built with

the now-standard three (and even four) garage stalls and think, “What do THEY need all that room for, when I’m the one who could put it to proper use?” I suppose that’s what Hitler thought of Poland. To understand my concept of proper garage contents, you need to know that I married into a family which once, while relaxing after a Christmas Eve dinner, and in the merry spirit of the season, developed a comparison we labeled the “axle count.” Everything that has wheels counts—lawn mowers, motorcycles, tractors, car and trucks, RV’s, even pedal-powered vehicles. If my recounting serves, one of my brothers-in-law was up to 24 (that’s at least 12 vehicles). In this family, I rank dead last. (I keep a couple of broken lawnmowers in my shed just to keep my numbers from being utterly embarrassing.) So you might say I come by my envy honestly.

Next, I have too many projects ongoing. Some of these projects have been ongoing for a long time. Others should be ongoing but are not now and just might never be. There’s fiber cement from a siding job, spark plugs that should go in the truck, a camp stove in need of a good going over. You see, if I put all this stuff away, I’ll never remember to get it out again.

The clutter of ongoing projects was barely manageable until about four years ago. That’s when I acquired a 1961 Chrysler Newport—and even, a bit later, a companion parts car. You would not believe how many places one needs to put things in order to sustain even a modest rebuilding project on an old car. And I offer this advice: label everything! Right now, extra sheet metal—doors mostly—and bumpers are in a rented garage across the street, where I also tuck the car (if *tuck* is the right word for a car of substantial tailfins and ample grille—it measures 215.6 inches, 18 feet, essentially—in length and just about 80 inches in width). A set of brakes, hubcaps, and an array of specialized tools are in the garage, and many spare parts (including window glass) fill a large shelf in a shed out back. Parts in progress, like the radio and a turn signal switch, are stacked in the basement. Yup, I’ve been to all four places before I’ve found the piece I’m looking for. Once even twice.

One more category: stuff I might need. We’ve all heard the Depression-era cliché about the box containing pieces of string too short to save. I’m not

trying to go over that ground, but my rafters, shelves, cupboards (two I saved from the discard pile at my school during a dorm renovation), and floor edges contain lengths of wood, buckets of bolts, spools of wire, used car parts, lawn mower blades, and bike accessories. I’ve fabricated my way out of many problems by walking into the garage, pausing a while to take it all in like a seer listening for his muse, and beginning to sort through my stuff.

Sort through my stuff. That’s the best hour of the week. Now, I use that title under protest and with apologies. When I tried the title out on my wife, she assumed (quite rightly) that the best hour of my week was one we spent together—watching a movie, for instance, a habit of intimacy we began 26 years ago when we intently adjusted the rabbit ears on our black and white TV in an apartment in Sioux Center just in time to bring *Masterpiece Theatre* out of the snow. The habit intensified when kids could, if all the spells worked, be got off to bed by 9:00 p.m., the moment on Saturday night when Iowa Public Television ran classic films. So that’s the best hour of the week, no doubt.

But the other best hour of the week sounds like this: it’s Saturday morning, early. I’ve made coffee and poured it into a thermal mug, one that won’t mind getting dirty. I’ll put breakfast off until later, after I’ve made a trip to Casey’s Bakery for doughnuts (another habit of intimacy). Right now, I back the car out and begin to clean up the garage. If the day seems open, I’ll clear everything out, sweep out the corners, and re-place everything—garden hoses, creeper, garbage cans, pieces of wood too short to save, basketball, aluminum cans. If I have less time—if that hour is really an hour—I’ll clean up my small workbench (it is a cabinet frame I hauled out of the town dump), putting away tools (maybe pausing to wipe them down), sorting through papers, refilling recycled coffee cups with short pencils, popsicle sticks, and other essentials, and putting away those gloves. I’ll get distracted, probably, finding that rain gauge that I need to put out or cocking an ear to the first news of the day on the radio. It’s oddly satisfying, even if incomplete work. It’s also very temporary, but what attempt at neatness is not?

I might even get out a tape measure and dream about the garage I’ll build to replace this one someday. Bigger barns, my son, bigger barns!