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President's Corner

No Joy in Techvill?

by Greg Skalka, President, Under the Computer Hood User Group, CA

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president (at) uchug.org

Pour a liquid into a glass just up to the midpoint. An optimist would say the glass is half full. A pessimist would say the glass is half empty. An engineer would say the glass is twice as big as it needs to be.

A lot of how we perceive reality is influenced by our internal biases and past experiences. As an engineer, I’m used to looking at things in a more clinical, objective way than others might. My wife thinks I am a pessimist, seeing the worst in everything and having a negative point of view. She feels I should be more positive and optimistic. If only I had a better attitude, things would be better. I prefer to think of myself as a pragmatist, dealing with and reacting to things in a more practical manner. I prefer the objective, based on facts, rather than the subjective, dealing with feelings and opinions, to make my decisions.

My wife and I also differ on how we perceive stuff, those material things we own. I have a lot of interests, including technology, and so I have accumulated a lot of stuff. My wife is more of a minimalist and thinks I have too much stuff. Who is right? Again, I think it is a matter of perception. What may be clutter to one person may just be the result of too little storage space to another person.

My attitudes about things are probably shaped a lot by my Midwest farm heritage. My Czech farmer ancestors came to this country in the late 1800’s and made the best livings they could farming and raising livestock in Nebraska. There is a lot to admire in the farmer. While farming is a lot of hard work and you often don’t have a lot of control over your situation (the weather, resources, crop markets, pests), you usually must become very resourceful, creative and self-sufficient in order to succeed. Farmers must often also be mechanics, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, weathermen and veterinarians. My grandfather had a blacksmith shop on his farm so that he could fabricate items he needed, as there was no Home Depot on every (or any) corner. Farmers must also be conservationists, ecologists and stewards of the lands, animals and environment. I still have relatives that actively farm, and though things have obviously changed for farmers since my grandfather’s time, I think a lot the values remain.

The time I spent on the farm in my youth probably helped instill those values and attitudes in me. I’ve tried to learn all I can about mechanics, engineering, electronics, computers and technology. I’ve built my own computers and maintain, debug and repair my devices myself as much as possible. I’ve become the family IT help person, network administrator, repairman and system integrator. As a result, I’ve accumulated a lot of devices, accessories, cables, adapters, software, tools and utilities over the years, probably way more than most other people. Of course, the collection does not remain static either, for as technology advances and new devices, interfaces and services become popular, my collection of stuff must expand to support them.

Unfortunately, it is often difficult to determine when something that used to be essential (or at least useful) has become obsolete and of no use and should be disposed of. I bought extra PATA (parallel ATA) hard drives at one time when the computer industry was transitioning to SATA (serial ATA) drives, in order to be able to support some of my older computers. I’ve gotten rid of some of the drives but am still running a couple old machines that could use them, so I continue to keep a few around. I have a number of devices for slide scanning and digitizing video that I need to be using, but I never seem to find the time. To my wife, all these things I’m not currently using are obsolete and junk and should be thrown away. To me they still hold promise; I have the hope that I will eventually get to use them productively again. Now who sounds like the optimist, and who’s the pessimist?

I agree that clutter can be a problem but reducing it and organizing things requires time. Early in my career, I found it difficult to keep up with the number of engineering magazines and component reviews I was receiving at work. I’d scan the items for usefulness, but making a binary judgment (1 or 0, keep or toss) right at that moment was difficult. A few things obviously went right in the trash, a few were keepers, but the majority were in that gray area - might be useful, but maybe not right now. I’d sometimes toss things and later wish I could get them back. Rather than waste my time deciding at the moment I received them, I found it easier to put the ‘gray area’ items in a pile in my office. If I found a need, I could consult the pile for the items that were pertinent. After a year, I’d split the pile in two, and throw away the older half, assuming the information in it was now likely out of date. This worked very well for me. My wife was not happy when I tried to use this method at home, however.

Technology has helped some with physical decluttering, as most information now comes in or can be converted to an electronic form that can be saved on small memory devices or deleted easily. There is the problem of organizing all those files, however. I am now a believer in the all-digital / electronic life, in as much as it is possible. I used to have file cabinets full of financial papers and product documentation. Now I get all my important documents in pdf form online and scan any paper forms I receive. I used to save the paper manuals for things I bought and filed them away; now I download them and / or scan them. All my important documents, product info, photographs and videos are contained on a few small hard drives. They are not only easier to store but also safer, as I can easily keep copies of the data in a fire safe, safety deposit box or offsite location. If only storing our physical possessions were so easy.

There is a Japanese woman that has become a decluttering celebrity. Marie Kondo, cleaning consultant, author of the bestselling book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* and star of a related Netflix TV series, has a unique way of determining what to keep and what to discard. I’ve not read her book or seen her show, but her method, from what I’ve read about it, involves holding each item, asking yourself if it ‘sparks joy’, and discarding it if it does not. Those (apparently) few items that do bring you joy are then placed where they are visible and accessible.

I have wondered whether her declutter method could work for me and my tech collection. While putting my hands on every single individual item I own might take some time (I have a medium-sized plastic bin of action camera mounts and accessories alone), the bigger problem I see is the hang up I’ve always had - determining the worth of the items in my life. What does it mean to ‘spark joy’? How does one define joy?

The dictionary (or at least Google) defines joy as “a feeling of great pleasure and happiness." Other equivalent terms might be delight, jubilation, rejoicing, elation, bliss, ecstasy and rapture. Those terms don’t seem to describe any tech items I own. This standard also seems very subjective. Everyone’s idea of joy could be different, perhaps very different. It reminds me of one of my favorite lines from the original *Star Wars - A New Hope*; it is Han Solo’s response to Luke Skywalker, when Luke was trying to persuade him to help rescue Princess Leia. Luke tells Han that Leia is rich, and the reward he would get would be more wealth than he could imagine. Han replied, “I don’t know, I can imagine quite a bit.”

Nevertheless, I decided to try Marie Kondo’s declutter method on a small part of my home office, as I wanted to clear some space to install an Amazon Echo Dot there. The area I was clearing had only quite old things, which sparked negligible joy, so tossing them seemed easy, but I paused on two items. One was a set of Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 98 CDs, for Windows 95. I was going to toss them, but then thought about how things have changed. Once these were valuable and useful sources for information, but now with Google, Wikipedia and the Internet, they are obsolete drink coasters. Into the trash they went.

The other was a Webster’s New World College Dictionary (2005 edition), which had been a gift from my wife. It too had been supplanted by the Internet. Though it did not spark joy, I felt a twinge of sentiment over it, as it had been a well-intentioned gift, and would be useful if some calamity caused the Internet to go away. I kept it.

The more I think about it, the more I feel that perhaps none of my tech items could truly spark joy. Do I feel delight when using my laptop? No. Am I rejoicing when holding my Chromebook? I like my Chromebook and it is very useful, but I am sometimes dismayed when I can’t do something simple on it effortlessly, as I can on my Windows PC. Do I feel elation when holding my digital camera? I like it pretty well, but I somehow accidentally got it into a funny mode, and only recently, after much grief, figured out how to give it a factory reset and return it to normal settings.

Am I in a state of bliss when holding my smart phone? It is a very useful device, and I do seem to use it more and more, but I don’t long for it or anything like that. I do see a lot of people who can’t seem to put their smart phones down, when in a restaurant, while walking, or while driving. Is that bliss I see in their eyes? It looks to me more like a vacant hollow zombie-like stare. No joy.

I don’t think this Marie Kondo declutter approach works that well for technology, or for most items (or perhaps for any items). There is unfortunately a lot more to life than joy and rapture. A lot of things in our lives are necessary not for the joy they bring but for the benefits they provide, the needs they fill and improvements they make in our quality of life. Is that joy? Not really. I don’t feel joy when I hold my toothbrush, but I’m not going to get rid of it, as a little clutter in the bathroom is better than a mouthful of rotten teeth eventually.

And it might be asking a lot to expect Microsoft and Apple and Google and Samsung to be responsible for providing us with joy. That’s what family and friends are for. The tech devices these companies do provide can help us keep in touch with them. We just shouldn’t let the devices get in the way.

