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WHEN THE COVID PANDEMIC closed down televised sports in the spring of 2020, I cast about to fill the holes in my TV schedule. I discovered *American Pickers*, a reality show that follows two middle-aged guys from Iowa as they crisscross the country foraging for old things to buy and resell to collectors. The still-running show unapologetically celebrates an anti-Marie Kondo aesthetic that embraces all manner of just plain stuff—the dirtier and rustier the better. I have learned about the surprising value of aged metal advertising signs, broken gas pumps, century-old motorcycle parts, and even vintage denim work clothes for which you pay extra for the stains and holes.

Probably the most stunning revelation from *American Pickers* is seeing the sheer volume of paraphernalia that people accumulate, and I am not talking about a few overstuffed garages or basements. I have watched episodes in which people preside over multi-

ple barns, storage buildings, and even enormous warehouses filled top to bottom with thousands of items, from cars, bicycles, and appliances, to oil cans, old toys, and architectural salvage pieces.

Some of these people appear to be genuine hoarders in need of an intervention, but many of them are lifelong or multi-generational collectors who just keep accumulating because they love acquiring things. After binge watching *American Pickers* I

came to the very unoriginal conclusion that we are a nation smitten with and probably overwhelmed by material goods; we are in love with our stuff.

I am not claiming any moral high ground because I am no more immune from the allure of stuff than anyone else; I simply focus on different categories. My wife and I have plenty of things that we use, need, or hang on the walls, but we also have empty shelves in our garage as well as in our cabinets and closets. I have never been either a hoarder or a minimalist, but as a septuagenarian I

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know that we are more ephemeral than our possessions, regardless of how many we have. If we all disappeared tomorrow, our stuff would survive us, and it would not care that we are gone.

As an archaeologist I am extremely aware of the persistence of material objects and what they can tell us about their owners. I've kept a few treasured items for years, but there is one category of things for which I have had an enduring fondness—books.

I discovered books early, and while growing up I read constantly and broadly. Books gave me the gift of imagination, which, as an only child in a very small house, was the interior space that I claimed as my own. I could

not afford to buy very many books until I got older, but in my mind, books have always been special and are where the stories come alive and where knowledge is forever stored.

Books were also one of my doors to independence because I could choose what I wanted to read. Over time I learned how to critically evaluate what I read and discovered that just because someone wrote it down did not mean it was always true—or even that it was good writing. That lesson took me a while to absorb, but when I did, it was liberating. By reading and understanding books, I was able to gain admittance to places I could not experience directly, and I saw how books could reveal new

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ideas and different vistas beyond the constraints of my own lived reality. I started hanging onto books and soon I had a collection, but books have been much more than things on a shelf. A great deal of what I have become has hinged on my ability to accumulate and connect dots of knowledge; books have been a big part of that.

As I write this story, I still have at least 2000 books, and over the years I have sold, traded, or given away hundreds more. As is my wont, my books are all shelved and roughly organized by subject matter. I know that sounds slightly obsessive, but when I was teaching and researching topics for lectures, I often needed a specific book or two, and I

had to be able to quickly find them. The vast majority of my library consists of nonfiction, heavily represented by anthropology, archaeology, history, politics, science, and books about the Southwest, but there are lots of subject areas. For example, every time I plan a trip I buy several topical books because I like knowing something about the places I am about to visit. Inasmuch as I have traveled a fair amount, my travel section is ample.

As I noted, anyone casually browsing through my collection will not find a lot of fiction, but it has not always been that way. In junior high school I went through a science fiction phase and collected every paperback I

could afford by Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, and a few others. In high school I became fascinated with the Russian writer Mikhail Sholokhov and had his books about the Don Cossacks—*And Quiet Flows the Don* and *The Don Flows Home to the Sea*. At the time I'm not sure I was aware of the Cossack participation in Jewish pogroms that helped propel my grandparents to emigrate, but I still remember Sholokhov's writing to be incredibly descriptive and evocative.

During the summer after my freshman year at college, I picked up Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over Cuckoo's Nest*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*, and Frank Herbert's *Dune*. I did a lot of reading in the "countercultural oeuvre" that summer. A few years ago, after we visited Spain, I discovered Carlos Ruiz Zafon's *The Shadow of the Wind*, set in Barcelona. I still consider that novel one of the most compelling I have ever read.

Somewhere, someone is saying that books are so twentieth century. They are bulky, take up space, and anything you need to know can be found on the Internet. My reaction to such comments is that they may be true, but they are irrelevant. Although I have looked at Kindles and similar kinds of electronic "not really books," they simply do not captivate me. Independent of their content, I like the tactile sense of books. I like flipping through the pages, and I love their heft and feel. Sometimes

I even like to scrawl a small note in a margin—fewer now than when I was teaching. I love seeing my shelves of books, knowing that I have actually read them. You can drop a book without breaking it, and they have no batteries that require charging. In my mind, books are timeless, and they have their own unique kind of kinetic energy. I will even admit to adopting one of Marie Kondo's aphorisms—frankly, *my books spark joy*.

An ongoing conundrum that is repeatedly discussed on *American Pickers* is the issue of what will happen to all the stuff when the collectors are gone. There is obviously no single answer; some people want to "find a home" for their collections while they can, whereas others are more like, "let the kids deal with all of this." It would be fine if our kids or grandkids liked some of these books enough to take a few boxes, but I appreciate that not everyone will be interested in the same things that interest me. The fact is that I'd be willing to let anyone who loves books take whatever they like. Alternatively, I could write out instructions about donating the books to local educational institutions or libraries, but they still might end up in a used bookstore or a yard sale, and that's okay as well.

Throughout my life, books have educated, informed, and enlightened me. They still do, and so for now, I'm keeping them. ❁

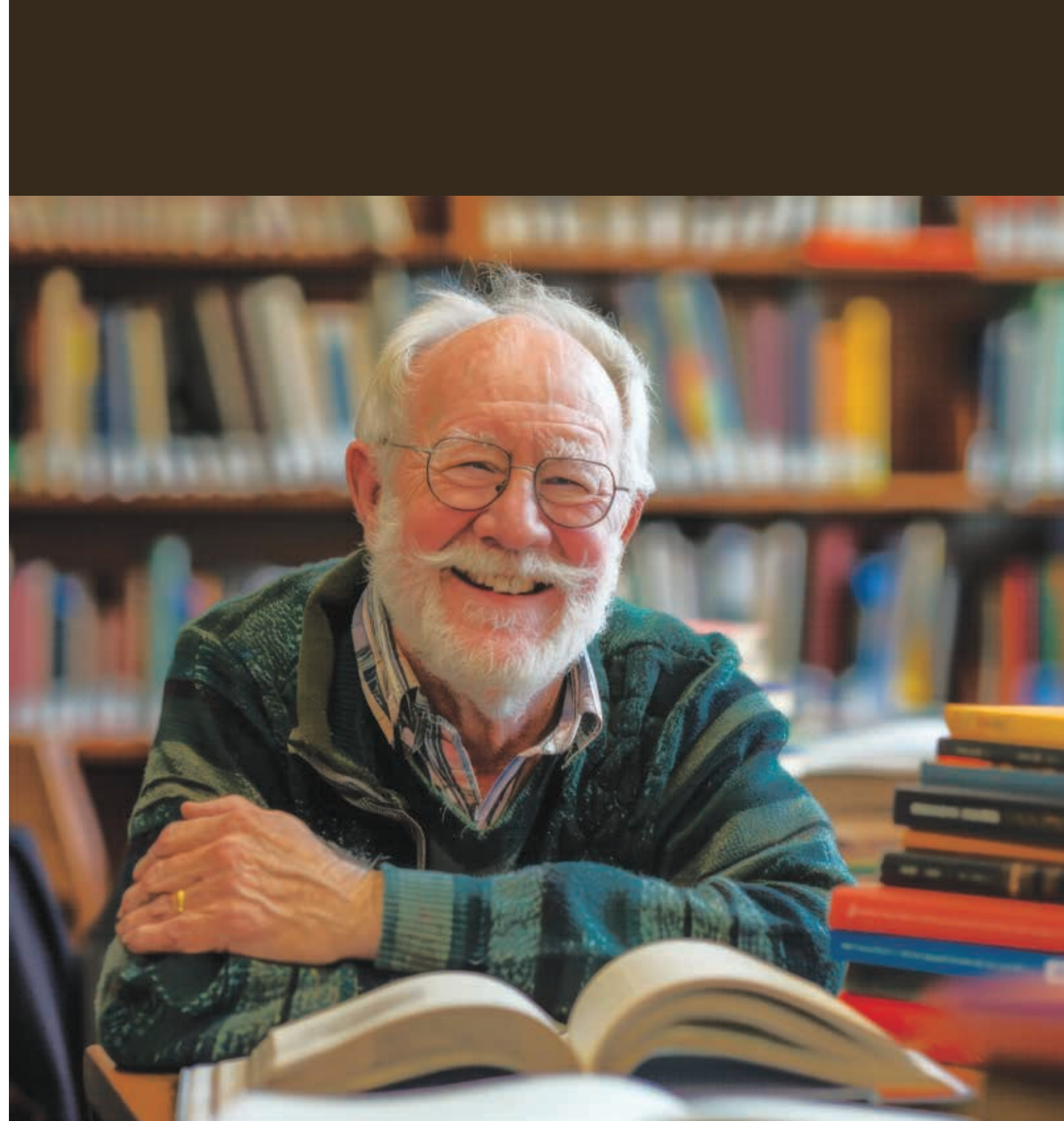


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