

The Life-Changing Blessing of Tidying Up
Lent series, Transfiguration 2020
Our Relationship to Personal Freedom

A few months ago, Rebecca shared the idea of this Lent series and asked me if I would be interested in speaking and I proceeded to bombard her with overly enthusiastic responses that covered Marie Kondo, quantum physics, and the Enneagram. I do not know how after all that she still thought it was a good idea, but here we are. So, I'm going to warn you that we are going to some random places but stick with me because all of this is actually about us getting free.

*How many of you are familiar with Marie Kondo? Marie Kondo is the author of two best-selling books, *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, and *Spark Joy*. She has an organizational empire, a full international speaking schedule, and a Netflix series. Her approach to organization is deceptively simple. She divides all your belongings up into six categories, asks you to gather them all in one place, and then as you go through the pile, you decide whether each item sparks joy for you. If it does, you keep it. If not, you say thank you, and let it go.

She admits that at the beginning, some people have a hard time discerning what sparks joy. But she promises that as you continue the process, your sense of joy will be honed.

I have a few inklings about why Marie Kondo has become an international sensation, and it just so happens that they are also really helpful life lessons. They offer us the life-changing blessing of tidying up our souls. So, here are three things I believe Marie Kondo can teach us.

First, *everything matters and everything is connected. We have been culturally conditioned to believe that our stuff doesn't mean anything. *It's expendable, lifeless, and easily replaceable. But inside, all of us actually believe stuff matters. Not just believe- we KNOW stuff matters. So when Marie Kondo came around and actually invited us to make good on this deep truth we know but don't live into, something inside us screamed yes.

Most of us have enough evidence at this point that living as if our stuff is expendable has some drawbacks, not least of which is that we have also been living as if our entire world is expendable. As the climate crisis reaches a critical level, we realize we cannot possibly continue to live this way.

The other reason I think this resonates is because trying to live disconnected just doesn't work, and it makes us unhappy. It is utterly unsatisfying to try to float above our actual lives as if we are not affected by things. Because we are. We live in a world that is, by design, deeply and endlessly interconnected. We can pretend we are islands all we want, but it doesn't make it true. Ignoring our connections only makes us feel isolated. It's only when we start to pay attention and honor those connections that we feel our lives have meaning.

*Diarmund O'Murcha, the author of the book Quantum Theology, wrote, "Our current travesty, as a human species, is that we have largely lost the capacity to love and to be lovely. We have succumbed to the crude and cruel functionalism of our mechanized culture." (p199)

We have arrived at this crude and cruel functionalism because since the Industrial Age, we have been on a mission to mechanize culture. We became reductionists. *Reductionism is, just as you'd suspect, the practice of breaking things down into its smallest possible part. Scientists whittled all the way down to the atom...and then subatomic particles of proton, neutron, electron...and then quantum physicists came along and added the quark. Philosophers like Descartes whittled down reality to the one knowable thing: I think, therefore I am. Theologians decided to write about God through systematic theology, which whittles ideas about God into smaller and smaller categories. And so on and so forth.

It's a handy way of learning about something. Every electrician and plumber and mechanic has learned how to fix a car by learning how to take it apart first. But here's what happened. We got overly excited about the project of taking things apart and we stopped learning how to look for the connections.

To put this another way, in the modern industrial era, we became something like mechanics who could take a car apart but didn't bother, or know how, to put it back together. Even worse, reductionism has the unfortunate side effect of turning everything into an "it." And when you do that, when reductionism finishes its project, what we're left with is a world without value and meaning and depth and sense.

We become people who see our stuff as expendable, lifeless, and easily replaceable.

Here is where quantum physics comes to the rescue, because it has revealed that the world does not actually work this way. All of this stuff, this matter? It's made up of energy. *It IS energy, actually. There is no lifeless stuff. There are only different forms of energy.

O'Murcha says "matter and light are ultimately interchangeable. Matter is nothing but gravitationally trapped light." (p164) Think about all the songs and prayers we have about light, all the ways we understand how light transforms us. And then think about how matter is simply light condensed into a particular space. That feels...important, right? It makes more sense now that the Greek word logos is related to the Hebrew word dabhar, which means creative, divine energy. The Word of God, the Logos, is God's creative divine energy.

*The Gospel of John says, "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

There is a wholeness at work to this energy, because it is not isolated. There are not like separate energy farms that live as islands from one another. Everything is connected. They have different force fields when they gather in certain ways and those force fields- O'Murcha calls them horizons of belonging- affect the energy around them. But it's all still one big web of energy.

Scientists have spent millions of dollars trying to figure out how to separate quarks and here is what they discovered: "Quarks give up their family connections stubbornly, and then decay in a micro-

instant, as if they had no way to survive outside of relationship" (p87). So when we say theologically that everything is in relationship, that is also ACTUALLY true on the quantum level.

And, not to freak you out too much, but quantum scientists will tell you that time and space don't operate the way we think and pretty much all our categories of separation are delusional. There is a fullness and a unity to the created world that we so often ignore.

As just one small example- if you take a magnet and cut it in half, each half still has the FULL field of magnetism it had before. Some things we can separate. Others hold onto their wholeness no matter what we do.

*Jewish Kabbalah teachings say that "there is nothing--not even the tiniest thing--that is not fastened to the links of this (great chain of being). Everything is catenated in its mystery, caught in its oneness. God is one, all the worlds below and above are all mysteriously one. The entire chain is one. Down to the last link, everything is linked with everything else, so the divine essence is below as well as above, in heaven and on earth. There is nothing else."

There is nothing else. There is no outside.

*The second thing Marie Kondo teaches us is to pay attention to our connections.

Since everything is connected, since there are these force fields that do affect us, it makes sense that we should be mindful of them. Because the truth is, things aren't lifeless, but sometimes our connections to them are. This is why we thank and let go of the stuff we have that is no longer bringing us joy, or life.

When we pay attention to our connections, our experience of life actually has the capacity to broaden and transform.

I once read an article about a man named Gordon Hempton. Gordon Hempton was a bike messenger in Seattle. He liked the job because it allowed him to be outside and take in the lovely view of his city, although the pay wasn't that great. Mostly, though, what he liked

about his job was that he had all day to listen. He listened to the sounds of different cars ambling down the highway, the sound of the wind through the Ponderosa pines, the sound of the birds chirping on the telephone wires. He delivered messages from place to place day after day, but he didn't see his job as a messenger but a listener. His job was to track the sounds of nature.

He was so adamant, so focused on his listening, that on more than one occasion he found himself running into cars and knocking over curbs. He listened with intensity, for seven years on his route.

Gordon Hempton was so enamored with all the sounds he heard that he decided to make a career out of it. I had no idea "professional listener" was a career but it is because at least Gordon Hempton has made it one. He calls himself a sound tracker. For years, he saved up money, until at last he had enough to pay for a trip that took him four months and 70,000 miles around the globe, tracking the sound of birds singing at dawn, recording what he calls a "never-ending wave of birdsong that follows the Earth's rotation as if the sun never stopped rising and the birds never stopped singing." *And he says you wouldn't possibly be able to hear it unless you took all that time to travel, to listen, and to find it. It has been there all along, but most of us never hear it. He turned that trip into a documentary for PBS, which won him not only national acclaim but an Emmy.

The idea that we are living in a never-ending wave of song should feel familiar to us. Is this not what we declare to be true when we say that we join in the chorus of angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, who forever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of God's name?

Part of the wholeness that underlies everything is the harmony of God. It is a symphony, a song, a never-ending melody. And the reason we sing the liturgy and the reason every religious tradition sings and chants is because we know somehow that this attunes us to the holy, puts us into congruence with the song of God that echoes over us. If we quit our jobs in search of it, we'd find it too. We'd pile up evidence of God's good and harmonious creation like little cassette tapes in dated boxes that Marie Kondo would be delighted to see filling our drawer.

*O'Murcha writes, "Our primary call is to be listeners at the heart of our world." (p81)

When we pay attention to our connections, we can only experience the truth that everything is relational, and everything is connected, and God is everywhere present.

The reason Marie Kondo became an international sensation is because she gave us a concrete way to experience the truth of the universe, which is that it is sacred, down to our sock drawers. It MATTERS, and we matter, and when we start to pay attention, we find joy and purpose and meaning and freedom.

Kondo says her clients have experienced remarkable life changes. They change jobs, lose weight, leave lifeless relationships, go after long-ignored dreams. They get healthy. They feel happy. Their relationships feel good and solid. They feel, in a word, free.

You see, we thought having stuff would get us free. And then we thought getting rid of stuff would get us free. As it turns out, treating everything as sacred is what makes us free.

*Enneagram teacher A.H. Almaas says that all of our Enneagram type fixations happen because we lose touch with our awareness of unity. To find our way back, we have to go beyond what our mind knows and open ourselves to experience capital E Essence, the Ground of All Being, the Divine Energy that makes everything alive and real and whole. When we experience Essence, we transform. When we transform, we are set free.

Pay attention to your connections. Which ones are bringing you life? Which ones may be blocking you from experiencing the Divine Essence, the dabhar, the creative energy of God? When we pay attention to our connections, we root ourselves in the holy.

And it's not coincidence that the Hebrew word for salvation means wide open space. There is freedom in rooting ourselves to the holy. When we are released from our twist, our particular delusion, we begin to see with the eyes of holy unity. We experience God not as

an idea or a concept but as Divine Essence.

*Third, keep your focus on the joy.

Kondo tells the story of how one day she heard a voice say: we should be choosing what we want to keep, not what we want to get rid of. This became the foundation of her organizational method. Start with joy, stay with what feels good and right and true, and let THAT be your guide. This is being mindful of our connections, but it's also doing so in a way that is freeing rather than limiting.

Kondo is adamant to say that her method is definitively NOT minimalistic. Minimalism asks us to determine the least amount we can have and stick with that. It asks us to go without and live with less. How many of you have done Lent this way? How many of you approach your faith this way? Marie Kondo is asking us instead to live with what we cherish, what we really value. She invites her clients to imagine the life they want to live in this space, and then create the space that will support that life. That is not minimalism. That's integrity.

I do not believe Lent is supposed to function as a kind of negative house-cleaning, where God your nagging mother tells you you need to pick up your things and call her more often. It's about taking a good close look at our life patterns and daily rhythms and asking whether they are, in fact, the patterns we want to have. If they are working for us.

*So what if we thought of Lent as a spiritual clothing swap, where you realize there are some things you aren't really wearing in your closet, things that just aren't fitting you right, and then you swap those out for some other things that seem to fit where you are right now? The great thing about a clothing swap is that you don't have to belittle every thing you are taking out of your closet. You don't have to say, UGH, this sweater is awful why did I ever buy it??? You can just say, That sweater really isn't for me but it might look great on somebody else.

There's no judgment really in a good clothing swap. It's just about finding the right fit. Spiritual practices in our lives are like that, too. Spiritual practices are designed to help people grow spiritually, in the

same way that all clothes are designed to...clothe people. *It's just about finding your right fit. And we can do that in a way that doesn't require us to throw ourselves mercilessly under the bus. Because, spoiler alert, most of the time, this backfires on us, because as it turns out, feeling bad about ourselves is not particularly motivating. We give up because the entire process itself takes away the energy we need to change. We are constantly undermining our own transformation.

Here is one way to check your intentions: you can ask, am I trying to control myself, or am I trying to be in harmony with myself? There's a difference.

O'Murcha defines hell as being "permanently out of tune with our deepest meaning." And if we know and trust that our deepest meaning is to be in unity with God, then we will trust and follow that song. It's not minimalism. It's not reductionism. It's not shame or guilt or self-righteousness. We are seeking harmony. Gerald May describes this as the difference between willfulness and willingness. Willfulness relies on that stubbornness, that human effort that so quickly runs out of energy. Willingness requires trust, letting go, allowing things to unfold. *Freedom doesn't come from clenched fists and clinging. It comes from trust.

Discipline that is good and right and true does not make us feel overly constricted. It makes us feel free. Because the spiritual disciplines that are meant for us, that are designed to transform us, align us and attune us to the song of the universe. And that always feels like healing, like love, even when it's really hard. I have a friend who is on a crazy restrictive diet because she found out she has all these allergies. It sounds awful to me. She has days when she agrees. But most of the time, she says she is just so grateful. She has no desire to eat any of that stuff, because she feels so much better now, so much more alive and healthy and strong. I have friends who gave up drinking who say the same thing. I know you have stories in your own life and in the lives of those you love that are similarly more restrictive but also life-giving. That's healthy discipline. It's freedom, in a unique and necessary form.

*So what if we saw our personal freedom as living in tune with our deepest meaning, with the unity of God's song?

*Sister Macrina Wiederkehr says that being a disciple means seeing yourself through the eyes of the teacher who loves you. This Lent, what if you started from the joy, from the connection, from the love of that Divine Essence that permeates every single subatomic particle filling this room? What if you started with that, and stuck with that, and trusted that?

*Ephesians 3:19 says, "I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God." Filled entirely with the fullness of God. And how do we get there? We get there by knowing the love of Christ, by resting in the joy and blessing that is God's abundant, steadfast love.

This is how we get free. And not just us personally, though that's where we begin, but everybody and everything gets free by experiencing the love that is beyond knowledge, the eternal song that echoes over our heads in a chorus from one end of the globe to the other and through this dimension to the dimension of heaven. We get free when we become willing to surrender to the wisdom of the song, to the holy connections that resonate deep within our souls, to the joy that sparks energy and delight in us and allows us to keep going.

So. Everything matters and everything is connected. As people who proclaim the incarnation of heaven and earth in a person, who affirm the divine relational dance of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, this should feel like the warm blanket that envelops us and feels like home. Our stuff matters. Our habits matter. The way we talk to ourselves in our heads matters. It all counts, and it all belongs.

And, it's all worthy of our attention. So we pay attention to the connections, because they will lead us toward the holy and help us stay there and reveal to us the presence of God. We trust the song, and we trust the steadfast connecting love of God, and we let the trust that comes from willingness and not stubbornness grow within us.

And lasty, we stay focused on the joy. We start with the wholeness and we stick with the wholeness because the wholeness is the way to freedom, the way home, the way we heal from all the places and wounds of disconnection that ail us and our world.

Gentle me,
Holy One,
Into an unclenched moment,
A deep breath,
A letting go
Of heavy experiences
Of shriveling anxieties
Of dead certainties,
That, softened by the silence,
Surrounded by the light,
And open to the mystery,
I may be found by wholeness,
Upheld by the unfathomable,
Entranced by the simple,
And filled with the joy
That is you.

Amen.

-Ted Loder