



# Engaging Aging

## Inside this issue:

With Only One Wing	3
Aging Engaged	4
Editor's Desk	6
Offices of NRRO	7
Calendar	7

## Compulsive Hoarding:

### “Just in Case...”

by Shauna Corbin, Ph.D.



Have you ever saved a packaging box because you might be able to wrap a gift in it sometime? Do you keep magazines you didn't have time to read? Most of us have held onto things, eventually getting rid of them as useless. Some people, however, find it impossible to discard things even though they are no longer of any value. In the extreme, these practices constitute pathological or compulsive hoarding.

**What is Compulsive Hoarding?** There is no formal psychiatric classification of compulsive hoarding, which is sometimes seen as a symptom of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder or a variant of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). It is often found in the context of depression and, less commonly, in schizophrenia or dementia. It can also be a standalone problem. There are no good data about its prevalence because it is often unrecognized, undetected or unreported due to the accompanying shame and embarrassment. There seems to be general agreement, however, that compulsive hoarding typically features: (1) the accumulation and saving of possessions that appear to others to have little value; (2) intense anxiety upon attempts to discard the belongings; and (3) extensive clutter that interferes with the normal use of living spaces.

What is the difference between a hoarder and a collector? In general, collectors feel proud of their possessions, enjoy having and displaying them, and keep them well organized and maintained. Hoarders are often

*(continued on page 2)*

*Let  
nothing disturb you,  
nothing frighten  
you.  
All things  
are passing away:  
God never changes.  
Patience  
obtains all things.  
Whoever has  
God  
lacks nothing;  
God alone suffices.  
Theresa of Avila*

*This article first appeared in "Covenant," September, 2008. It has been edited and reprinted with the kind permission of The Southdown Institute, Ontario, Canada. Southdown offers residential, assessment & outpatient services to religious and clergy.*

## **Compulsive Hoarding** (continued from page 1)

embarrassed by their possessions, which are disorganized and scattered randomly. Collectors take satisfaction in acquiring items for their collection, while hoarders may feel ashamed and depressed after adding to theirs.

**Types and Patterns of Hoarding Behavior** Compulsive acquisition is the impulsive purchase of objects without concern for the amount of money spent. Discount and bargain shopping is common, as is the frequenting of yard sales. Television and online shopping are easy and invisible. Another form of hoarding is the compulsive acquisition of “free” things. “Buy one, get one free” ads may be irresistible, as are other people’s broken and cast-off items, all in the name of avoiding waste. Most common is the amassing of written materials—newspapers, magazines, and junk mail.

The purposes and patterns of hoarding also differ. Sentimental saving is the holding onto an object because of the emotion attached to it. Instrumental saving has to do with keeping objects “just in case” they may be needed or useful in the future.

**Why People Save** For compulsive hoarders it has been suggested that fear drives their behavior, and fear is avoided by feeling safe and secure with one’s possessions. Hoarders share several fears and related characteristics: (a) fear of losing information; (b) indecisiveness, including uncertainty about what to discard; (c) inability to prioritize, which leads to procrastination; (d) fear of making a mistake; (e) fear of loss; (f) fear of not having enough; (g) lack of trust in one’s own memory; and (h) poor organizational skills.

**Treatment** Compulsive hoarders often have very poor insight into their difficulties, and many do not consider their actions unreasonable. When confronted, they either resist admitting the severity of the problem or acknowledge it with great embarrassment, and repeatedly promise to clear out the clutter. Such promises meet the same fate as those they make to themselves—procrastination or efforts that are short-lived. Involuntary purging of their belongings by others is not a solution. It only engenders anxiety, hurt and anger, and does not encourage the personal responsibility required to avoid future problems. Sometimes a formal intervention may be needed.



If an individual can be motivated for treatment, a multi-modal approach may have the best chance of success. Medications that are effective with OCD sometimes relieve intrusive and obsessive thoughts about possessions, which in turn may enable the person to benefit from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) tailored to the problem of hoarding. It needs to be coupled with a systematic behavioral approach to clearing out belongings and changing old patterns of behavior.

If any of this sounds familiar, you might think twice the next time you are tempted to buy or keep something you don’t actually need.

## With Only One Wing

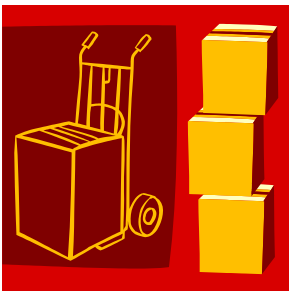
**Brother Mark Knightly, CSC, Director, Aging and Health  
Congregation of Holy Cross, Eastern Province of Brothers**



In 2005, I went to Brother Patrick's rectory door and knocked. "Just a minute!" he said in a quavering voice. At nearly 80, Br. Patrick had enjoyed over 20 years of working in the parish. He was a familiar figure in the neighborhood, nattily dressed, puffing on his pipe, always ready to engage passers-by. In my second year as Aging and Health Care Director, I was looking forward to helping him relocate.

I had been warned by other brothers to expect a lot of clothes. Stories told of Patrick's main form of entertainment being bargain-shopping on his small personal budget. Well-prepared with a new roll of institutional-sized "trash" bags in which to put his garments, I knew I would have to be gentle and reassuring, but firm in moving him forward. I was confident I would be able to handle anything. This one afternoon spent moving would be smooth, even enjoyable for us both. How bad could it be?

As the door opened, instead of the dapper, slightly odd, affable old man, I noticed Patrick was sweating. "I knew it was moving day," he said, "and I've started to help you." He pointed to his bed; five neatly folded pairs of trousers rested on top. I smiled and walked past him, glad he couldn't see the shock on my face. Before me was a cache of hundreds of trousers and at least a hundred tony sweaters, shirts and jackets draped over chairs. Unopened packages of shirts were piled high and shoes covered the floor. I opened the top bureau drawer to find it full of watches, many never worn. Too stunned at first to listen, I finally heard him say timidly, "I thought maybe I could give those to the poor." I turned and saw he was pointing to the five trousers on the bed.



Over the days and weeks ahead, we worked together to pack his belongings, move him to his new local community, select clothes he felt he could live without, and give those away. I discovered very useful information. (1) The community generally knows stories and true data about members. (Not that they've done anything about it, but they know.) (2) Any (sometimes laboriously) negotiated actions Patrick and I decided on were inevitably more easily accommodated than trying to surreptitiously separate him from (some of) his collection, or using power-and-control. (3) There was always a better outcome if I prepped for interactions with Patrick by spending time in reflection: What was Patrick experiencing as a result of his compulsion? What is it like to have the needling anxiety to acquire; to have the initial elation fade after purchases; to feel burdened by the accumulation and yet have an unsettled longing for the objects?

Maintaining a balance was difficult during that hot summer. As a leader I had a duty to care for the whole group, *as well as* for the individual with the problem. I could not afford to be overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the challenge of resettling Patrick. I had to keep reminding myself of the saying, "We are, each one of us, angels with only one wing." My job as leader was to throw my arm around him and help Pat fly.

# Aging Engaged



The heart of a great educator never seems to waver. For forty-eight years, Sister St. Francis Wenzel, OSF, entered the classroom as a professional, well-prepared and eager to engage her students. It has been just so with this interview. We think you'll be delighted to count yourselves among her students as you join us in learning from the insights of one of life's great teachers. Sister was asked to reflect upon the invitations of downsizing as one ages.

## **As you look back, what was it like as you made the various moves in your life?**

It was exciting because there was always something new to look forward to. But when I left it was also with misgivings because I liked the place and what I did.

## **How have you managed the downsizing over the years?**

When I was packing to leave a place, I got rid of things I knew I wouldn't need. That resulted in less physical and emotional baggage. The things weren't as hard to give up as some of the places and people.



**Sister St. Francis Wenzel, OSF**

## **Did you find any one point over the years to be significant?**

When I developed macular degeneration, I couldn't see well enough to do things such as reading, singing, crafts, and all my hobbies. I found it frustrating. I cried when I had to give up all my hobbies because it was a part of my life. I was giving up a part of myself.

## **What have you felt invited to let go of?**

I loved teaching, but I knew it was time to retire when I lacked the energy to keep up with what the children needed. And then there was the invitation to let go of my hearing and vision. That had more of an impact. Even with hearing aids, conversations are difficult in large gatherings. When I was losing my vision it was very difficult because I was losing what I could do: activities, television, and reading. I felt as though I was losing a part of myself, especially the craft work. The day I put out all my craft resources for others to take, I cried all day. Not because of the stuff, but because it was a part of my life. *(continued on page 5)*

**Aging Engaged** (continued from page 4)**What has helped you to do that?**

In Fr. Peter Van Breeman's book, *The God Who Won't Let Go*, there is a section about God asking "Do you mind if I take this?" and then, "Do you mind if I take this?" After God asks the question, He says, "I will give you something better." And He did! Once I accepted the fact that I could not see, I realized it was a blessing because the Lord gave me more time to focus on Him and spiritual things that really mattered. I had more time to pray because I was not engaged in craft work. If I could have my vision back, I would not desire it because I feel my lifestyle now is more focused on spiritual matters.

**What have you felt you wanted to hold on to or remember?**

I have a photo album and a few extra photos for remembrance and sentimental reasons. The album is a mix of family, friends, and places I served.

**As you look ahead, what is your hope?**

Going to heaven! [Insert a big smile here] My physical body is cared for, and now is the time I look forward to going to heaven. As my retired reverend brother used to say, I am "cramming for the finals!"

**Are there any suggestions you'd like to offer to people?**

In general, I'd say,

- Strive to live a good Christian life
- Don't follow the crowd and do what everyone is doing. Keep your dignity.
- Don't **ever** lose your faith.
- Be faithful to prayer and sacraments.
- The less you have, the less you have to worry about.
- Don't be a pack rat.
- It's not the material things that matter, so don't accumulate stuff just to have stuff. It is just "stuff!"
- Remember, the best things in life are not things!
- Share what you have with the poor, including time, talents and treasures.

*Sister St. Francis Wenzel, OSF, currently resides at St. Francis Convent, the retirement facility for Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity in Manitowoc, WI. We are grateful to Sister Sarah Bertler, OSF, for her assistance with this interview.*

## From the Editor's Desk

*Sister Sherryl White, csj, Ph.D., Psychologist, Pittsburgh, PA*



As you might expect, I've been watching my own behaviors lately in relation to this topic of hoarding. Yesterday, I found two cans of lentil soup in the cupboard and got nervous that I was stockpiling. Every time I started dusting, I found far too many knickknacks, so I scooped the surfaces clean. I've sifted through my closet three times in the last few months to winnow the excess. Basically, the local thrift shop is making out like a bandit with my recent deposits.

Still, just when things seem in order, I turn a corner and am confronted with more "stuff." There's the notorious "trunk" that accompanies us from one mission to another; file cabinets holding volumes of papers; a desk burdened with piles of "to do" lists. Whatever happened to simpler times of two habits, one pair of shoes, a pair of galoshes and an apron? Surely, we've all posed the question at least once.

But maybe that takes us in the wrong direction. There is wisdom in the engineering that makes a windshield bigger than a rearview mirror. Instead of looking backwards, what are the invitations of the present? Instead of dreaming about what has been, what are the invitations of the future?

This morning in prayer, a canticle from the Book of Tobit, challenged me to "*consider what God has done for you and praise God with a full heart.*" Suddenly, the focus shifted from examining closets and drawers to asking what fills my heart these days. The answer: fear. There I sat, healthy, housed, clothed, nourished, educated, befriended, employed, loved, and still I found myself afraid. Sometimes I wake up in

the middle of the night, scared green, worrying about the future. Projections from the National Religious Retirement Office estimate that by 2019, retired religious will outnumber those working by four to one. Expecting wage-earners to be able to continue underwriting the expenses of elder care is like asking water to run uphill. It feels like an impossible task. And then I had a thought.

I've become a hoarder. And what I'm gathering to myself has little to do with the gewgaws that litter basements and bedrooms. Hoarding can be about the attitudes we cling to, the fears we hold, the defenses we maintain, the opinions we refuse to relinquish, the needs we are unwilling to negotiate. Hoarding can be about procrastination, resistance, and denial, refusing to open ourselves to the graces in our midst. Where, in such a tight-fisted heart, is there room for praise? How can hope find space to breathe?

Perhaps the warm winds of summer are inviting us to slow down for a second look. We can check that black hole of storage space under the bed. But more importantly, what might we see if we look into the recesses of our hearts? What clutter is crowding out a generous spirit? What stuff keeps us tethered to the past in place of the yet to be? How can we dispose ourselves to listen more acutely to God's invitations manifest in the everyday moments of life?

Best wishes to all for a wonderful summer. May all be well.

## From the Offices of NRRO

**Brother Robert Metzger, SM**  
**Associate Director of Planning & Education**



We might be slightly past the time for the annual rite of “spring cleaning”, but we hope you still find the theme for this newsletter timely. This issue of *Engaging Aging* looks at the concern of hoarding. We hope you find it useful.

NRRO ran a workshop in February, 2011 entitled *Through Grief to New Life: A Spirituality for Meeting God in Transition Times* that included among its topics a session on hoarding. The workshop became oversubscribed, so we have scheduled a second offering of this workshop to be held in St. Louis, MO on October 14-15, 2011. The presenters for this workshop are Sr. Ann Billard, OLM; Bro. Wayne Fitzpatrick, MM; Sr. Mary Hopkins, OP; and Bro. Mark Knightly, CSC.

This is an educational workshop for leadership

of religious congregations. It will look at the power of unresolved grief, its affect on a congregation as well as introducing a process that will help religious heal this grief.

Comments from the first workshop include: very helpful; great team of presenters; excellent gathering; very encouraging; a much needed topic at this stage of the religious life for all of us; very practical advice and a good deal of hope; extremely valuable and timely; two days of enlightenment and inspiration.

Information and registration will be sent out electronically in July.



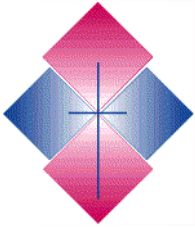
**You're Invited and It's on the House!**  
**Web Seminar: Assisting Religious with Transitions of Aging**  
**Speaker: Sister M. Peter Lillian, O.Carm.**  
**June 30, 2011, 1:00 pm EDT**

**NRRO is pleased to join with the Avila Institute of Gerontology to sponsor this online educational opportunity.**

**Register by visiting <http://www.avilainstitute.org/>**



- Aug. 3-6 CMSM Assembly, Orlando, FL
- Aug. 9-12 LCWR Assembly, Garden Grove, CA
- Sept. 10-14 NCDC Conference, Orlando, FL
- Sept. 20-22 NRRO Planning and Implementation Workshop
- Oct. 6-9 CMSWR Assembly, Belleville, IL
- Oct. 14-15 NRRO Workshop *Through Grief to New Life*, St. Louis, MO



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