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WHEN THE GAME IS OVER
IT ALL GOES
BACK IN THE



Resources by John Ortberg

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Requests for information should be addressed to:
Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ortberg, John.

When the game is over, it all goes back in the box / John Ortberg.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-0-310-25350-1 (hardcover)

ISBN-10: 0-310-25350-0 (hardcover)

1. Christian life. I. Title.

BV4501.3.0768 2007

248.4—dc22

2007006673

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Interior design by Beth Shagene

Printed in the United States of America

REMEMBER YOUR STUFF ISN'T YOURS

I go around doing nothing
but persuading both young and old
not to care for your body or your wealth
in preference to your soul.

SOCRATES

It's only stuff.

We all have stuff. We see it, want it, buy it, display it, insure it, and compare it with other people's stuff. We talk about whether or not they have too much stuff; we envy or pass judgment on other people's collections of stuff. We collect our own little pile. We imagine that if that pile got big enough, we would feel successful or secure.

That's how you keep score in Monopoly, and that's how our culture generally keeps score as well.

You get a house, then you have to get stuff to put in it. You keep getting more stuff, and you need a bigger house. A house, said comedian George Carlin, is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. Some people have actually survived without owning one. Jesus, for instance.

There are now more than 30,000 self-storage facilities in the country offering over a billion square feet for people to store their stuff. In the 1960s, this industry did not exist. We now spend \$12 billion a year just to pay someone to store our extra stuff! It's larger than the music industry.

Psychologist Paul Pearsall comments on people finding it difficult to give their stuff away:

Many people can't bring themselves to get rid of any of their stuff.

You may require a "closet exorcist." A trusted friend can help prevent the "re-stuffing phenomenon." Re-stuff happens when, in the process of cleaning out closets and drawers, we are somehow stimulated to acquire new stuff. Beware of the stuff co-addicts, who may see a closet cleaning as a chance to acquire stuff for themselves from your stuff supply. Such friends are likely to go with you on a re-stuffing expedition.

Some people have a gift for acquiring stuff. Not long ago I took my daughter to a place called Hearst Castle. William Randolph Hearst was a "stuffaholic." He had 3,500-year-old Egyptian statues, medieval Flemish tapestries, and centuries-old hand-carved ceilings, and some of the greatest works of art of all time, most of which came from Sweden.

He built a house of 72,000 square feet to put his stuff in. He acquired property for his house: 265,000 acres; he originally owned fifty miles of California coastline. He collected stuff for eighty-eight years. Then you know what he did?

He died. That was shortsighted.

Now people go through Hearst's house by the thousands. They all say the same thing: "Wow, he sure had a lot of stuff."

People go through life, get stuff, and then they die, leaving all their stuff behind. What happens to it? The kids argue over it. The kids—who haven't died yet, who are really just pre-dead people—go over to their parents' house. They pick through their parents' old stuff like vultures, deciding which stuff they want to take to their houses. They say to themselves, "Now this is my stuff." Then they die—and some new vultures come for it. People come and go. Nations go to war over stuff, families are split apart because of stuff. Husbands and wives argue more about stuff than any other single issue.

Prisons are full of street thugs and CEOs who committed crimes to acquire it.

Why? It's only stuff. Houses and hotels are the crowning jewels in Monopoly. But the moment the game ends they go back in the box. So it is with all our stuff.

Stuff Is Not Treasure

Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Let's say you spend a week at Motel 6. How likely would it be for you to take all your money and spend it decorating your motel room? How probable is it that you would clean out your bank account to purchase van Goghs or paintings of Elvis on velvet or whatever it is that your taste runs to?

Not very. You wouldn't even be tempted, because the motel room is *not home*. You're only going to be there a little while. It would be foolish to waste the treasure of your one and only life on a temporary residence.

Smart players are clear on what lasts and what doesn't. So Jesus says it is wise to store up treasure in what's eternal: God and people.

This is Motel 6. Your "room"—your home and furniture and clothes and possessions—will last the equivalent of a few seconds compared to the eternity that will be occupied by your soul. It's not bad to stay in a place and enjoy it while you're there. But Jesus says don't store up treasure in Motel 6. It's not home. You're only going to be here a little while. If you're going to stay up nights dreaming, dream about something better than how to upgrade your motel room.

Smart players are clear on what lasts and what doesn't. It is wise to store up treasure in what's eternal: God and people.

Stuff Cannot Belong to Me

To an adult, it's ironic when a two-year-old says, "Mine."

Adults know that two-year-olds don't earn any of their stuff. It is all provided for them. It is a gift from someone much larger and wiser than they. They don't even generally take very good care of it.

Nevertheless, two-year-olds get extremely attached to their stuff. If someone tries to take something, that item suddenly becomes their favorite stuff. Two-year-olds can be so deluded, can't they?

Consider a few statements from Scripture: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." "Remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth." "The silver is mine and the gold is mine," declares the LORD Almighty."

I have been around churches for a long time. Do you know what the most frequently asked question about tithing is? "Do I have to tithe on the net or on the gross?" Translation: "How little can I give and not get God mad at me?" The implied question is: "How much of *my stuff* can I keep and not get in trouble?" This is like going to your mom on Mother's Day and saying, "Mom, what's the least amount of money I can spend on your present without severing our relationship?"

King David once said to God, "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this?" He doesn't ask, "What's the least amount I have to give and not get God ticked off?" He says, "Who am I, that I should be able to give like this? I want to use my stuff to build *your* kingdom, not *my* kingdom."

One day we will give an account for what God has entrusted to us. That can be an occasion of great joy or of deep regret. Some time ago we borrowed a friend's car. We had a two-car garage that was full; our friend's car was sitting in the driveway. We have five drivers in our family; three of them are teenagers. Somebody got into a car in the garage and backed out without checking the rearview mirror. *Boom!* I don't want to tell you who it was because I don't want to embarrass

that person. It was not, however, one of the teenage drivers. Nor was it my wife. What a bad feeling I had when it was time to return the car: “Here’s what you entrusted to me. I didn’t do real well with it. I had an accident—in the driveway.”

It’s not my stuff. And one day I will give account.

One of the most amazing statements about the early church is that “there were no needy persons among them.” If they had stuff, they shared it. There had never been a community like this.

Stuff Cannot Last

Speaker Randy Alcorn sometimes invites his listeners to go for an imaginary ride. We’re in line behind a few dozen pickups. They are filled with old furniture and rusted refrigerators and obsolete TV sets and velvet pictures of Elvis. One by one they stop at the top of a hill; the drivers get out and throw the stuff from their trucks over the edge of the hill to whatever’s below.

You get out of your car to look over the edge and see what’s going on. You see nothing but acres and acres of junk. It is Old Stuff Home. It used to be called a junkyard or a dump, but nobody wants to live next to one of those, so now we call it a “landfill.” *Garbage* and *dump* and *junk* are sad words, but filling up land with more land sounds positive. Who doesn’t want the world to have more land?

It’s a dump all the same, and that’s where old stuff goes to die. Flat screen TVs and sub-zero refrigerators (they don’t actually get that cold; “subzero” refers to your IQ at the moment you’re willing to pay for an overpriced refrigerator) and toasters and Twinkies and pieces of old Lear jets will rot next to each other in the democracy of decay. It’s not that such treasures are *bad*. It’s that they won’t last. Stuff is a foolish investment. It’s all going back in the box.

It’s not that such treasures are bad. It’s that they won’t last. It’s all going back in the box.

Stuff Cannot Make You Free

Paul says, “Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.” Not having stuff can lead you into the trap. Ironically, getting more doesn’t lead to more freedom. Getting can be its own trap. Randy Alcorn notes the comments of some of the wealthiest people of their day:

*“The care of \$200 million is enough to kill anyone.
There is no pleasure in it.”*

W. H. VANDERBILT

“I am the most miserable man on earth.”

J. J. ASTOR

*“I have made millions,
but they have brought me no happiness.”*

JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER

“Millionaires seldom smile.”

ANDREW CARNEGIE

“I was happier when doing a mechanic’s job.”

HENRY FORD

Stuff Cannot Make Me Happy

We are desiring creatures. We can’t stop desiring any more than we can stop breathing. But we can decide what sights and messages we will expose our minds to, and these in turn will shape our desires. By the mid-1970s, Americans were spending more time in shopping malls than any places other than work and home.

Ever get any mail-order catalogs delivered to your house? Take a guess at the total number of mail-order catalogs that get sent out in this country per year.

The correct answer: Forty billion (that's right—*billion!*).

And every one of them is designed with the same objective: to make you desire more. They are in the “need-creating” business. Things that we used to put in the “want” category keep getting shifted into the “need” category, and we feel we can't get along without them. We suffer from “catalog-induced anxiety.” Here's the problem: you cannot get enough of what you do not need.

You can get more. But as we will see in a later chapter, it will never be enough.

Stuff Cannot Make Me Secure

This is perhaps where the teaching of Jesus and his followers most radically diverges from conventional wisdom. Paul said, “We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.” Job said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart.”

We come in naked and penniless; we're going out naked and penniless. In between we get some stuff to put on our bodies and some stuff in our pockets, but none of it is really ours. We borrow it for a while; then one day we will hand it all back in.

My desire for financial security discourages me from giving. Each dollar I give away is no longer available for my protection. But my sense of freedom always *increases* when I give because giving is a declaration that my security rests someplace other than the bank. Giving is an act of confidence in God.

Stuff Can Help Me Become Rich toward God

Jon Haidt is a University of Virginia professor who found himself worn down by the study of human pathology. He began to explore that which elevates the human spirit to try to find out what creates lasting joy. He calls such emotion “elevation.” A freshman coed relates a typical story:

We were going home from working at the Salvation Army shelter on a snowy night. We passed an old woman shoveling her driveway. One of the guys asked the driver to let him out. I thought he was just going to take a shortcut home. But when I saw him pick up the shovel, well, I felt a lump in my throat and started to cry. I wanted to tell everyone about it. I felt romantic toward him.

A fellow psychology professor, Martin Seligman, engaged his class in a debate about whether happiness comes more readily from acts of kindness or from having fun. He gave them a unique assignment: engage in one philanthropic activity and one pleasurable activity and write about both. “The results were life-changing. The afterglow of the pleasurable activity (hanging out with friends, or watching a movie, or eating a hot fudge sundae) paled with the effects of the kind action. When our philanthropic acts were spontaneous and called upon personal strengths, the whole day went better.”

Early on in our marriage, I taught a class at a seminary and got paid for it. In those days we had very little money, so I set a financial goal: I decided that within a year I would surprise my wife by kidnapping her for a weekend and giving her a new wedding ring. (The one I gave to her at our wedding had a diamond in it, but it was only visible through a microscope. It was a step below the rings you get in a box of Cracker Jacks.) For the next twelve months, I socked away every check I got for doing weddings and funerals. I was secretive to the point of deception with her about money: “No, I guess I won’t get paid for that wedding either.”

When the weekend finally came, I had arranged for the kids to stay with my parents. I took her to the airport, and we flew to the coast to stay in a fabulous hotel. I had her ring hidden by a waiter in a cherry tomato in her salad. And I found that as much joy as she got out of the weekend, I got even more. The thought occurred to me, as I watched her mouth drop open when she saw the ring in her tomato, *It’s really true, what Jesus said. It really is better to give. Giving is the best!*

When we give casually, we receive casual joy. When we give effortfully, thoughtfully, creatively, we get immense joy. In the Old Testament, David was once offered everything he needed to give an offering to God. He turned it down, saying, "Shall I give to the Lord that which costs me nothing?" David understood how satisfaction comes to the human heart.

Nancy has a cousin named Kenny who more or less doubled as her best friend when she was growing up. When I first met Kenny, he was a professional baseball player, a pitcher who could throw a baseball as if it were coming out of a cannon.

Kenny hurt his arm and never did end up in the major leagues. He always loved baseball. When our son was playing on a team in the fourth grade, he got a few stints as a pitcher. Uncle Kenny came out to watch him and afterward explained to Johnny how to throw a bean ball, which fortunately Johnny never used in game conditions.

Kenny ended up living in the South in a community where most people struggle pretty hard to make ends meet. He has a relative by marriage who was extremely ill and facing death unless someone donated a kidney. None of the biological relatives was a good match. But Kenny found out that he was compatible and donated one of his kidneys. That one gift has created so much joy and gratitude in both the giver and the receiver that the spiritual transaction was greater than the physical. If you were to ask Kenny what in his life he is most proud of, I suppose it would be the giving of that gift.

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we receive casual joy.
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Richness of Having vs. Richness of Being

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf says that there are two kinds of richness in life: "richness of having" and "richness of being." Richness of having is an external circumstance. Richness of being is an inner

experience. We usually focus on richness of having. We think true happiness lies there. Our language reflects this when the “haves” keep popping up in our thoughts:

If only I could have my dream house ...

If only I could have a higher salary ...

When I have a better car ...

When I have enough money for the ultimate vacation ...

If only I could have financial security/nicer clothes/better vacations/
shinier toys ...

We seek richness of having, but what we really want is richness of being. We want to be grateful, joyful, content, free from anxiety, and generous. We scramble after richness of having because we think it will produce richness of being, but it does not.

In the sense of “having,” we can become rich by long hours, shrewd investments, and a lot of luck. But it is possible to *have* a barn full of money and a boatload of talent and movie star good looks and still *be* poor. The bottomless pit of our desires will never be satisfied. No matter how much we have, we remain what Volf calls “not-enough people.” For not-enough people, there exists no lasting soul satisfaction. I saw an ad this week that featured the tagline “Yesterday I didn’t know it existed; today I can’t live without it.” That is the disease of the not-enough soul.

On the other hand, we can *have* very little and yet *be* rich. A rich soul experiences life differently. It experiences a sense of *gratitude* for what it has received, rather than resentment for what it hasn’t gotten. It faces the future with hope rather than anxiety. The apostle Paul discovered that when he was living as a friend and companion of Jesus, who “though he was rich, yet for [our] sakes he became poor.” Paul himself experienced richness of being. He became a “more-than-enough” person. He found that whether he was living in luxury or living in prison he had more than enough, because he had been freed from the treadmill of *having*.

Richness of being is always available. I can seek at any time, with God's help, to be compassionate, generous, grateful, and joyful. And stuff can aid me in this. But usually it will not mean seeking to accumulate more stuff. Richness of having usually means getting more stuff; richness of being is generally associated with giving more stuff. Jesus' goal of "richness toward God" always involves richness of being.

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"richness toward God"
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richness of being.*

When I think of being rich and having riches, I think of two men. One of the men was part of a ministry for twentysomethings that my wife used to lead at Willow Creek Community Church. It is not a group that thinks much about death. When you are that age, you think you are going to live forever. I used to tease her that to draw a lot of people, she only had to teach on three subjects: sex, the end times, and will there be sex in the end times?

Then Larry Clarke died. Larry and I had gone to the same college. When he was in his thirties he quit his job so that he could serve full-time at the church (for no pay). He never married, never owned a home, never went on an expensive vacation. He just befriended people. He saw potential. He invited people into groups, into opportunities to make friends and contribute. He saw potential in discouraged people. He had radar for lonely people. He told people what he thought they could become.

Not long after Nancy had taken over the ministry, Larry, while at a leadership retreat in Milwaukee, was jogging downtown early in the morning and stepped in front of a bus and was struck and killed. His loss was devastating to that group of leaders, but even they had no idea of his impact.

A wake was held for Larry in the chapel of the church that week. No one was sure how many people would come: after all, Larry never married and had no children and no regular job. Cars came flooding in. The wake lasted three hours. So many people came to file past

the casket that the line went out the chapel door for blocks; eight hundred people stood in line for three hours to honor him.

The next day was the funeral service. The chapel at Willow Creek can hold around five hundred people when jammed full. Over the decade or so that we served there, many funerals were held in the chapel, several of them for people of significant stature and achievement. Only one drew so many people that it overflowed the chapel and had to be moved to the main auditorium: Larry Clarke's.

At the service and the wake, at the reception and in the halls, one person after another spoke of how his or her life had been touched by Larry. None of the stories were about Larry's possessions or achievements. All of them were about Larry's capacity to love. We used to wonder how Larry could afford to give all his time away. Somebody at his funeral mentioned they heard Larry say one time that you'd be surprised how much good food you could find foraging behind Ralph's Supermarket that gets thrown out even though it is still packaged and fresh.

That same decade, a funeral was held for a man named Armand Hammer. At the age of ninety-two, Hammer was chairman of Occidental Petroleum Company. A billionaire industrialist and philanthropist, he was called by *USA Today* a "giant of capitalism and confidante of world leaders." It wasn't until his death that his story came out. Harvard-educated political scientist Edward Epstein wrote *Dossier: The Secret History of Armand Hammer*, in which he reported that Hammer got his start by laundering money for the Soviet government, then hired ghostwriters to write fictitious autobiographies of his life. He got more money through a string of broken marriages. He allowed his father to go to prison for a botched abortion Hammer himself had performed. He neglected his only son and hid himself from an illegitimate daughter. He had no friends at Occidental where "he fired his top executives as though they were errand boys." When his brother Victor died, he filed a claim of \$667,000 against the \$700,000 estate rather than disbursing it to Victor's children and nursing home-bound wife.

When Hammer died, his son Julian did not attend the funeral. Neither did the members of his two brothers' families. And neither did almost anyone else. Within days of his death, Occidental distanced itself from him (the company's website doesn't mention him in its history). His pallbearers were his chauffeur, his male nurse, and other personal employees.

One man was famous, courted, wealthy, connected, powerful, envied, and feared. The other man secretly scrounged for food behind a grocery store and was loved. Which one was rich toward God?

It's only stuff.