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# Declutter, Organize, Optimize: A Thingless Path to Creativity

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Declutter, Organize, Optimize: A Thingless Path to Creativity

By

Caitlin Wingrove

An Abstract of a Project

In

Creative Studies

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Science

May 2019

Buffalo State

State University of New York

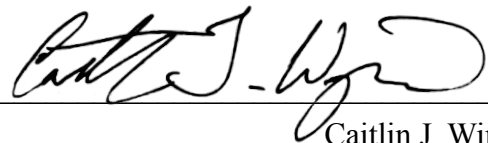
Department of Creative Studies

## ABSTRACT OF PROJECT

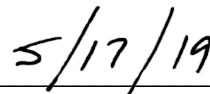
## Declutter, Organize, Optimize: A Thingless Path to Creativity

This project explores the connection between material possessions, physical clutter and the optimization of one's personal creativity in their creative environment. It first includes a review of the book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering*, by Marie Kondo by looking at her methods through the lens of the creative process. The project then documents my personal process of decluttering and optimizing my living space. The project includes some ideas from prior research in the field combined with personal reflections on how the optimization of a physical space can improve one's creative productivity, creative thinking, personal habits, mental and emotional wellbeing and ultimate lifestyle.

*Keywords:* Clutter, Creative environment, decluttering, Konmari



Caitlin J. Wingrove



Date

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State University of New York  
Department of Creative Studies

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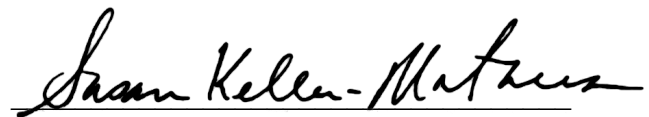
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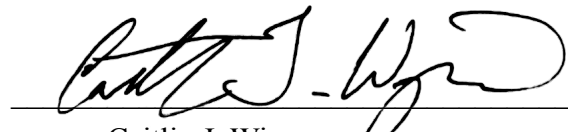
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## Acknowledgements

I confess, I wasn't originally going to put an acknowledgments section in this project. I reasoned that there were just too many people that have shaped, inspired, guided and influenced me; I could never cover all my bases. But I also believe that now, more than ever before, gratitude is so desperately needed *for* all things and *through* all things. Even though "Thank You" feels much too small, it's still important.

This project took every ounce of my person and covered almost every area of my life, so every person and circumstance that led to me being me must take some sort of credit. If I filled up a ferris wheel of those who have contributed to my development and success, it would be too tall for this world; I am overwhelmed with complete and utter gratitude at that thought.

Without my parents, I simply would not be me. More importantly, I wouldn't be this good looking. Mom and Dad, your hard work, among many other things, has influenced me profoundly. From the core of my being, thank you.

Without my wife, I might have gone inside my head permanently and never come out. I also likely would not have finished this project. Cristin, your love has truly opened doors for me and continues to do so. I'm so lucky to have your unwavering support in this project and in life.

Finally, to the incomparable, beautiful souls of the Creative Studies department, I can say without doubt: I would not have the very real sense of purpose that I have in this moment if it weren't for every single one of you. Each one of you has affirmed me and expressed belief in me in some way that I was completely unaware that I needed. Special mentions rightfully belong to Cyndi Burnett and Sue Keller-Mathers: "Advisor" does not seem adequate to describe your roles in this whole "Me getting a master's degree" thing. Thank you, thank you, thank you both for everything, but most of all, for believing in me. It means more than you will ever know.

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## SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

### Purpose and Description

The purpose of this Master's project is to explore the nature of my physical surroundings and material possessions as the basis of my personal creative environment and the relationship that material possessions have to creativity. The exploration will take place through two avenues: The first avenue consists of completing the process of the KonMari method outlined in the 2014 bestselling book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* by Marie Kondo. This process includes using the KonMari system to tidy: which means fully optimize, organize and declutter my furnished, one-bedroom apartment and included storage unit. The second avenue is a thorough reflection on the relationship between my creativity and my material environment; how my relationship with my things directly affects my creative productivity and thinking.

The project will consist of images and written reflections based on experiencing the process of decluttering and organizing the KonMari way, as well as reflecting on the creative experience with material possessions, organization and their relationship to personal creativity. The KonMari method of tidying has several key factors that will be a part of the process.

The largest focus of the book is about discarding items. Rather than touting techniques to neatly organize hundreds or thousands of possessions; it's about getting rid of all of the accumulated "stuff" that we often overlook. For many of us, particularly in America, we accumulate possessions steadily without even realizing; This accumulation can hinder our personal creativity without us being aware. Under Marie Kondo's system, the more items you

can discard, the easier it is to routinely live in a completely tidy space. My goal will be to eliminate and/or optimize as many material possessions from my life as possible or necessary in the time frame allowed.

The basic components of the KonMari process divide into two parts: discarding and organizing. Her method requires the discarding of items to occur first. This aspect of the process will be a large part of my reflections. I will also seek to support my reflections with interesting data from research on the creative environment in relation to material possessions.

Marie Kondo utilizes creative thinking techniques without specifically referring to them as “Creativity.” She states that in order to truly create one’s optimal environment, a changed mindset is of utmost importance. Some examples of her thinking guidelines include using visualizations, applying divergent and convergent thinking, highlighting the essence among one’s material items and looking at things in a new way. My outcomes will include identifying these techniques in greater detail and reflecting on their use in my life and process.

The process flows in a certain order. Kondo begins with clothes, followed by books, papers, miscellaneous materials, and lastly, mementos and keepsakes. Some of those categories break down into more specific subcategories. The order that Kondo follows allows clients to organize items with less attachment first so that there is momentum going to into more potentially emotional decisions. My goal will be to evaluate and reflect on new levels of emotional and/or creative freedom that arise out of the experience and completion of this area of the process.

According to Kondo, the main requirement for choosing to keep an item should be whether or not the item “sparks joy.” If it “sparks joy” then it this means it fulfills a purpose,

either emotionally or through utility that creates the ability to have joy; This is the motivation to keep an item. If it does not spark joy, and especially if it prompts a negative reaction, then the item does not have use or fulfill a healthy purpose and it should be passed onto the giveaway bin. I interpret “joy” to include the sparking of creativity as well. Whether or not an item sparks or evokes creativity is another standard by which I will be basing my decisions. The main intended outcome from this part of the process will be to have an environment that is as optimized to my personal creativity as possible.

Other mediums that will help express findings, conclusions and concepts with which I will be dealing are a possibility and are welcome as inspiration unfolds. The process of following a predetermined method will be of significant importance as it allows me to be poised to reflect on my own relationship to my material belongings within my lifestyle.

I will be using scholarly sources to reinforce my reflections and findings within the process. If it is relevant, I will explore prior experience previously captured in the form of personal notes, journals, idea systems, notebooks, doodles, illustrations, cartoons, sketchbooks, digital capture systems and more.

### Rationale for Selection

Within the framework of the the FourSight Assessment Tool, developed by Dr. Gerard Puccio, I am considered low-implementor, high clarifier/ideator/developer (Puccio, 2003). This means that my biggest preferences within the creative process tend to be thinking-oriented rather than doing-oriented. This can be seen clearly in regard to my creative output. I have several notebooks and idea systems that are full, only to find that there is not a lot of corresponding

creative product to accompany it. Part of the reason for this lack of output has been not only my low implementation preference, but also a consistent struggle to maintain a positive creative environment for myself in which to produce. Whether this is due to personality traits, difficulty prioritizing my physical space, life circumstances, a lack of organization or any other reason: it has been a dream of mine for many years to eliminate any and every physical distraction from my possession that I do not absolutely need or that does not add to my personal creativity and joy. In this case, the optimization of my personal environment acts as my finished product which hopefully will allow me opportunities to further practice creative outcomes.

Among my deep interests are personal development, change and creative thinking, which have this common thread: they require our human ability to learn. And we learn by being self-aware of our current state of thinking, acknowledging it, and then proceeding to alter and go beyond it in some way. After having read Marie Kondo's book last fall, I was struck by how closely her methods correlated to these areas of my philosophy of creativity. It seemed that many of the universal traits of creativity inhabited her methods and thus I found her ways very relatable and desirable. In a wide-picture sense, the ultimate goal is to use this practice to provide momentum for future creative products in order to ignite creativity around the world.

## SECTION TWO: PERTINENT LITERATURE

### Bibliography

In the Fall of 2017, I took Dr. Cyndi Burnett's Current Issues in Creativity course. When our class was tasked with reviewing a current book about creativity, I chose to read *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo. Taking another, more in-depth into the book, it is clear that Marie Kondo's work embodies a strong sense of individual creativity, thus making her method a powerful tool for people to use in their own lives. Kondo gives prime examples of how her method of changing one's environment for the better has set thousands of clients free from their creativity-killing surroundings. A few gems that she noted include:

After your course, I quit my job and launched my own business doing something I had dreamed of doing ever since I was a child.

I'm delighted to report that since cleaning up my apartment, I've been able to really increase my sales.

And, perhaps most striking:

Your course taught me to see what I really need and what I don't. So I got a divorce. Now I feel much happier. (Kondo, 2014, p. 3)

People often think that neatness and creativity orbit two entirely different solar systems. If you're creative, you must be generally messy and disorganized.

But we know better than to rely on stereotypes about creative people. We can even look to the very nature from which we have evolved in order to see a wealth of creativity, coexisting

with deeply organized, organic symmetry. This doesn't necessarily mean that being untidy and being creative are supposed to be mutually exclusive. But I think it does point out that when we allow ourselves an environment that is primed for growth, we are free to synthesize and make connections that we were not able to make before. The intense or sudden change from an unsupportive environment to a constructive one can even lead to dramatically increased production of creative products.

Kondo then examines what holds people back from discarding their excess trinkets, books, clothes and papers. As she gives example after example of clients who have had to confront the reasons they haven't been able to let go, she reveals the underlying root of almost 100% of the problem: Some form of fear (Kondo, 2014, p. 182):

The question of what you want to own is actually the question of how you want to live your life. Attachment to the past and fears concerning the future not only govern the way you select the things you own but also represent the criteria by which you make choices in every aspect of your life, including your relationships with people and your job.

I compare this to the selection of ideas that occurs in the creative problem-solving process. By allowing oneself to diverge completely judgement-free (ideating without fear), we produce the space in which we can define our priorities and make affirmative decisions based on those priorities. Just as one can do with ideas, one can do with their material possessions.

This is the true beauty of Creativity, being mirrored by a Japanese organization consultant: the moment you reorder your mind to allow creativity, your other perspectives begin to transform and evolve as well. Kondo encourages us to set not only ourselves free, but also our possessions and our environment. Her KonMari method opens the door to doing more with less, and in turn creates more joy by teaching us to only keep things around us that inspire our purpose and values. She teaches people that they truly can overcome fear and judgement, make affirmative decisions, and change self-perception.

The following references are additional, inspiring literature used to expand my understanding of the creative environment, creative thinking and what it means to create change.

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## SECTION THREE: PROCESS PLAN

### Plan to Achieve Goals

This quote from Marie Kondo's website speaks to the methods by which these goals will be achieved (Kondo, 2018):

The KonMari Method™ encourages keeping only those things that speak to the heart... Discard items that have outlived their purpose; thank them for their service – then let them go.

People around the world have been drawn to this philosophy not only due to its effectiveness, but also because it places great importance on being mindful, introspective and forward-looking.

Step one is a difficult step for many people who potentially have resistance to the idea that tidying is right for them. That step is: Commitment. Fortunately I have wholeheartedly embraced that step in full.

The next phase is to reflect on the ideal lifestyle that I'd like to achieve. That includes not only the physical design or layout of the space that I occupy, but also the kinds of habits that I want to create or change. This can include basics, like a simple desire to not let my mail pile up or it can be deep and detailed with goals of implementing real life philosophies.

After visualizing my desired lifestyle, I will move into the discarding phase. I already know that approximately 70% or more of the things I own will be leaving my possession in some way. Throughout the discarding process, categorizing items will take place so that when all that

is left is the things I am keeping, I can tidy those things. Kondo makes special note to emphasize tidying items by category rather than location so that it may prevent snags in the process such as duplicate items and becoming distracted.

The final tidying phase will consist of following the prescribed order that Kondo suggests. As referenced earlier, Kondo makes recommendations based on her vast experience with clients, and thus describes going in the following order: Clothing/linens, books, papers, miscellaneous materials and then finally, keepsakes/personal mementos. The tidying phase will consist of utilizing Kondo's advice of handling every single item before making a decision and to ask, "Does this spark joy?"

## Project Timeline

Date	Task	Amount of Time to Complete
10/21-10/28	Gathering data on creativity and the environment. Reflection on lifestyle and design of my space. Complete written account of these desired design and lifestyle outcomes.	10
10/25+	Full scale KonMari decluttering process begins first with non-emotional items, clothing and then papers. Taking photos for documentation. Document specific problem areas that hinder joy or creativity (i.e. top of dresser, hall closet, etc.)	15
End of Oct, beginning of November	Have system well under way for KonMari process (i.e. separate bins for giveaway items, important papers, recycling, etc.). First organizational areas starting to be completed in full.	25
November 1-15	Reflections throughout the decluttering process. Begin to take after pictures. Continue to reflect on research involving creative environments. Write ups involving creative thinking techniques used by Marie Kondo.	30
November 15-30	Final touches on optimized space, additional reflection and finishing any photo/process documentation	15
End of November, December 1	Project write-up, finishing edits, getting feedback	10
December 1-8	Final edits, polishing, being a perfectionist	10
Total		115

## Evaluation Plan

I will be able to evaluate these outcomes firstly with photo documentation, secondly with reflection as I encounter the process, and thirdly, the reflection upon the “before” and “after.” As I will be reflecting prior to the process and setting goals and outcomes, I will certainly be able to note a contrast once those outcomes are accomplished.

I think it’s fair to say that I would also like to be evaluated on the quality of my writing and the articulation that I’m able to create. If I’m not demonstrating relatable and/or thought-provoking ideas that inspire the connection to a more creative environment, then I have not fully expressed what decluttering and optimizing my environment has actually accomplished to change my life. I expect there to be such great relief and growth through this process that as I continue into it, I cannot imagine not being able to chronicle the results and effects of this change.

## SECTION FOUR: OUTCOMES

There are a number of outcomes to note as a result of completing this project. The physical results of the project are twofold and essentially a dual manifestation of the same product: The first being the optimized space in my home: my personal creative environment. The second physical product is the work-in-progress that is maintaining my home. I do not consider this process to be completely finished, but significantly begun as a transformative journey to a clutter-free, creativity-focused environment.

Within the physical outcomes I have achieved:

- A clutter-free bedroom geared toward rest and relaxation, rather than storage, work and miscellaneous junk
- A clean, organized dresser that allows for a functional clothing and laundry system
- Two clutter-free hall closets: one used minimally for long term storage and the other used for organizing linens and toiletries
- A functional kitchen where everything has a place and a purpose
- A much less cluttered desk that, via the KonMari process, I have decided to sell and replace with a more functional desk
- Clearly delineated spaces for work, productivity, relaxation and rest
- A twist in my living circumstances that I will address after presenting Before and After photos of the initial KonMari success

Although the KonMari Method prescribes a specific order to decluttering as I had described in Section Three, I found myself hindered by trying to stick to the order. I understand

why Marie Kondo recommends beginning with practical, tangible things like clothing. In her experience as a consultant, following her order ensures that the clients' emotional/sentimental items do not overwhelm the client and hinder the process. Starting with neutral, less sentimental items allows the client to get the hang of the process, setting them up for success as they practice discarding safe, less emotionally taxing items.

This is a cogent strategy, however I found that personally, I had a natural decisiveness about my items that proved to be efficient. I'm sure that I've spent enough time dreaming and scheming about optimizing my space over the years that I was truly ready to encounter everything. There were a few boxes I sorted through that left me a tad more sentimental than others, but my main focus was to pare things down as progressively and quickly as possible. In my enthusiasm, I brought out every box, bin and bag throughout my apartment and dove straight into tackling everything all at once.

It looked like a bomb went off in my apartment.

Although everywhere I turned it was a disaster, I did have a bit of help from friends here and there and I kept motivated with an awesome playlist and snacks. I just kept thinking about the light at the end of the tunnel: I was about to have a truly tidied, organized, optimized space!

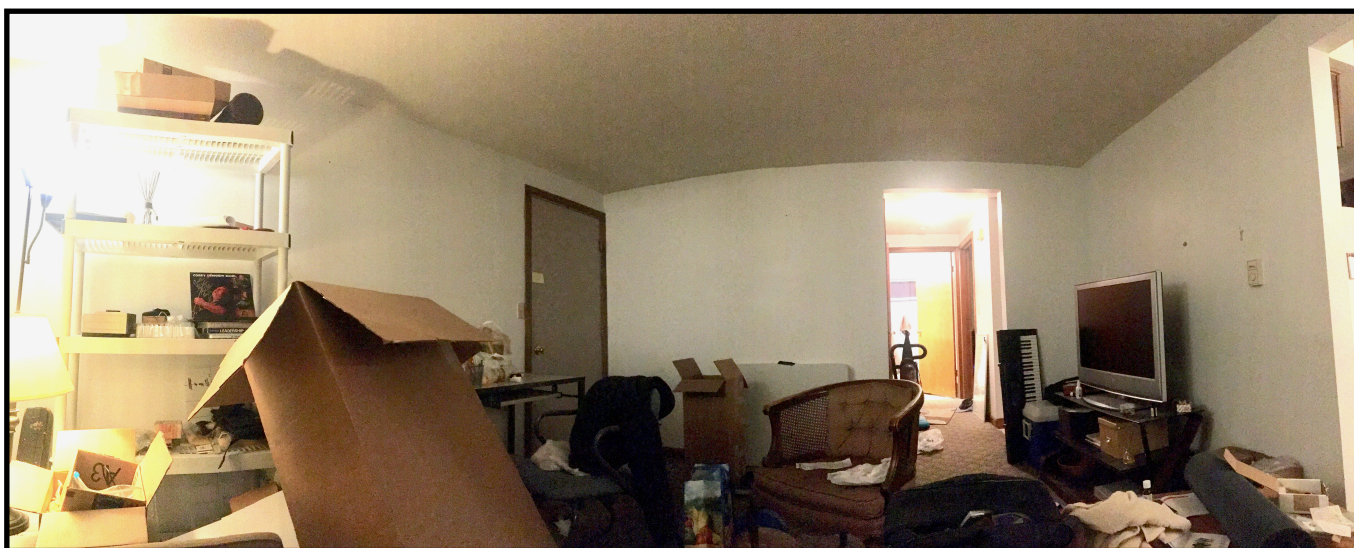
The following photos are visual outcomes within and as a result of the process of this project. The initial photos are taken at the beginning of the decluttering phase when everything was a disaster. Believe it or not, there are organized piles in that mess! The categories are "give away," "keep," and "sort later in the process." This allowed me to separate out anything that I confidently knew had a place in my home.

Here are the “Before” photos in my living room and bedroom. Much of the furniture, such as the bed frame, headboard, couch and TV, are items that came with my apartment. No KonMari-ing those! The dresser, living room shelf, black nightstand and desk are mine.



Left: View from my front door looking into the chaos. Right: Bedroom from the doorway.

Below: Panorama of the living room and hallway. Look at this mess. If I can do it, anyone can.



Eventually, I made enough progress that I was able to take some true “before” and “after” pictures. Here is the “Before” of my hall closet:





And here is the “After.” I was able to store all of the linens that came with the apartment on top. I was able to completely get rid of the box underneath the shelves, two other entire boxes, and I was able to streamline my medicine area, laundry supplies and toiletries. Shoe boxes came in handy for creating compartments. The whole closet became completely functional at this point.

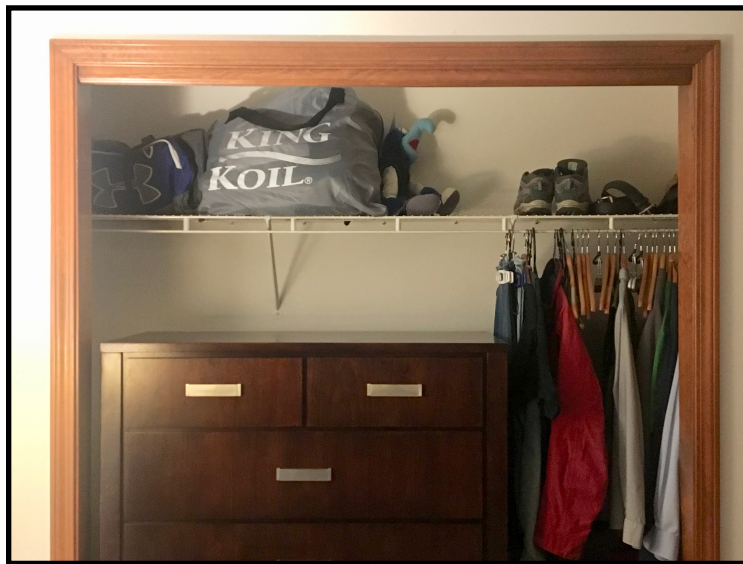


After this hall closet, a few more progress pictures.

The picture below is one of my proudest accomplishments in this process. There are seven containers in this picture: five bins, a box and a bag. They are *all* empty! I was able to discard or categorize every item in these with ease. It was so encouraging and energizing to accomplish a “done” pile. Even discarding a little baggie of unnecessary/miscellaneous items felt satisfying after the momentum kicked in.



Below are some results pictures of my bedroom closet, dresser organization and bedroom. Notice the KonMari-style rolled clothes! The bottom picture of my bedroom includes one last bin and a few items on my night stand that I further organized after I took the photo.



Here are a few more pictures of the progress as it unfolded in my living room space. The boxes by the door in the bottom picture are all discard/give away items from the top photo.



I don't have a "Before" of my bathroom because there isn't really a noticeable difference. I just made sure that my daily use items were more organized in the bin on the shelf.



My kitchen table originally came furnished with a cheesy tablecloth and decorative centerpiece. I put them in the storage unit and organized my cupboards with only the utensils and Tupperware I use on a daily/weekly basis.

Finally, here are the final photos of the living room space after everything was discarded, organized and placed. Yes, that is an original Nintendo Entertainment System under the TV.



In addition to the physical changes to my space, there are many intangible outcomes that have resulted from this process. The first step in the KonMari process is a reflection on the desire, design and visualization of the ideal lifestyle one would like to achieve with the help of the KonMari Method. This consideration of desire and design has prompted much deeper contemplation on the design, function and flow of my ideal future living space. As a result of this project, I have developed a substantial set of filters for the way in which most items must contribute to my creative environment. Some of the intangibles, such as these filters, are ideas that find their origins in creativity concepts to be addressed in detail in Section Five.

At the end of all of this decluttering, there was a twist of fate that landed me in an even more prime position to test the motivation behind my path to thingless optimization. I got word that my rent would be increasing, along with some other new fees to be instituted at my apartment building. With my student loan payments starting to kick into full swing, I knew that I had a choice to make. After considering my options, I decided that I not only wanted to optimize and reduce my possessions, I wanted to minimize my rent and monthly bills, even if it meant shrinking my space... by a lot. This led to a decision to leave my apartment and move into what is essentially a bedroom. So, while the photo evidence of my KonMari ventures are accurate for the days in my apartment, the process continues as I get settled into my new, minimal home that I've occupied for less than four weeks. I am currently still living the KonMari life out of my laundry basket. However, I look forward to devoting more time to my optimization adventures once I am finished detailing my learnings in this master's project. Oh, irony!

## SECTION FIVE: KEY LEARNINGS

The key takeaways throughout the process seem to arrange themselves into a few different categories. The first of those categories revolves around factors that go into decision-making regarding discarding or keeping personal possessions. Another set of observations centers around the personal nature of preferences for deliberate environmental configurations that spark creativity. Lastly, my research was able to shed some light on connections between decision-making, environmental preference and the way these things can cooperate to optimize a day to day state of personal creativity.

One of the most joyful learns in the process of letting go was about a concept that Marie Kondo teaches all of her clients: Discard items with a spirit of gratitude. In the book, she encourages her audience to mindfully touch an object before making a decision about it. She explicitly states that it is important to physically handle each possession rather than making disconnected, blanket decisions about entire groups of items. Only then, she states, after you've handled the object, can you truly part with it by thanking the object for its service to your life, then moving it to the discard pile. Kondo prescribes this with deep purpose: to create attentive mental space for each items' capacity, or lack thereof, to spark joy.

Believe it or not, the physical handling of each item worked its magic. It forced a connection, no matter how small, which created a brief moment to pause and reflect on the stimulus of the object. I must say that I was pleasantly surprised by my own unexpected reactions to some of my possessions upon handling them. One of my biggest takeaways from this part of the process was that I found *permission*. Permission to discard, sell, give things away,



etc., *even* if the object in question only brought joy *for one instance, but now no longer does*.

Marie Kondo presents this concept in a number of case studies in the book. Often times a lack of feeling permission is the root of some “fear-based” reasons that some of her clients give when they have a hard time letting go. It’s counterintuitive! We think, “Surely, we *must* feel as though *that* object should stay in our home; we just bought it less than a month ago!” But the rule stands: Joy, or no joy? Does it lend to personal creativity, or not? In the end, fear of regret or guilt over a seemingly “unjustified toss” only holds us back and hinders our creativity. Just because we have had the object for a short amount of time or “Great grandma Ethel made that quilt!” does not mean the object is adding value to our lives. After internalizing this, it felt so refreshing to experience the freedom that I now had to add to the give away pile!

#### The Life Changing Magic of Decisions

During the process, there were a few times that decision-making did not fit the simple, black and white “get rid of it” formula that became my tendency. One such story revolves around the aforementioned Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) that took residence underneath my TV.

As an unabashed product of the nostalgic 80’s and 90’s, I have a borderline-irrational soft spot for old games and technology from the era of my childhood. The NES was a big part of my formative years as it was for many who are now in their 30’s and 40’s. As such, my beloved game system turned into a bit of a challenge: One one hand, if I’m being honest, I rarely use it. Maybe a couple of times a year I get the urge to plug it in and do the ol’ “blow on the cartridge and smash the reset button until it starts,” followed by a reminiscent trip down Super Mario, Tetris and Duck Hunt Lane. On the other hand... oh the joy! There’s nothing quite like the

feeling of the original Nintendo controller in the hand, or timing a speed run on a Super Mario game that I've played tens of thousands of times in my life.

The pressure of this situation truly tested my freshly empowered philosophy: Would I choose utility and practicality and an uncluttered space? Would I choose to keep this silly grey space-taker for an annual visit to memory lane? In the end, the chaos of my space forced me to hit pause on the entire discarding process in order to reach my decision. How so? Well... it's a really fluffy way of saying...

I couldn't find the power adapter for it.

Truly, how anticlimactic.

However, the pause did actually give me space to reflect and reach a decision: I decided to sell it. It looked great in the "After" photos, but the more I thought about it, the more I leaned into my commitment to Ultimate Environmental Optimization. Thoughts entered my mind like, "What happens when I move again? I hate moving. Do I really want to pack this into a box again? How much joy is this thing really sparking? Am I just looking for excuses to hold onto this? Is this one of those things where I *think* I want to use it *someday*? Is it one of those, '*When I get around to it*' situations? What other ways might I obtain the joy that this object brings without having to keep, store and maintain the physical object?"

It became clear to me that "When I get around to it," at least for me at this point in my life, is not an acceptable reason for me to keep something. I need to know here and now that I have definable, veritable reasons to say "Yes" to any physical possession, rather than a theoretical, latent reason pointing toward a potential future. I'm all for promoting infinite possibilities through divergent thinking. I also fully support the idea that objects in our space

unintentionally force connections, leading to creative output (LEGO pieces, anyone?). However, I know that for now I need a clean slate for objects in my space before I start to allow “potential connections” to come back into my environment for permanent residence.

It was a proud and satisfying moment to learn that I had the resolution to take a problem-solving approach to my attachments. The decision to part even with things I love revealed that I had untapped strength for championing creativity in my own life. Ultimately, that decision is still bringing me joy to this moment.

### Form, Function and Purpose

Due to the internal, deliberate and mindful nature of the KonMari process, I had time to reflect along the way about what I desire out of the systems that function within my space. As I have grown in my understanding of what contributes to or distracts from my creative environment, I have also become increasingly aware of my personal preferences for design and how it sparks my creative thinking.

It is one of my dreams in life to design a home from the ground up, whether that means remodeling an existing home or building a new home. I can say with confidence that this process has helped shape the way that I will make decisions about layout, dimensions of halls/rooms/closets and materials based on function and sustainability. I can even speak to stylistic choices in design, colors, object placement, combining different period elements and furniture, convenience features for optimizing organizational systems, even down to the type of appliances I might consider.

These things may seem superficial to some, but self-awareness lies at the heart of any good process that seeks to reconcile a dysfunctional relationship with the environment. This self-

aware and personal creative environment is just that: Personal. It should be a reflection of the self, not *only* in stylistic or aesthetic terms, but also a reflection of the best, most functional self. This mindful awareness takes into account oneself across time: The self of the now and the self of the future. Whether the personal creative environment is reflected in an entire home, one room, one closet or one table doesn't matter. What matters is the internal transformation that takes place prior to and throughout manifesting the true creative environment.

### Space Oddity: You Can Be Your Room

There is a connection between thoughtful, purposeful decisions regarding the longevity and sustainability of items and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow*, which he considers to be a state of complete concentration with the activity at hand (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Deciding on even simple home environmental factors, such as a wall color, materials for a countertop, a faucet, or even towels for the bathroom, can prime an environment to reduce or eliminate distractions. These decisions can cause a ripple effect that spreads even long past the initial decision and into the future. Let's take the idea of choosing bath towels as an example: a member of the KonMari Facebook Support Group was looking for advice on long-lasting bath towels when someone responded by touting the benefits of linen as a material. According to M. Martinez (personal communication, December 14, 2018):

If you can afford them, linen are wonderful. I took a textiles class and learned about their benefits—very long-lasting, absorbent (no need to rub), they dry quickly and don't produce lint (which makes dust) that gets your bathroom dirty.

What a simple, thoughtful, yet broad-reaching solution. The time, attention and energy I personally spend from the moment I think, “Wow, my bathroom sure is dusty! I should clean it,” through the process of remembering and planning to clean it, to the actual doing of the cleaning is potentially now simplified by one single choice: Choosing towels that create less lint and dust. In addition, the attention given to the process of choosing new towels every couple years is likely removed by the longevity of the linen.

This is only one example, but prompts the question: How much more time and energy can be devoted to a pursuit of creativity and the activities of the *flow state* by being mindful of simple decisions such as this? In essence, these decisions compounded over time contribute to a flow-centered environment. I would go as far as to say that it is possible, through optimization, to create an environment that could be considered an extension of one’s body. Csikszentmihalyi outlines perfectly why this is a plausible way of thinking about one’s environment during a TED talk from 2004 entitled, “Flow, the secret to happiness.”

Regarding a famous composer who once said composing is so intense, it makes him feel like he “doesn’t exist,” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2004) says this:

Actually, our nervous system is incapable of processing more than about 110 bits of information per second... Well, when you are really involved in this completely engaging process of creating something new, as this man is, he doesn't have enough attention left over to monitor how his body feels... His body disappears, his identity disappears from his consciousness, because he doesn't have enough attention, like

none of us do, to really do well something that requires a lot of concentration, and at the same time to feel that he exists. So existence is temporarily suspended.

Perhaps, through processes like the KonMari method, we can create optimal environments for creativity by decreasing the amount of information that our surroundings cast onto our nervous system for processing. If, in theory, we make enough mindful decisions where unnecessary and distracting bits of information are noted, examined and then eliminated (as in the case of the towels) then in essence, pieces of the environment “disappear,” or remove themselves from the requirement of one’s attention, further promoting a state of flow.

#### Using The Process to Develop Personal Creativity

With the rise of e-commerce, Amazon, same-day shipping, direct-to-consumer online companies and the Internet of Things, it may be more important than ever before to raise awareness of our relationship with our possessions. It is now easier than ever to instantly have more, and faster. By releasing unhealthy attachments to the “things” we own that end up owning us, we can instead create connections and experiences, enabling us to live more creative lives in attachment-free spaces.

By the same token, even though getting things is so much easier, *getting rid* of your possessions is also easier than ever with the possibilities of social media. Between Facebook Marketplace, Instagram, Craigslist and apps like LetGo, OfferUp and eBay, there are thousands upon thousands of ways to discard your items and make a bit of cash while doing it. There are even consignment apps that are just for gently used clothing. As I mentioned previously, I chose to discard my desk, which I was able to successfully do via Facebook Marketplace. That turned

out to be a rewarding experience that snowballed into a positive way to part with other possessions of mine, and even some people in my family are now letting go with LetGo. Since getting into these apps and resources, I uncovered about myself that I have an enthusiastic interest in the arbitrage of material possessions across multiple platforms. In other words, I discovered how fun it is to “flip” stuff. I didn’t intend on a creative entrepreneurial side hustle to come out of this project, but it’s a very pleasant surprise that it has. So in essence, not only do I have fun getting rid of my own stuff, I like to get rid of other people’s stuff too!

## SECTION SIX: CONCLUSION

Going through this process has finally allowed me the experience of living very practically with very few possessions, and as such, it has required some clarification of my beliefs and intentions surrounding simpler living. Here is what I now know for sure: My personal creativity does not require sweeping, stringent thingless living, nor does my philosophy on living with less. Preferring few possessions at this time does not mean that I will physically have zero things, or that I will refuse to buy or acquire “things” evermore. I do not believe that “things” are inherently bad and I am definitely not anti “things.” I only know that for me right now, in order to have as little friction between me and my creativity as possible, I need to *need* as few “things” in my life as possible.

If someone wants to live a completely off-grid life devoid of possessions to their wholeness, contentment and personal truth, I would champion that undertaking for that person without question. I will admit, the rise of “Van Life” (living one hundred percent in a van) of the past few years has sounded very compelling to me! Truth be told, I just may take on “Van Life” as a challenging adventure at some later date. But the important thing to remember is that thinglessness, minimalism, simplicity; whatever word best conveys the idea of intentional, creative, joy-centered living, does not assert itself as a dogma. It *can* be adopted as a part of various philosophic traditions of the world, which is certainly one of many ways that people can cultivate a more creative and joy-centered life. But it is accessible to anyone who desires more simplicity in their environment on any level.

In my research, I discovered a poignant quote by minimalist architect John Pawson:



“To be thingless is to possess the world.”

The quote was taken from Pawson’s type-written notes on display at the Design Museum of London (Pawson, 2010). It captures the same spirit of openness and barrier-free living that I intended to bring to this project. I would maintain that creativity is one of the keys to “possessing the world,” in the sense that interfacing with the world by making connections, seeking novelty and finding perspective through new experiences are essential values of creativity. I would also go as far as to say that “possessing” the world is only half of the equation, as it could be interpreted to imply a consumptive relationship to the world. Though I’m sure the spirit which is intended inside the quote is akin to “having the world at your fingertips,” I believe it to be even more precise to include our participation in building the world as a way of “possessing” it. Ergo, if we do not have a mindful relationship with our possessions, it is possible to become overrun by the Maintenance of Things and lose out on the opportunity to build the world.

What’s next for the budding minimalist? More creativity. My dream was to get rid of all the material distractions that I possibly could, and that is certainly a dream come true. But what was the point of that dream if the end result is just me sitting in an almost-empty room? My real dream is this: Do.

I mentioned my FourSight profile back in section one. I score high on preferences for clarifier, ideator, and developer. My implementor scores reside in the basement. It may be a

“preference” on paper in terms of my natural tendencies toward the creative process, but it is certainly not my conscious preference for how I live my life.

My official FourSight profile label is “Hare” (Puccio, 2003). According to FourSight, Hares “appear to lead the pack in the race for innovation,” however, “the only element missing from their process is the actual doing,” (Puccio, 2003). True to my profile, I have, whether due to overthinking, debilitating perfectionism, or whatever other reasons, struggled throughout my life at the brink of action.

That track record is about to radically change.

One thing I have learned in all this is the value of time. Time is a finite resource, and it’s the same finite resource we all have in common. After eliminating the distractions in my surroundings, I’m beyond pumped to get my hands dirty and waste no more time. I’m an entrepreneur at heart. I have notebooks filled with ideas and hundreds of browser tabs saved with market research. I certainly don’t intend to spend my life having thought of all sorts of great things that I *could have* done. I am primed for the doing. I am passionate about helping people learn how to live life on their own terms, myself included.

No more distractions. No more unnecessary attachments. No more maintaining unimportant “things,” whether those things are objects, entities, goals that are not my own, beliefs or systems that no longer add value, or any other conditions that do not cultivate my personal creativity and joy.

I think Marie Kondo would be proud.

*"... 'Cause let me tell you something Little Britches,*

*If you act like that bee acts,  
nuh uh*

*You're working too hard*

*And don't spend your time lookin' around  
For something you want that can't be found*

*When you find out you can live without it  
And go along not thinkin' about it*

*I'll tell you something true  
The bare necessities of life will come to you!*

*Look for the bare necessities  
The simple bare necessities  
Forget about your worries and your strife!*

*I mean the bare necessities,  
That's why a bear can rest at ease  
With just the bare necessities of life!"*

— Baloo, "The Bare Necessities"  
Disney's *The Jungle Book*, 1967

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## APPENDICES

Appendix A: Quote from John Pawson's typewritten notes

Appendix B: FourSight Profile Graphic

## Appendix A: Quote from John Pawson's typewritten notes

The Japanese have a word 'wabi' to denote 'poverty', or rather, 'Voluntary poverty' - in the Zen sense that to be 'thingless' is to possess the world. In both China and Japan, this ascetic search for 'poverty' derives from the teaching of the Buddha. A man weighted down by ~~poverty~~<sup>things</sup>, he said, ~~is~~<sup>was</sup> like a ship into which water is pouring: the only hope of reaching safety ~~is~~<sup>was</sup> to jettison the cargo.

## Appendix B: Hare FourSight Profile Graphic



**Permission to place this Project in the Digital Commons online**

I hereby grant permission to the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State college permission to place a digital copy of this master's Project (Declutter, Organize, Optimize: A Thingless Path to Creativity) as an online resource.

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05/13/2019  
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