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Curating or uncluttering, KonMari or feng shui

Simplifying your home promotes well-being

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This commissioned bookcase by Techline Twin Cities was designed to accommodate an ancient Chinese chest and organize art and book collections.

Do you remember the junk drawer? It was typically located in a kitchen — pre-Ikea, Container Store... or Marie Kondo.

This drawer was packed to the hilt with items that didn't seem to belong anywhere else: brimming with dried up ink pens, worn down pencils, balls fashioned from rubber bands, balls of lovingly looped string, odd corkscrews or even a now-collectible plastic Mr. Peanut spoon. The drawer was a loving jumble.

Ah, but that was before the advent of contemporary commercial consumerism: the rise of the credit card that contributed to compulsive buying; the growth of the internet that fostered one-click impulse shopping and same-day delivery. Modern economic tools courted the consumer with convenience, shaping a society awash in possessions.

In those simpler times, many needed only one shoebox-sized drawer to chuck “clutter.” Not so now. Many consumers are drowning in belongings — not merely drawers, but closets, rooms, garages and homes swamped.

Enter the litter liberator, Marie Kondo, a gracious icon of good taste. Everyone seems to be in a frenzy of conquering their clutter, watching her series “Tidying Up with Marie Kondo,” inspired by her best selling book “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up.”

Now you can “KonMari” your life, amending your wicked ways. You may dutifully visit the organizer section of Target to nestle your whisk properly next to your latte frother in a color-coded, divider-replete Valhalla of storage! You can obediently toss those trinkets that don't spark joy!

Though Kondo's approach seems as if it has sprung sui generis from this fresh-faced, soft-spoken naïf, the truth is that both accumulating and easing excess dates back to the dawn of civilization.



Collage by Susan Schaefer.

A history of clutter

The Western history of word clutter traces back to the 1400s and is related to the word “clot,” loosely meaning “collected in heaps, crowded together in disorder, to litter or to crowd a place by a disorderly mass of things.” Yuk.

Improbably, the word signifying the correction of this condition, the verb “decluttering” (which spell check doesn’t even acknowledge as a word) didn’t exist until 1950, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary. Nearly 70 years later, experts about how, why and when to clear your untidiness abound, complete with articles in “juried” scientific publications proving that if you have mess you may need a shrink (or simply the KonMari Method) to unshackle yourself from the despondency it creates.

Well hold on to your hats (or toss the ones you don’t wear)! Predating medieval cluttered hovels, or 1950s Modern Architecture streamlined homes, was the Chinese practice of feng shui, an ancient art that is possibly the first system developed to create joy and promote well-being by tending to your surroundings.

Dating back approximately 3,500 years, feng shui developed as early societies moved from hunting and gathering to farming and domesticating animals. In other words, no longer nomads, these folks settled down, built permanent homes, cities and societies and began accumulating stuff.



This north-facing dining nook incorporates a feng shui metal element with red and black good luck colors to harmonize with the owner's "Metal Tiger" Chinese birth sign.

Qi, yin and yang

The word feng shui itself translates as "wind-water," signifying its earliest practice as a means to site a safe place for dwellings with a main purpose to create abodes where families could flourish. Sound familiar? As time progressed, the movement morphed into a tradition to help locate important

buildings, palaces and monuments, focusing on elements in both natural and man-made environments.

Feng shui consists of three different concepts: qi (pronounced chee), yin and yang, and the five elements.

Qi refers to “a complex natural force generated by a combination of both real and abstract sources including sunlight, cosmic influences, color vibrations, the movement and quality of the air around us, the flow of water, the nature of our thoughts and emotions, the form of objects, and more.” Most critically, and completely in line with Kondo’s concepts, qi influences how a place feels, how you feel in it and if you can circulate in the space harmoniously.

The term yin and yang, more familiar to Western ears, means to create a balance, such as between light and shade or movement and stillness. Too much of one or the other causes disruption and therefore lack of harmony or joy.

The five elements are a bit more complex, but to simplify greatly, the presence of each in your home and surroundings, placed according to ancient precepts, will also greatly contribute to serenity, energy, productiveness and overall health and well-being.

Feng shui has been applied to businesses, gardens, public spaces and homes. Practitioners work with concepts and objects such as natural light, views, colors, plants, images, water, fire, wood, steel, stone and more.

Homeowners who employ feng shui, like those turning to KonMari, create spaces devoid of untidiness. However, objects are curated according to ancient natural principals. Unlike merely decluttering, there is an aura of magic and the mystical in this practice.



The Ikea Kallax shelf system.

Six principles

I have worked with the principles of feng shui since the late '70s, when I lived abroad for two years: one traveling India and one teaching in Bogotá, Colombia. During my foreign travels I'd picked up more than a few interesting artifacts and transitioned from an apartment-dwelling student to a home-owning professional.

I enjoyed the simplicity of my student days, so when I took possession of a modest two-story, three-bedroom, side-by-side brick duplex, I sought a way to display my growing collection of art objects, textiles, books and housewares with the same attention to openness, flow and harmony that my student days had fostered.

Still in my 20s, in order to supplement my role as director of bi-lingual English at a local college, I worked weekends at my friend Nancy's organic health food counter where two charming coworkers, a Hawaiian named Leo and a Hindi named Vivekananda, turned me on to feng shui.

I was hooked and have incorporated its basic principles into every home I've since owned. My own design principles follow feng shui and KonMari, with the emphasis on curating.

Here they are:

1. Continuously pare down belongings to those that have both meaning and value.
2. Buy or commission furniture that is affordable, beautiful and functional, with both open and hidden storage.
3. Display possessions that are visually pleasing and meaningful to you.
4. For everything else, find a place that is organized by how you use it, keeping frequently used items within easy reach.
5. Keep open space both to navigate within your home and between objects so they can be lovingly beheld.
6. Seek help if you're overwhelmed!



Ikea dividers separate kitchen utensils for ready access.

The road to well-being

A recent Psychology Today article lists five big reasons to pare down your “disorderly masses,” citing scientific documentation about how and why this will put you on the road to well-being. Living in clutter creates or contributes to:

1. Low subjective well-being
2. Unhealthier eating

3. Poorer mental health
4. Less efficient visual processing
5. Less efficient thinking

The conclusions seem irrefutable: the advantages of streamlining outweigh simple house-keeping by elevating your happiness at home and work while also benefiting your physical health and cognitive abilities. As with the ancient Chinese beliefs, uncluttering allows you to flourish.

This doesn't mean creating totally sterile environments, overly Zen, devoid of personal touches. Thoughtfully curated collections can also define and please you and your guests. Learn how to arrange things together for a pleasing and artistic effect. But if your surroundings are a jumble, like that old junk drawer, reach out to a local expert for help.

Sheila Dingels' business, Successful Simplicity, is located right in Southwest Minneapolis. Dingels has been interviewed on radio, television and in-print publications and is a member of the Minnesota and National Association of Professional Organizers.

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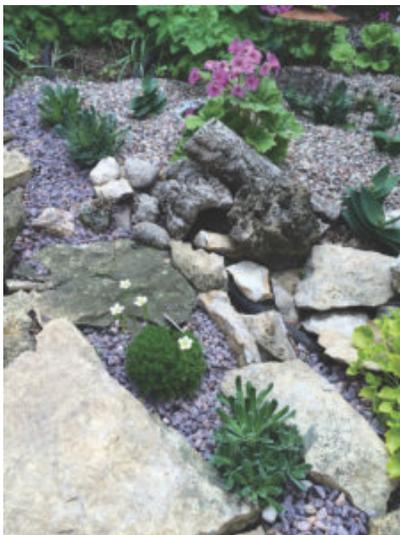
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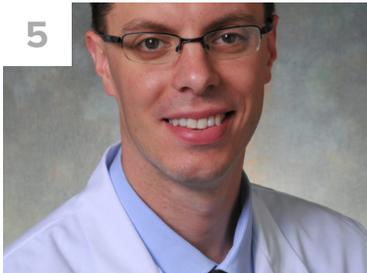
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A real estate advertisement for Josh Zuehlke. The text reads: "Josh Zuehlke. Deliberate. Strategic. Your Neighbor. Serving the Minneapolis Lakes area for over 15 years." Below the text is a photo of Josh Zuehlke, a bald man with a beard, wearing a suit and tie. At the bottom left is a box with "THE WILLE GROUP DISTINCTIVE REALTORS JOSHUA W. ZUEHLKE 612-735-2345 jzuehlke@cbburnet.com". At the bottom right is a box with "COLDWELL BANKER BURNET".

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