

Ahuvia Edited

Aaron Ahuvia: [00:00:00] The people who are the consumption machines are not actually people who love stuff. They're people who have unrealistic expectations about what stuff is gonna do for them, how it's gonna transform their identity and transform their lives, That was Aaron Aya on psychologists Off the clock.

Yael Schonbrun: we are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships work and.

Debbie Sorensen: I'm Dr. Debbie Sorenson, practicing in Mile High Denver, Colorado. Co-author of Act, Daily Journal, and an upcoming book on act for burnout.

Yael Schonbrun: I'm Dr. Yel Shreen, a Boston based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the book Work Parent Thrive.

Jill Stoddard: And from coastal New England, I. Dr. Jill Sto, author of Be Mighty, the big book of Act metaphors and the [00:01:00] Upcoming Imposter. No more.

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Debbie Sorensen: Check out their current offerings@praxiscet.com or you can link to them through our website offtheclocksite.com and you can get a discount on live training events. If you use the code OFFTHECLOCK. This is here with Debbie to introduce an episode on things we love. I got a chance to speak to Erin Hoya, who wrote a book called *The Things We Love*, [00:02:00] how Our Passions Connect Us and Make Us Who We Are. This book was named by Amazon as one of the top 20 business books of the year, and honestly, it was a really fascinating conversation and kind of comes at a good time. I think after the holidays, I'm always thinking about all the consumerism that I engaged in, and you know what that means about what kind of a life I'm living and how I'm contributing to the environment. And what was so cool about this conversation is that it really introduces a lot of nuance into how we think about the things that are an important part of our life.

Yael Schonbrun: And Debbie, I'm just curious what thoughts were sparked for you as you listen.

Debbie Sorensen: Oh, well this really, this conversation really did get me thinking, and I think that's a good word for it, nuanced, because I think I kind of went into it with a little bit of a fixed point of view about things, right. And I think it's, it really is mostly concern about consumerism and this, [00:03:00] you know, materialistic, capitalistic world we live in and the environmental impact.

And I think I just kind of had this idea of like, this is all bad, right? , this is all a problem. And then I, as I listened, I was like, you know, it's really much more complicated that, and first of all, I really appreciated that he did. A lot of thoughtfulness around how we take care of things. You know, the, the downsides, especially the environmental impact when we over consume and when we have this kind of disposable culture.

But then he also really got me thinking about how, in some ways, some of the objects that are on our life, are important and they enhance our quality of life and they enhance our relationships. And I was just thinking, you know, I'm not immune from that. You know, like I love my book collection and I love my morning coffee and I love having a place to live and at home for my kids.

And I'm like, those things really do increase the, do I wanna go, [00:04:00] you know, over consumption? No, of course not. But I don't know, I just really appreciated how he had a lot to say about sort of ethical consumption and how these things, you know, why do we care about these things?

Why do I love my book collection so, so much? You know what I mean? What's happening there?

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, it's amazing cuz he is a marketing professor and I had on also Zoe Chance, who's a marketing professor. And I think it's so amazing that marketing professors are doing a lot of work. On consumerism that is value aligned and consistent with taking care of the world that we live in.

And to me that is kind of a beautiful thing because I think we're not gonna be able to get rid of our attraction to objects. Debbie, like you, I love many things that I own. And, um, you know, they, they do, they make me happy and make life a lot more pleasant. So we're probably not gonna be able to eradicate that drive to like, you know, have things in our.

And to buy new things even. But if we can instead turn [00:05:00] towards a hope of building that drive in a way that is ethical and, compassionate and considerate of the world that we live in and, and aligned with our value of taking care of our world, I think that seems like a. More feasible goal. And so I just really appreciated how exactly what you said, that he's a marketing professor with a real eye towards ethical consumerism, which, and, and what is so terrific, and I hope everyone listens to, to all the way to the end of the episode, is that he actually offers a, a lot of really useful ideas for how to build yourself and your behaviors in ways that do align with values of, Caring for the environment

Debbie Sorensen: yeah, and I mean, he gets pretty deep into some things like the concept of non-attachment and that kind of thing, and it's, I don't know. I just, I love that. Right. It really resonates with, it really looks at this in terms of like a deep philosophical query. So I, I think it [00:06:00] made me think about some of my own patterns in a, in a really new way, which is pretty cool for an episode that on the surface you might not realize that it's gonna have that impact.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Yeah. So at a good time to sort of start out 2023 with, with a fresh look at all the crap that we just bought for the holidays and, and, and open eye towards how we want to approach. Life as a consumer, life as a person who has things that have meaning in throughout the year. . Aaron a Hoya is a professor of marketing at the University of Michigan who studies consumers love of products and brands and the nature of contemporary consumer culture.

His research has been featured in Time, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and a number of other major publications. And he is also appeared on public radio talk shows as well as popular television shows. For example, the Oprah Winfrey. Most recently, he's the author of The [00:07:00] Things We Love, how our Passions Connect Us and Make Us Who We Are.

And we are here to discuss this book today. Welcome, Erin. Oh, thank you very much for having me. So I have to start by sharing that. I told my three sons this morning that I was doing an interview with somebody who studies our love of things, and I asked them, what is the one thing you love most so much that you'd be heartbroken if you lost it?

And my youngest told me his stuffy cheetah that he can't sleep without. Mm-hmm. . And my older two sons named soccer and baseball. So this is cute and all, but let's sort of start by framing the topic because kids and adults talk about loving things all the time and. So there's this kind of broad question that you address in your book, but should we consider this to be an accurate description of our feelings, or is it just another way that we find ourselves hyperbolizing and maybe even perverting language?

Aaron Ahuvia: It depends on the person and what they're talking about. So very frequently it is just hyperbole, but we can actually learn from that hyperbole. So when people [00:08:00] say, um, I love your haircut, all they mean is that's a really good haircut. So, Very frequently people use the word love as a figure of speech to mean high quality or excellent.

And what we can learn from that is that something being perceived as high quality or excellent is one really important part of what it means to love that thing. And we also know from, uh, neuroscience studies where they take a brain image of people as they think about romantic partners that they love, their children, that they love, and brands or products that they love, that the part of the brain that is used for judgment.

So making those sort of, is it high quality kind of assessments, is much more activated when people think about brands than it is when people think about, say, their children. So that. [00:09:00] I love this because it's great and if it stops being great, I'm not gonna love it anymore. That is a very strong part of people's love of products or objects and not such a strong part of their love of people.

However, there are other times when people really do mean it. They say like, I really do love this thing in a deeper sense. And what's happening there is that

they're taking the thought processes, most of them, that they, that they use when they apply love a person and they're applying it to this object.

And that's what I find the more interesting case. I think it's so interesting, and I have to be honest, so I have, um, a specialization in relationships, human relationships, and I never really thought about the parallels that exist in relationships between people and relationships between people and objects that they love.

you have three boys. So you love them when they're behaving well and [00:10:00] you're angry when they're not, but you don't hate them when they're not right.

Because that is a difference between products and, and people. Yeah. Yeah. That, and you have this line where you talk about that we can, when we anthropomorphize objects, find this moral responsibility. But for the most part, it is a different way that we get frustrated with objects than we do with our loved ones.

Right? Yeah. Yeah. So interesting. so let, let's talk a little bit about the evolutionary function of what we love. You, you say in your book that loving people is often evolutionarily optimal, but that's not true for loving things.

Loving people who share our genes makes evolutionary sense because it leads us to help them and hence helps our genes to survive. But the things we love never share our genes. So making sacrifices for them doesn't propagate our genes. But you also conclude saying that loving things isn't a bug in being human, but rather a feature that has utility.

So [00:11:00] can you explain this paradox? Yeah, absolutely. So there's humans and other animals. Many other animals have, uh, a kind of a bonding that is really very similar to love and connected to it. So humans and, and other animals, uh, love other animals for really two reasons. So the first is they love their children and or sometimes their mate, depending on the species.

And that's to help. Their, their progeny survive and carry on their genes. Humans are one of the few species, and some writers I've read say the only species, um, I don't know if that's true, but one of the few species that have friends. And in English, we don't really talk about loving our friends that often, but the underlying psychological structure is the same.

The closeness you feel with the close friend is, is, is a kind of love. And we love our [00:12:00] friends because from an evolutionary perspective, there's this two-way relationship. Um, it's a lot. Two people can do a lot more than each person separately. And so, uh, it creates commitment in the relationship that allows people to help each other and cooperate with each other and do each other favors without constantly needing to keep track of exactly who owes who, what, and, you know, that sort of thing.

So it, Dr it increases our, uh, efficiency together by working as a group when you get to objects, right, they don't have any genes. So as you said, we're not, they're not gonna carry on our genes the way our children will and their behavior towards us. Isn't dependent on our feelings about them and our relationship with them, right?

If we, if we give the computer the correct command, it's gonna respond. And if we don't, we don't. So when we love things, in one sense, it's kind of a, a case of [00:13:00] mistake and identity. We're treating them like people in ways that isn't evolutionarily optimal. But there's a huge difference between what is evolutionarily optimal and what we want as people.

And we have other goals for our life. I mean, very straightforwardly. Many of us have chosen to limit our family size. Uh, and this is not evolutionarily optimal, but we think it makes our lives happier. And gives our lives more meaning to have a certain number of children, which could be zero to whatever, but is less than 12 or less than the most we're biologically capable of having.

Um, and similarly, when we love activities and objects and, um, times of the year or holidays or what have you, it makes our life more meaningful [00:14:00] and more enjoyable. And that's a good thing. And if our jeans don't like it, they can go to hell. . Yeah. Damn, straight. Okay. So, so you're a marketing professor and, and we, we had talked a little bit about that your wife is a rabbi, so, or was a rabbi, or I'm not sure if she's Practic, is a rabbi, psychedelic rabbi.

Um, So you also clearly have an attachment to spiritual life, and so there's in spiritual life, these ideals of non-attachment, and you're also a parent. So I guess I, I would imagine that you sometimes get concerned about the way that loving things can detract from loving people. So how do you personally reconcile your sort of more favorable attitude towards loving things with the concern about things detracting us from a more wholesome approach to activities and relationships?

Wow. That's a fabulous question. And one I would love, there's, there's so many parts to that. [00:15:00] Hopefully we'll have a chance to get into it and in some of the different aspects there. So I wanna, uh, put a pin in what you taught, said. You mentioned non-attachment, so let's promise to get back to non-attachment.

But first, overall, Today. I, I would say that on balance, loving things is beneficial to both our lives in general and to loving other people. So there's a knee-jerk kind of assumption that many people make that either you put your time and energy into loving things, or you're focused on loving other people.

But that is abundantly false from, uh, my research that overwhelmingly the things we love are things, we love them precisely because they help us connect with other people and they strengthen our relationships with other people. So, um, I have a lot of kitchen stuff that I love and serving stuff that I love.

But a huge reason why I love that is because I like to throw dinner [00:16:00] parties and they're one of my favorite ways of connecting and really communing with other people. And all of the kitchen stuff is just part of what supports the dinner parties. So it's not in conflict at all with my love of other people.

There are times when things go wrong, right? There are people who get obsessed with objects in ways that do detract from their relationship with other people. Usually my reading of the research is this happens through a vicious sort of spiral. People get lonely and it used to be, this I think is an important point that.

I don't think most people think about much, but we have a, let me make an analogy. We have a need for certain kinds of nutrition from our food and we've developed this taste of, you know, we like sweet [00:17:00] things. And for most of our human evolutionary history, sweet things were also high nutrition things. And so by eating sweet things, we got calories we desperately needed and we got other kinds of nutrition and everything was good.

Recently we've been, we've split this off and so now we have all these sweet things. They're high calorie, most of them, but they're not high nutrition. And we get into trouble. Well, we had a similar kind of thing with our relationships with people. We need desperately a certain amount of close contact with other people and warm relationships with other people.

And loneliness is the symptom we feel when we're not meeting our sort of, Psychological nutrition needs for positive relationships with other people. It used to be that another thing would come in that would also be relevant, and

that was boredom, because if you got bored, the only way you could get onboard for the most part was to do something with another person.

So boredom [00:18:00] motivated you to do things with other people. Now, we've developed devices like televisions and video games that have sort of split off boredom. So just like we have junk food, we have things that will help alleviate our boredom, but won't provide the psychological nutrition that we get from social relationships.

What happens then is people start to get lonely and they get bored, and it's very convenient and easy to use television or video games or stamp collecting or whatever it happens to be. To be kind of a solo effort. And this helps alleviate the boredom, but it does nothing to alleviate the loneliness.

Yeah, you would think that people, when they're lonely would become very open to social contact. But in fact, a lot of people, when they get lonely, this triggers a kind of a cycle where they, uh, want to avoid the very social contact they need to make them less lonely. And [00:19:00] so then you get like, okay, so I get attached to these objects, they help me alleviate my boredom, and then as I do that, I get even more lonely.

Um, and so I turn to the objects even more and you get in this kind of vicious cycle. Um, I don't think that's that happens, but those are particular cases of individuals with significant problems. I don't think that's the diagnosis about our society as a. That's so interesting cuz it, it does seem very analogous to, you know, substance use, uh mm-hmm.

cycles where, you know, you might feel an uncomfortable emotion, use a substance to alleviate it and then, you know, feel shame and, and need more of the substance to alleviate, alleviate it. And so you end up in this kind of cycle and you're saying that can happen, but that's not the dominant way that we tend to relate to objects.

That that's more sort of when it gets into unhealthy nont nutritional kind of cycle. Yeah, and I'm worried though [00:20:00] about the future because right now the objects that we use can help us with the boredom that comes from social isolation, but they don't really help us with the loneliness. So we still feel that loneliness very strongly.

People do. I mean, you mentioned earlier how your youngest, uh, son, you asked him what he loved and he mentioned his teddy bear. Right? Teddy bears are perfect examples. Yeah. Uh, because they're anthropomorphic.

One of the, one of the ways, every time that a person loves a thing, they've, their brain is, in some level it's a case of mistaken identity. Their brain is treating it as if it was a person for, there's different reasons for that. The simplest reason is it's a teddy bear. It kind of looks like a person.

Yeah. And so the brain just outright treats it like a person. Uh, so lots of kids turn to teddy bears to [00:21:00] help them when they're feeling scared or lonely or bored in any of these ways. But as researchers on these transitional objects have noted many times. As soon as mom walks into the room, down goes to Teddy bear and mom's more important.

Right? So really no competition. The teddy bear is not a substitute for mom, and it's not like the teddy bear is making the kid not interested in his parents or his friends or anything like this. Um, we're developing much, much better Teddy bears objects that not just vaguely look like people, but are gonna talk and actually be interesting to talk with.

Right? Right now, voice, human language, uh, apps or computer programs that try to be conversation apps for people where you talk to the computer people find those amazingly enjoyable to talk to even. They're pretty terrible. They work at a very [00:22:00] simple level and they don't say interesting things. Whereas, uh, in the future, our artificial people are going to say much more interesting things and are gonna be very comforting to us and also gonna be very convenient.

Yeah. Because in a real relationship with a person, if you want them to listen to your boring stories, you have to listen to their boring stories, right? But with these, uh, computers or androids or what have you in the future, they're just gonna be about you all the time. You know, they'll never want you to listen to some boring story, uh, from them.

And if you know, so I think about junk food as an analogy here, right? Where junk food, it's not the best food, but it is very convenient food. And people take, and it feels good as you're eating it. Yes. And it feels good as you're eating it. Absolutely. And people take convenient and pleasurable [00:23:00] over the best all the time.

So even if these sort of substitutes, technological substitutes for interpersonal relationships, even if they aren't really as good as interpersonal relationships, they'll be easy and they'll be convenient and they'll feel good. And I do worry about what the future will bring that maybe in the future will have a situation that's more similar to what some people think the present is like.

Yeah. I just sort of wanted to reflect back cause it is true that when my son needs his little teddy, his cheetah, uh, it's usually at night, like he can't sleep without it, but during the day he can, he can take it or leave it.

So I, that, that really resonates is, is quite true. The other thing I was gonna say, uh, regarding how technology has gotten more and more advanced and, and can naturally take the place is the example of, um, therapy that gets automated, right? There are these apps that are, that folks are trying to develop and, and have developed and.

[00:24:00] In, from what I understand, have shown some really good evidence that they're quite helpful in, for example, teaching cognitive behavioral therapy or even in providing a place for people to share their experiences in a, in a platform where they can receive some validation. But it's just technology, ai, artificial intelligence that's offering that validation.

But there is some utility there and the concern that I have is similar to what you you're describing, which is something gets lost and I think it's an important something, especially if we only have that to the exclusion of real human relationships. Yeah, absolutely. Another example, um, to compliment yours, there is research showing that.

Senior centers where you have people living, there's a lot of loneliness there. And if people have dogs, there's a lot of benefits both to their emotional health and also to their physical health. Like their, the benefits for the emotional [00:25:00] health carry over over to their physical health. But of course, dogs are a lot to take care of.

So there've been experiments where they use these robot dogs instead of the real dogs, and they discover that people get the same health benefits and emotional benefits from having a robot dog. That they do from having a real dog. And so that was the first set of headlines to come out about this. And that was very interesting.

And I believe that's still true. However, uh, later research also discovered that when people have a real dog, they maintain the interest in the dog and therefore the benefits for as long as the dog's alive. But with these robot dogs, after about two or three months, people just lose interest in them and then they lose the benefits.

So there's something about the robot dogs as they are today, and I don't know what it is that doesn't have the, the staying power of, you know, the real dogs.

Um, [00:26:00] nonetheless it seems to me only a matter of time until they develop a robot dog that you really can't tell the difference. Yeah. Huh, that's so interesting.

But then I guess the, it begs the question of if you could generate a robot dog or a therapist that provided all of the things without loss of interest over time or any of the other downsides, could that be sufficient? And, and would that therefore be like something to applaud instead of something to be concerned about?

I would think that in terms of the dog kind of, maybe I'd, I'd be like, well, it's up to each individual. Decide what kind of pet you wanna have. Even if that works for you and for the therapist. I would think that that's probably a good thing cuz therapists are very expensive. If it really works, it would allow a lot of people around the world to get therapy who don't now have access to therapy.

Yeah. And so that would probably be a very good thing. [00:27:00] But the therapist does have this other side, which is the, you, you do form a relationship with them. You're, it's not exactly, I know people who are friends with their therapists, but officially that's not the relationship you're supposed to be creating.

Uh, and, and that's why I feel like that wouldn't be such a terrible loss. But if it starts to get into the social realm and you start to replace your friends with these sorts of devices, that's way more scary and detrimental in my mind. Yeah. Uh, at that point, I mean, you think about like how bad it is, how bad people feel now if they lose their job because they've been replaced by a machine at work, what's it gonna feel like when you find out you've lost your friend because you've been replaced by a machine after.

Yeah. The other thing that just occurs to me, and this kind of goes back to the research of Emil Dhe, where [00:28:00] he was a French sociologist in the 18 hundreds, and he did this really fascinating study where he was looking at predictors of suicide and what he found was the central predictor was the more role obligations one had, the less their risk of suicide was.

And so when it comes to dogs or therapists, it's almost like that need to listen to somebody's boring story or that consequence of not taking care of that dog actually matters. Like losing that might make it more convenient, might, you know, have a lot of the elements of that relationship that already exist.

But it's almost like by automating something you lose. Human consequence, which actually is part of what is so beneficial about relationships that, that our, the things we're taking care of, our relationships need us, whereas computers don't. That's a really interesting insight, and I will admit, I've never thought of that before, so thank you for that.

And it makes total sense to me. Um, one of the things that people talk a lot about in this regard is that people need a [00:29:00] sense of meaning in life, and that's part of mental health. They'll ask people about meaning in life, uh, frequently. People aren't really clear what the question itself means. Like what does it, what does meaning in life, what does that really mean?

And what I figured out, a, a way to translate that into everyday language for people is to say, uh, things that are meaningful are things that feel important or that make you feel important. And they're important in some larger sense. So not just important over the next 10 minutes, but they're, you know, important in your life on the longer term or to the world on longer term.

So it's a sense of importance. It's like an easier work for people to understand than meaning. And I think that that's really true. That you feel a sense of meaning in your life when you are important to other people. Yes. And if you are not, if there aren't other people, if your relationships are all with machines, I don't know how that's gonna play out for people.

[00:30:00] Right, right. I mean that's a nutrient that you really can't replace with a machine. I don't think so. Not logically. Yeah. So logically you would say, um, look that compu, you know, my dog's a robot dog. If I commit suicide, uh, it's not gonna starve to death. And if it does, it doesn't matter cause it's a robot dog.

Right. Uh, so that logically there would be a big difference there. But when we deal with pets, uh, and this is something I do, I talk a lot about pets in the book cause I find 'em really interesting. But we anthropomorphize them in ways that aren't really logical. So I have a friend who was saying, Oh, I talk to my pet all the time, she said, and then she realized, she said, no, actually I talk to myself when the pet is in the room, but I don't feel, I don't feel comfortable talking to myself the same way when the pet isn't in the room.

So we all say things to our pets, I do this too, that, [00:31:00] you know, the pet could never in a million years have any idea what we're talking about. Yeah. So there's already an element of unreality in those relationships. And I wonder if people might feel like, oh, I can't commit suicide cuz my robot dog needs me.

That might work at some emotional level for them, even if logically they, I don't think it. Yeah. Yeah. Huh. That's really interesting. Okay, so we put a pin in non-attachment. I, before I go on my next question, I wanted to give you a chance to speak to that, cause I'm very curious what your thoughts are. So, I have a friend, um, Matt Ricard, who is a very prominent expert.

He is, a. Former French, uh, scientist who became a Tibetan Buddhist monk and has written a lot on, , meditation. , and he is in many cases the official spokesperson for the Dalai Lama on all things meditation. So, uh, a, a very expert person, and I talked to him about this [00:32:00] and interestingly, he wrote, , one of the blurbs for my book.

Uh, and he talked about, you know, how good it is to love things. But the only thing he, he was willing to talk about as like, it's great to love things was nature. So it's good to, it's good to love nature, and I'm with him on that. I think it's great to love nature. , his explanation, cause I asked him about this, his explanation was that non-attachment isn't exactly the right word, that that's a bad translation and that really what you're talking about, , are kinds of attachments that bring you suffering.

So you have to look really honestly at what that attachment is doing in your life. And if it's the kind of thing that either is now or is likely in the future bring you suffering, then you should not have that kind of attachment. Now, certain Buddhist schools tend to think, and [00:33:00] that that includes just about everything in their mind, right?

But others not so much. And it, that's sort of depends on how you, you know, what, what school of Buddhism you're in, I gather, , about that. But the real issue is, you know, what you're attached to and what that relationship is like, at least from a Buddhist, , perspective.

My view is, and here I, again, not trying to contradict that, but you know, attachments are really important parts of life and I think for most people, emotionally healthy, certainly we have attachments to other people and that's fine. And what an attachment really means is it means that you've expanded your sense of identity to include this other thing.

So it's become part of how you see yourself at a deeper psychological level. That's what's happening when we talk about attachments. And I have a kind of a positive look on that. Um, for the most part, [00:34:00] as humans have evolved, we, you know, our animal predecessors went. Being animals that only cared about themselves to the extent they had the conscious mind to care.

Right. But they're only acted as if they can, were concerned with their own physical body to expanding to a point where they saw their children and their mate, and maybe their siblings as part of themselves and cared about them in the same way to expanding again, where we saw our friends and our community as part of ourselves.

And then in my view, we now have the potential to expand again. So we see much of the world as an extension or part of ourselves and hopefully care about it in the same way that we care about ourselves. So I, I see that as a largely positive thing, and. And with one little note, which is, I'm very concerned about global warming as I think many people are.

And there are [00:35:00] two really good approaches to reducing consumption, , which will help with global warming and other kinds of ecological issues. And one is this sort of generalized non-attachment. And that says like, just don't care about things. Don't own things. You know, just, just say no kind of approach.

And that works. You know, I think if you're in a Buddhist monastery, that's gonna be the approach that you'll probably be living with. And that works for some people. But I really don't think that works for most people. And what the data shows is that the people who are really attached to the things that they actually own, Keep those things for longer and repair them and don't buy new things and don't wanna replace them cuz they love the thing they have, they don't feel the need to replace it.

The people who are the consumption machines are not actually people who love stuff. They're people who have unrealistic expectations [00:36:00] about what stuff is gonna do for them, how it's gonna transform their identity and transform their lives, their greatest sense of pleasure from the things they own.

Uh, this is from studies from Marsha Richens who does brilliant work on this occurs just before they buy it, when they have this fantasy about how great it's gonna be. And then the minute they own it, they like it less and less the longer they have it, which is why they constantly wanna replace it with something new.

So if you can get those people to actually. Own, you know, fewer things but own things and love the things that they actually have as opposed to craving a fantasy about things they don't have. That's another way to, to create a fulfilling life kind of surrounded by things you love. That's a satisfying life and that's also a much more sustainable way of life.

I love that suggestion from somebody who's in marketing, cuz I, I think that's brilliant. So I, I have a, [00:37:00] okay, I have a two pronged question. So one is that you explained in the book that objectification is the opposite of love, so I wanted to give you a chance to speak to that. But then related to what you just said and, and related to objectification, how do you get people who are more material.

To love things more deeply. That's a really interesting problem, and one that I, I wanna put more research into in the future. I will say for the time being, um, I have some hypotheses, uh, about that. , one comes from a, a psychologist friend of mine, , and, and, and wonderful author Robert Diener. Uh, yeah, he studies happiness.

He studies happiness. And we were discussing this and he said, well, what if you took the gratitude exercise and what if you were to say your coffee maker, use it every. What if you actually thanked your coffee maker first?

You gotta give it a name. Cause we know many things makes people love them more. [00:38:00] So give it a name and then thank you John, the coffee maker for this fine cup of coffee you have provided me this day. I think I, I strongly suspected that would make you love your coffee maker more and be less inclined to replace it with some other coffee maker because it's John the coffee maker and he would, you can't do that to John.

Um, so that's one approach. Another approach is to recognize that there are two sort of paths to love, and this is true in romantic love, where sometimes people have a love at first. Or, um, more realistically love at early relationship, you know, early in the relationship kind of thing. And other times though, there's just a totally different trajectory where they know people know each other for a long time and the relationship slowly builds.

And then at some point it goes from a friendship to a romantic relationship. And then [00:39:00] the love continues to sort of grow over time. Both of those trajectories in human relationships can yield extremely rewarding, positive love relationships. Both of those are legitimate. Similarly, you have the same pattern.

When people love things, there are some things that you have sort of love at first sight, or like you hear a song for the first time and you fall in love with it. Other things though, grow on you over time, but they'll only grow on you over time. Under certain conditions. First is you have to keep trying them.

Uh, they say, I've heard it said that if you want your child to learn to love a new food, you have to have them taste it 14 times. I don't know if that number's right. But the basic idea is they have to keep at it and, and keep trying. And that's also true with many of the things we love. So if you, I've made a hobby of learning to like new musical styles [00:40:00] that I wasn't formally interested in.

And the way that I do this is I just listen to them a bunch and I ask myself this question, what's good about this? What's enjoyable about this for the people who like this, what do I think they might be liking about this? And that, that I think is another way with people who are materialists, um, who like buy stuff and hate it the minute they buy it.

You know, to stop and say, now hold on a minute, you know? Don't just throw it in your closet. Actually use this and build up some experience with it and relate to it and think about what's good. And you can come to love things and I'll, I'll say one last closing thing on this, which is people often discount the ability of learning to love things because they [00:41:00] think that when they love things, it's always love at first.

But what's happening is they're just forgetting about the process of learning to love the things that they do love. So if we have, you know, your music taste now you think, oh, I didn't have to learn to love this music that I like now. Oh, you absolutely did. It took you years to learn to love that music.

You just weren't really aware of the process. It was happening. It was playing on the radio. Your friends were playing it around you. You were talking to your friends, they were telling you what they liked about it. You were talking about the music to them. You heard it again and again. So, The things that we love now.

We learned to love all of those things and we can learn to love new things. I love that, that I love how parallel some of the ways that you understand our relationship to objects are to our relationships with people. Cuz that's true in relationships too. We often think, you know, my best friend, they're just my best friend.

We just click, we're exactly the same. But actually, you know, if [00:42:00] you really look back, it's often the case that it took you a while to, you know, there's research that suggests that you have to spend like 90 hours with somebody before you really develop a close friendship. It's a process, but we are so immersed in the outcome that we forget about the process.

Absolutely. And that's not to deny that there are some things that are gonna be better fit for some people than others in, in all sorts of areas in the same way. There's some people you can spend 90 hours with them and you're not gonna become friends with them necessarily, but you really, it is a combination of

both things. Yeah. And if you insist that, you know, you're only gonna be friends with someone who you click with on in the first half hour, you're really closing yourself off. Right. Which is good advice for the dating sphere too. . Absolutely. Yeah. I guess related to that, and this is sort of in the opposite direction, for people who have a hard time letting go of objects that are cluttering their house.

Can you talk through your [00:43:00] advice for that? Right. So if you are, I'll give the example for myself, like my youngest is now six and so we're, you know, they've, all my three boys have been through certain outfits and it does not make sense to hold onto them. There's no grandchild that would wanna wear something that's been through three boys, but it's so hard to let go because I'm attached to those objects.

They represent my kids early childhood, and, you know, those early moments of mothering and, and it makes sense to get rid of them in free up space for all the new junk that clutters up my house. So what's your advice for that? A couple of, things here. One is, Absence makes the heart grow disinterested

So in some cases, if you take the stuff and you just like put it in the attic and you don't see it for a while, then when you come back to it in a year, you look at it and you're like, ah, I can get rid of this now. , so there's that sort of emotional connection that comes through frequent interaction, [00:44:00] and that's to, to during that on its side, you know, around for just a second.

A lot of the times, one of the, one of the most surprising findings from my work, when I ask people about what they love and why they love it. It turns out that one of the things that predicts how much people will love something is just how much contact they have with it, and the things that, as long as it's positive contact, if it's, if you have a lot of contact with something and it's annoying, you're not gonna love that.

But if you have positive contact with something and it's just in your life because it's, you know, it's around you all the time. People develop affections for those. And the flip side of that is if you take it outta your life and you don't see it and you throw it in the basement for a couple years, you can become less emotionally attached to that.

Now this also relates to, to hoarding. At first, I assumed. That hoarding had really nothing to do with the kind of love I was studying. And I will admit that was largely unscientific. I, I, I think the [00:45:00] kind of love that I study is usually a positive thing most of the time. And hoarding is a very negative thing and I didn't really wanna see them as being very connected to each other.

So I, you know, built up this belief. But then as I looked more into the research on hoarding, I had to go with what the data said. And there clearly is a similarity. And there's two things that happen that are similar. One is when you love something, you've changed your, you've included it in your identity, you're thinking about it as if it was an extension or a part of your own identity.

And when hoarders do this with all kinds of things as well. Uh, and that's part of the reason it's very hard to let go of something if you think it's part of your identity. So you have to come to rethink it. And so it's not part of your identity if you're gonna get rid of it in some way. Uh, The other part that's really surprising was to me was that hoarders tend to anthropomorphize these objects.

So part of the [00:46:00] reason that, you know, They buy the item in the supermarket to begin with is they'll be, oh, I don't really need this can of tuna, but it's the last can of tuna on the shelf. Everything else has been sold. It must be so lonely sitting there on the shelf by itself. I'll take it home and make it, uh, comfortable in my home.

And so they buy it and bring it home and they don't want to eat it. Um, because they don't really eat tuna and don't use it that much. Uh, and then it sits on their shelf, but they, they anthropomorphize it. They see it as a person and they feel like it would be terrible to it, like they'd be doing harm to it if they were to, you know, get rid of it in some way.

And that also is a similar thing when, when we love things. Um, so I don't have a full solution to the anthropomorphization part. Uh, but I will say if you're trying to get rid of things, Realize that they're not actually people that's, you know, , that might be, uh, another hint in that direction too. Yeah.[00:47:00]

Well, and it's funny because that doesn't, you talk about Marie Cono in your book, but it's almost the opposite of what she does, right? She sort of says, thank you and says goodbye as if it's, uh, you know, a personified object, but it's engaging with that object in, in sort of like a, a goodbye ritual. Yeah.

No, I actually think her work is brilliant. Um, on that, the, the, the, the goodbye rituals she comes up with. Um, the example that's also, I don't know if this is

from her, from other people that I've heard, is to take a photograph of the object, especially a digital photograph. So the photograph doesn't have to take up any room, take a digital photograph, and have a, uh, portfolio of things I love that are here in my digital.

So I keep them in the digital form and release them to someone else who will use it better. Um, I, if you can, it would be helpful to not to sort of de anthropomorphize the objects, but that might not always be that possible for people [00:48:00] because anthropomorphism is a very unconscious mechanism. It's not a conscious, you already know it's not a person, right.

So you've gotta work with it in this other way. And what Marie Kondo talks about of saying like, oh, I'm gonna let it go. It does not bring me joy. It doesn't spark joy here. Um, I'll keep my relationship to it through the photograph, but I'll let it go to a place where it will be happier because it will find a person and, you know, have this happier existence with its new owner.

I think that's very smart. Yeah. Oh, I love that. There, there's so much in your book that we're not gonna have time to get to, but I, I just, again, I love the parallels between human relationships and, and relationships with objects. Cuz you talk about, maybe we can just touch on this here,

that the more anxious people are about their interpersonal relationships, the more likely they are to form strong relationships with brands. So, in other words, attachment styles with people that we have, with [00:49:00] people translate to our attachment style with objects. That, that's so fascinating. Can you speak a little bit to that finding?

There's a, it's one of a whole class of findings that I call carryover effects. So things that, you know, we evolved because they helped us in our relationships with people, or they worked in our relationships with people and then they sort of carry over to relationships with objects. Now, when this work started and people began to realize this connection that people who are insecure in their relationships with people tend to.

Brands be more likely to love a brand. The initial thought was, oh, they're using the brand as a substitute, right? They can't get the human relationship, so they have this relationship with the brand instead. Later, research, however, showed that no, they're trying to use the brand as a way of connecting to other people.

So they only form this kind of relationship with brands. If the brand is something that's [00:50:00] used socially, if it's the kind of thing that other

people might be impressed with them if they had this brand for brands that they use by themselves, you know, for the furnace in their home, they don't, they don't feel any different about the furnace in their basement.

Uh, so, and it really only works or only occurs if they think that. Brand is gonna be a way of connecting to other people. So is just in the end. Another example of how people try, you know, when we love objects is because we think they're gonna help us in our relationships with other people, not substitute for our relationships with other people.

The problem here is that brands don't really help us in our relationships with other people. Most of the time it's a, it's misdiagnosing the issue. And so while the intention may be good, it's just not an effective way of improving in your social relationships. [00:51:00] Yeah. So, so a lot of the time when we love objects, it is to nurture connection to others.

What, but where does love of nature fit? Is that separate or is that, does that have a way to connect us? I think it's a little separate, and it's also a way to connect us. So research on love of nature, contrary to the stereotype, the stereotype of a person connecting to nature is the lone backpacker in the wilderness, trekking through the wilderness kind of thing.

Um, but when people talk, yeah, it's like Walden, pond. Walden's pond. When people talk about this, the events in their life where they have connected to nature, overwhelmingly they are experiences they had with other people, and they created the deeper connection to nature simultaneously with creating a deeper connection to the people they were with.

So that is [00:52:00] very typical of the objects that we love that they create. We create a deeper connection with them. As part of, they're like a if, if it's you and your friend together, trekking through nature, nature becomes like a third member of the relationship in a positive way. So that part is similar.

However, I do sometimes wonder about nature and maybe it's a little bit different. And part of the reason is that people tend to. Much more altruistic towards nature than they are towards other objects. So I mentioned earlier in the interview how most of the time with the objects, when people love an object or a brand, they are a little bit altruistic.

For example, people who love brands, if someone else attacks the brand online, they'll take their own precious time, which is in short supply, and they'll go

[00:53:00] online and they'll write a rebuttal to, you know, no, the brand is really good for this reason. Um, and that's a kind of altruism towards the brand.

They're giving up their time, you know, in service to the brand. So people can be a little bit altruistic, but not nearly the way we are with other people. Uh, it's much stronger with other people and we're much more likely if a brand just starts putting out low quality products at first. The same way with we would with a person.

We make excuses for the brand just as we make excuses for ourselves when we do something that isn't so good. However, if you do that long enough as a brand, even your most loving and loyal consumers will decide after a while that, no, this, this just isn't very good. And people, uh, were much more forgiving of other people that we love than we are in general of products and brands.

That said, with nature, people exhibit much more altruism than they do with other kinds of physical [00:54:00] objects. So if I ask people, you know, you say you love your car, what? The only way you could drive your car was you knew you were damaging it. But if you set your car up in a special storage place and never drove it, it would stay in good health forever.

It would not be damaged. That's, you know, of course I'm gonna drive my car. The purpose of the car is for me to drive my car. Right? And yes, I know eventually I'm gonna have to get a new one, but that's what my car is for. But people who love nature, if you say the only really way to protect this natural area is for no one to go in it, you will not, as a backpacker, you will not be able to access this area.

Enormous numbers of people say that's fine, right? I would rather have that part of nature be something I never get to have contact with yet. Just know that it's okay. Um, and my, my, [00:55:00] my one of the longest sort of running, uh, not, it's not a running joke, but like one of these comments from my wife, you know, in relationships you'll often have, someone will have a, a comment that they make repeatedly and it becomes kind of an in thing.

Um, every time she passes an open plot of land as we're driving along, that's got a billboard in it that says for sale, she always says, oh, I wish I had money to just buy that plot of land and just let it sit there without doing anything with it. Right. Um, and people, people feel that way about nature and that's a kind of an altruism.

Yeah. Uh, and so I think that for whatever reason, people. See nature as more human than we see other kinds of things. And that would certainly go along with religions from, you know, early people where they tend overwhelmingly to be animistic and they see, like, [00:56:00] they see the mountain as having a spirit and the tree.

Each tree has a spirit. Right. And so I think it may be from a strong tendency to anthropomorphize nature. Yeah. Yeah. Oh, that's so interesting. So we're, we're just about out of time and I'd love maybe to leave you with this final question, which is to ask you for suggestions of ways to optimize our love of things.

So what can we do so that we find that balance, like don't become too materialistic, but instead use our things to live in more value aligned ways? One thing. Okay. Advice number one. Look at the things that are in your life and think about ways that they connect you to other people. Very frequently in my research, I'll interview people and just ask them, is there anything that you love?

And what is it? And often I'll be in their home with them and they'll start talking about the things in the home. And when they're done with the interview, they'll say, you know, I just never realized how many of the [00:57:00] things I love are things that sort of connect me to other people. So step one is making that realization.

And then step two is, alright, if that's why I love this thing, can I do that better? You know, is there a way that I can use it more effectively to connect with other people? And do I really need all these things? If for the purpose of this is really connecting with other people, you know, do I need so many versions of, of the same thing?

So that would. One way to form a deeper relationship. Another way that I would say is to try to get creatively involved with things. So for example, um, if you, let's say you love clothing. Some, one approach might be to say, oh, I spent a lot of money on clothing. Um, maybe I should just forget about clothing and, you know, do something else.

Um, but for a lot of people that feels. [00:58:00] Very painful because they really love clothing and they don't wanna forget about clothing. So maybe the solution is to try and love that thing more by having a more creative engagement with it. So join a group now. It's gonna bond you to other people. Join a group of people who design and make their own clothing.

And then through that creative process, you'll bond with these other people and you will come. I guarantee you to love clothing more than you did at the beginning. But instead of going shopping and coming home with four outfits that you don't end up wearing, cuz they were mostly on sale, it'll probably take you a.

by the time you start designing what the clothes should look like and learning the skills necessary to sew those clothing and, and putting 'em together, it might take you a year to make, you know, one item of clothing, but you'll really love that thing. It'll mean something to you. Mm-hmm. and it'll, [00:59:00] your pocketbook will thank you.

You know, if you can make that your connection. I love that suggestion. I love those suggestions. So thank you, Erin, for joining me today. This was so much fun. People should pick up the things we love, how our passions connect us and make us who we are. Um, where else can people find you? Find out more about you and your work.

Erin. Um, I've got a website called the Things we love.com. So head on over to the things we love.com. And while you're there, uh, there's a, on the homepage, there's a link you can click on to sign up for my blog. I have a blog with Psychology Today, and it's called. Peace, love and happiness and marketing and is just a very occasional blog where I send out interesting things.

Um, sometimes from my own research, sometimes from other people. Things I think are either intellectually interesting or sometimes just funny and entertaining. [01:00:00] Uh, and I'd love to have people sign up for that as a way of keeping in touch. Awesome. Well, thank you so much and, and I'll be in touch with you too, great.

Yeah, I'll, this was a wonderful opportunity and I really appreciate it. hey psychologist off the clock listeners. I'm going to guess that if you are listening to this episode, that you love to geek out about books in psychology.

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