

Waste Not...

By Neil J Hart

I used to have a house.

I used to have everything that the twentieth century has dictated to us to have, to own, to horde, collect, store, treasure, love. I used to have all the things that we presume we need to underline our place in society. I had the things that made people jealous. Things that made my friends jealous, my parents jealous, my loved ones. I used to feel comfortable with that. You could see how that made me happy, couldn't you?

I had everything and you know what?

I sold them all (well almost).

I sold; the cars (Lamborghini Diablo [devil red] and Jenson Interceptor [lemon yellow] both with Kenwood ten CD stacking stereo systems and bass woofers), the clothes (Armani, Paul Smith, Yves Saint Laurent etc.) suits, shirts, ties, t-shirts, jeans, cuff links, handkerchiefs, the lot, the TV (a huge Sony 48" plasma screen with Dolby DTS surround sound), the microwave, stereos, food blenders, electric tin openers, framed prints of works by Van Gogh, Dali and Pollock, books, videos, CD's and soft furnishings.

So what do I have now? I have what I've chosen to have, not what some marketing and advertising graduates have decided that I should have. I have what I have because I have chosen to have it. Me. All on my own. That wasn't so hard was it? Making my own mind up, I mean. We make decisions all the time but the answers are always based on something that we've heard somewhere before, something ingrained, not instilled at birth but exposed to ever since. It was always somebody else's decision.

Never my own. Never something purely personal. Something untainted by others. Mine. Ownership. Control.

I wish I could trace it back to its origin and find out who this guy is that sits around in some IKEA fitted, continually sun-facing, beach condo that has Ferrari's parked in the drive, with naked women feeding him Starbucks skinny latte's and decides fashion, style, home improvements and innovations in the advancement of technology. I bet he's laughing. He is, of course, a man. Only men can be this pompous.

So what do I have now?

Well, I still have the house, from an external point of view. In reality, I have a library. I have all the things you have and all the things you dream of having. Anything you could imagine, throughout the entirety of your life, is residing in my library. Just try to think of something that you'd want. I dare you.

Thought of it?

I have it.

You are thinking of materialistic objects here, aren't you? I mean what else could you want? Love, happiness, loyalty? A life partner? You *do* have a TV right? Everything you could need is in there. You just have to know where to look. The most emotional people are those who really engage with their TV. You just have to find the right channels, programmes, soaps, films, music, adverts, informercials (I pray for you) and all the emotion you'll ever need is there. That's where you got all that emotion from in the first place. That's where you were really made (physically in the womb, emotionally from cable), that's where you became the person that you are today. It's better that way

too because you can turn the TV off when you've had enough or watch it again to keep the feelings alive. Your TV never has a headache, never works late, never has an affair, never has different life goals from you, it never gets cancer, and when you get bored of it you just go and buy a new one. A better one. You get uglier, older, more sterile – your TV stays young, shiny, new and the quality gets better and better and better. You should name it. It's your best friend. Your life partner. I have all the TV's too. All of them.

You lose. I win.

So why am I like this? Does it matter? You're like this too, and you'd see it if only you could be bothered to look deep inside yourself (even the deepest oceans have shallow waters). You're only like you are because you have been told to be that way. Sure, you have little idiosyncrasies that make you stand out a bit from the crowd, make you a little different from the norm. You're not like the rest are you?

You are. And you know you are.

Acceptance.

Friends.

Like minded folks! Aw shucks. Isn't that nice! You're being herded like cattle from one consumer-grazing field to the next whilst wearing blinkers sponsored by Pepsi and Nike.

So what do I have?

I have a library. It's not just any library. It's the greatest library in the history of the world. It's man's greatest earthly achievement and nobody can see it but me, for I am the Librarian. I have merely taken what is all around us and catalogued it for no reason at all. None at all. Negating its purpose.

It started when I inherited my parents' estate. I got the whole lot. Millions. I didn't know what to do with it all. I had a huge mansion, which was filled with the trappings of my parents' era; it reeked of their existence. It had nothing of me, or for me, in it at all. It was at this time that, perhaps due to mourning or some other emotion I'd believed in, that I started to shed my worldly belongings. I sold most of the stuff at auctions, including most of the stuff that my parents had collected, treasured and loved. I made even more money. It was depressing. The money rolled in and my smiles packed their bags for the long terminal winter in Siberia.

I was consumed by the concept of work, money, possessions, social standing, death. Where was the point in that? What was my point? The point of being me? I wasn't ready to be just another rich guy with rich friends, fast cars and a mansion. I wasn't ready to be just another statistic, another marketing strategy, another type of person, a label, a logo, a bar code. I wanted to be me. We spend our lives earning money to experience things and find out where we belong, to give us character, to make us whole. Most of us come up wanting. We attach ourselves to that which makes us feel comfortable, relaxed, at home.

I know what you're thinking. I'm not looking at the big picture right? We all have our place, our little fate that was tick boxed at birth, our own path to follow which is all clearly-sign posted. I didn't want to be part of the big picture. I didn't want to be just one pixel amongst three hundred in every square inch of the world's favourite glossy magazine.

But what did I want?

I wanted to build my library.

At least, that's what I did. I never stopped long enough to question if I should, just if I could.

And here it is.

Three thousand four hundred and fifty six square feet of space filled with everything you desire. Everything you need, want, lust, love and it's all mine.

It started with the Yellow Pages like everything else. It's all there. Everything. You think I'm kidding? Go see.

The notion of 'free' had hit me one day more forcefully than it ever had before. Sure, I'd been drawn in to buy two and get one free but what was completely free? Friendship? Think again. Love? Nope. Sex? Ha.

And why? Why was The Yellow Pages free? What was in here that meant that I didn't have to pay for it? And as I looked inside I found everything that I'd ever wanted. Everything that could be found, could be found in The Yellow Pages. So I started from A in the business section and phoned them all up. I requested catalogues, magazines, pamphlets, circulars, anything that was free. I joined every mailing list there was in The Yellow Pages. I got mail. Lots of mail. So much mail that I got a letter of complaint from Royal Mail. You'd have thought that with so much mail coming in they'd have phoned me or something, rather than adding to the influx. Eventually I put two of my parents' dustbins outside the front door of my house with a sign saying 'post' above it. They were full twice a day.

Of course, The Yellow Pages is printed in area editions and I was only receiving post from companies and businesses in the South West London Area. I wanted all The Yellow Pages editions there were to offer.

I got them. To begin with I phoned The Yellow Pages Publishing Office in Reading but they tried to charge me for each copy that I wanted. Next I went through the Office of Fair Trading and complained that The Yellow Pages is essentially a free publication that discriminates against people by their default location. I caused a real stink. I complained hundreds of times. I didn't see why I couldn't have every area edition that was on offer. I hotly explained that I travelled around the country on business and I need to have access to a copy of The Yellow Pages in every district that I visit. I hotly complained hundreds of times.

Eventually, I received hundreds of versions of The Yellow Pages.

I sat for three months and phoned every company from A to Z in the UK and signed up for all their free publications and literature, mailing lists and competitions, surveys and loyalty cards.

I disconnected the phone.

I started to sort out all of my post.

I sectioned off the rooms into alphabetical order. Some rooms contained two or more letters as they were less popular or had less usable initials such as I, X and Z.

I stacked all the catalogues, manuals, letters, menus, fold-outs, flyers, brochures and marketing gimmicks in alphabetical order inside each room by 1.) Type of business 2.) Company name 3.) Date of publication. For example, in the ballroom was S. The stacks were lined up along the wall at the far end and went forwards and backwards (left to right) across the room moving nearer and nearer to the front windows. The room began with companies files under Sacks and Bags, Saddlers and Harness Makers, Safari Parks, Safe Deposits, Safe Removers etc right through to Swimming Pools, Swimwear and

Beachwear, Synagogues, Synthetic Resins, System Analysis and Systems Furniture. Each section would then be split into companies, for example: Supermarkets. This is by far the biggest section in my Library. I've even recently moved half of it to the conservatory. However, under Supermarkets would be A.N.A Oriental Supermarket, Andover Stores, ASDA Superstores (and then split into areas alphabetically), Budgens Stores Ltd (and then split into areas alphabetically), Co-operative and on and on. You get the idea.

Each room was constructed in this way.

The post never stopped coming.

The rooms never stopped growing.

The place was alive.

I hardly slept.

I hardly had time to contemplate what I was doing.

It never really sank in. I just did it because that was what I was doing. It was like I was meant to be doing it. I chose to start it and then it chose to continue growing. To stop this now would be like turning the life support machine onto stand-by.

The post never stopped coming.

I broke down in the summer of 1992. My mind was an alphabetical map of the UK's consumer literature. I could find you any item from any catalogue of any description, no matter how bizarre or rare, in ten minutes flat. My Library was finely tuned. My mind was finely tuned. I suppose you think that's impossible. I suppose you think that putting every consumable item in the country to memory is unfeasible. Well, have you done it? No. Then how could you know? People thought that putting a man on the moon was impossible until Neil Armstrong did it. Go figure.

I had ladders and shelving that I'd built from beams I'd take out of the roof. My Library was becoming a Labyrinth and I was David Bowie. Soon the corridors and stairways were converted into storage space and I was forced to retire and exist in only one room. My brain finally let go.

I spent two months sleeping and vomiting in the one room that I had put aside to be 'my own'. It was still filled with loads of personal correspondence, microwave meals, a PC and a sofa bed though. 'But you sold the microwave' you scream. Yes, I did. I also sold the fridge freezer. I wait for the food to thaw and then eat it straight from the carton. It's pre-cooked, right? I don't have an electricity, heating or water either. It's a commitment I didn't need. This room was the only part of 'me' that was really left. Everything else was 'you'.

I'd been stacking, sorting, organising and configuring for nearly three years. I didn't want to stop. My body forced me to. I wanted to go on forever, I was driven, focused, sorting and organising with an amazing sense of self-purpose. All I could think of as a slept and puked was how big the pile of post in my dustbins was getting. I worried that the postman might even stop delivering, I wondered if the post would ever stop coming, I worried and wondered for hours everyday.

And when I was lying there I realised just what I was doing. I managed to sort through the obvious madness of my filing rituals and began to piece together the methodologies behind this act. I believe my subconscious was trying to tell me something.

This is how it all shakes out.

I was charge of the United Kingdom. I ruled the UK. Honestly, I did. Back then you all worked for me. I had complete control and it was slowly killing me. I was a dictator and it felt good.

I ordered catalogues of products and services that you either made or offered. Because you made these products and offered these services, you needed to have promotional material that you sent out. You needed to attract me. I was the fly in your web. You employed designers, writers and publishers to put together your promotional material. Everybody was putting together material and sending it out to potential customers. Everybody was putting together something to send out to me. Whether you knew it or not, I was your target market. You wanted my business. That's why you had a job. That's why The Yellow Pages exists – to help you find me and for me to find you. Without me you'd lose your job, you'd have no money, you'd stop buying clothes, records, jewellery, DVD's, books, stationary, games, software, magazines, electronic goods and food. Other people would lose their jobs and they'd stop buying the product you were selling and all the companies in the UK would crumble. Do you understand what I am saying? Do you get it? Does this compute? I was meant to contact you. I was meant to contact all of you. I made you who you wanted to be. Without me you could be whatever you chose to be. You're caught and I'm reeling you all in.

You lose. I win. Again.

And then it got worse. Then it turned around. It wasn't about me trying to stand alone. It was about me trying to keep you numb. I'd gone from capitalist, to free spiritualist, to post-capitalist in three years. I was fixated with keeping people in their jobs. The more I order, the more you have to produce and so, from your managing

director who puts up the money for your promotional material, right down to the guy who keeps everyone topped up on caffeine, I'm the boss.

As I said, I'm in charge of the United Kingdom.

Confused with my use of tense. Yeah, me too. I can never remember what happen when properly and when something happened what was my frame of mind. Even now as I write this I'm not sure if I'm there or here. I guess that everybody is alive all the time, living every moment of their lives all the time. That's memory for you. You will never die as long as somebody is still remembering.

But what of the world? Could I really break into America? Of course I could. After all, America sets the tone for the world, right? What do you mean, 'yeah right'? 'And how would you do that?' I hear you cry.

Enter the Internet (I gave into electricity to fuel my cause).

Could I really master that too? Could I really scroll through search engine after search engine typing in Abattoirs, then Abortion Advice, then Abrasive Materials, then Abseiling etc? Well I did, and as usual, I signed up for everything. I got email. I got loads of email. Millions of emails. I printed out every email and categorised all the pages into order, as usual, storing then in the loft and the wine cellar.

As the years passed by, now nineteen ninety eight, I was seething with jealousy. The Internet was a far larger and more complex library than I could ever compile. Sites were going up faster than I could print them out, quicker than I could email them, faster than I could type!

I had to concede defeat. The Internet had beaten me. I guess you had won. I suppose you're all out there downloading right now, emailing, buying on line, ordering,

selling, reading, deleting, updating, forwarding, spamming and adding it all to your favourites. I can't fight you. A force that's out of control is impossible to stop, you're an avalanche, you're a stone collecting moss, an army of blinded fools rushing towards the latest fashion fortress, clutching hello and cosmo, with no thought of 'why?'. You're just doing it, whilst you pay as you go, making life taste better and working less and playing more. I can't fight you. I can't even find the battlefield anymore. You took the goal posts and removed them from my Universe. The pitch has four dimensions now and the players are armed with a technology that I can't comprehend. I have little time to even try. The glitter has faded for me, the curtain has swung across and the audience is leaving me to clean up the Skittles and Hagen Daas. I'm disconnecting.

I guess you've taken me over. I guess you've figured out what I'm doing and you've mutated it to suit your own purpose. You've managed to squeeze the rectangular block through the opaque window. Damn you. I had it all figured out. It was going to be so great. It was going to be the greatest human achievement in the Universe.

I have nothing but everything you have. The playing field is levelled and I'm obsolete.

But you're thinking right? About me I mean. Who am I? Where am I? And I guess you're thinking that I'm strapped in a chair, inside a rubber room, scribbling endlessly about how the world is corrupt, flawed and evil. I supposed you think I'm dribbling on these words, whilst they force feed me sedatives and try to pull the pen from my resisting fingers. I guess you would think that. That makes you feel better, doesn't it? That would fit me, that would make all of this okay. You believe that, don't you?

What if you're wrong?

What if I'm just the guy next door, the man at the bus stop, the guy who handles your bank account, the bloke who valets your car, the guy who's selling your house?

Who says I'm a man?

A man could never do what I've done. They just don't have the mental capacity. As I said, 'Men are pompous'.

So go flick on your TV. I'm sure there's a great episode of Friends, or The X-Files, or Frasier, or Eastenders, or Survivor, or Emmerdale, or The Simpsons, or Pop Idol, or My Family, or Knight Rider, or The Teletubbies. Who cares if they're repeats? You get up every morning, don't you? You go through your day, go home, go to bed, get up in the morning? Do you tire of that?

Isn't it all just one big waiting game? What are you waiting for? Just filling in time before you die, right? No, of course not. You've got something to share with the world. You've got a gift, a dream, a new angle, something fresh and original. Why aren't you sharing it? Oh yeah, you can't possibly miss Coronation Street, can you?

I hope you're happy with what you've done to me. I hope you're happy with what you've done for yourself. I hope you haven't strayed from the path and ignored the signposts. I hope you have a great life. I hope it works out how you expect it to. I hope it goes just like you plan. I hope your friends compliment you on how well you've done. I hope they enjoy your furniture, your recipes, your cutlery, your music collection, your home, your car and your family. I hope that makes you happy. I hope that fits the ideal that you hold so dear. I hope your parents are proud and your children grow up to follow in your footsteps. I hope you fulfil your dreams. I hope you sleep well tonight.

I just wonder sometimes if you'll ever wake up.