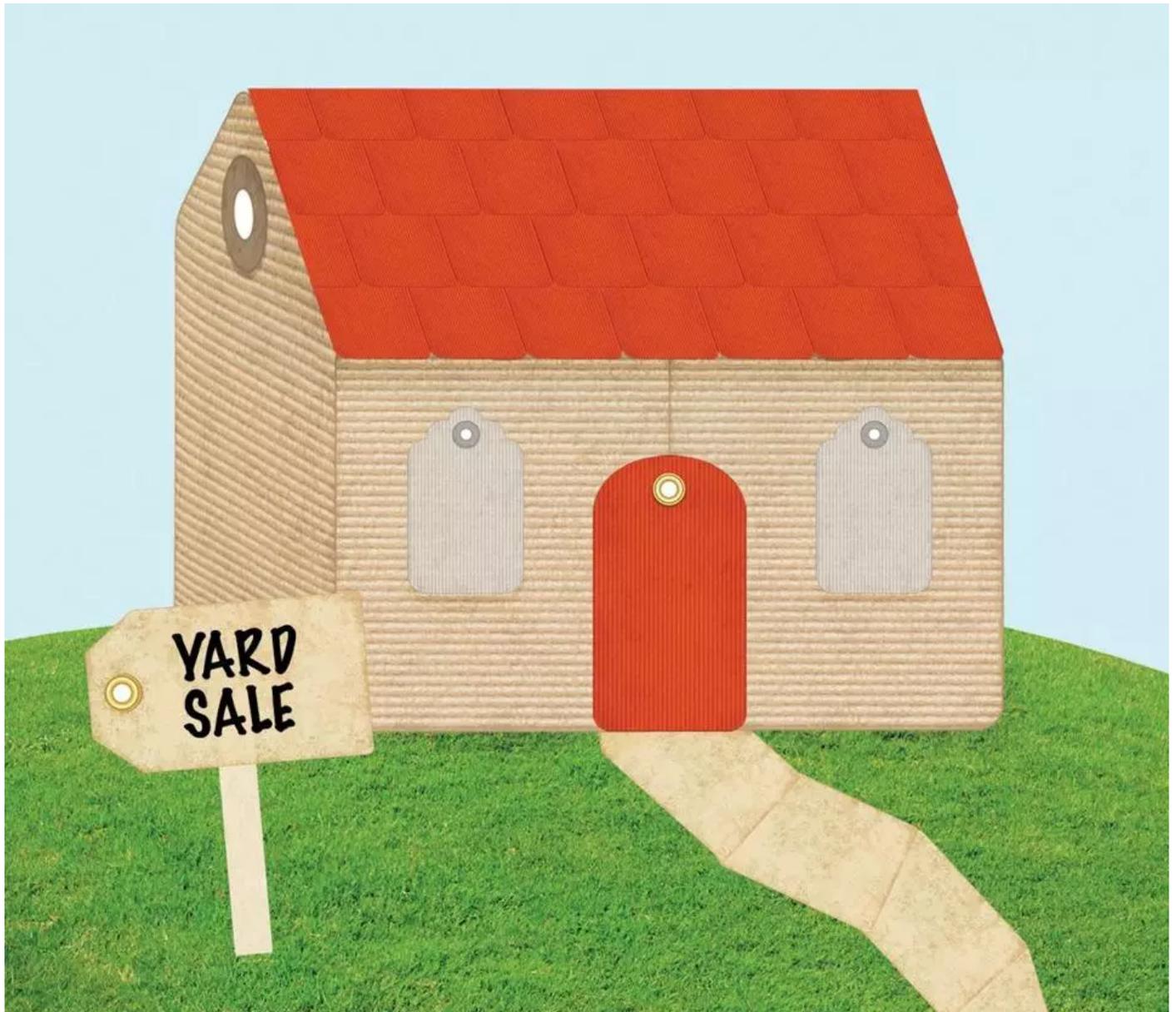




Opinion

OPINION | LEILA PHILIP

10 cents for an inflatable unicorn horn for cats — how could I resist?



LUCY NALAND FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By Leila Philip

JULY 14, 2017

It's only 9 a.m., and I'm already failing miserably. In my car is a green upholstered bench, a set of office drawers, a desk lamp, two blankets, two lampshades, one Polartec, and other things I bought at the church and the small white house. I've been out only 60 minutes, and I've already spent \$42.25. I set out just to observe . . . but this is so much fun!

Summer. Season of one of the great American pastimes: the yard sale. An estimated 165,000 yard sales will occur each week, with bargain hunters snatching up nearly 5 million items weekly, meaning that by the end of the year, [a whopping \\$219,563,500](#) will change hands at this American tradition. Many towns have instituted a town-wide yard sale day. On the seat next to me is a map listing over 40 locations.

The roots of the modern yard sale date back to the word “romage,” which entered the English language as early as the 16th century. Originally a nautical term relating to the way in which cargo was packed into ships, the word soon came to refer to the cargo itself, particularly the large amounts of miscellaneous cargo stored in the ship's hold. The first rummage sales were of unclaimed or damaged cargo that was hauled out of ships on arrival and sold at the docks.

In the United States, churches began holding sales of discarded goods to raise money for charities. During the Civil War, women held rummage sales to raise money for either the Union or Confederate Army. Flash forward to the 1950s and '60s, when American consumerism was on the rise, and the yard sale became a feature of summer.

We Americans love our yard sales, having instituted a National Yard Sale day (Aug. 8) and the world's largest yard sale, [Corridor 127](#), an annual sale of used goods that runs along 690 miles of highway from Michigan to Alabama. [YouTube abounds with legends of found treasures](#) — a sketch that turned out to be an original Andy Warhol, a set of old glass photographic plates that turned out to be the lost work of Ansel Adams. Advice books offer instruction: turns out you need at least 100 items, and (if in good shape) they should be priced at 20 percent of the original value. Done right, these books insist, even a modest yard sale should generate \$500 to \$1,000.

Before I head home, I tell myself I'll go to one last yard sale, and soon I'm pulling up to an old farmhouse. On the narrow porch I see rows of beat-up suitcases and yard ornaments. I'm looking at the three-foot light-up “Velvet Lady” doll still in her box in a red velvet Christmas

dress when I hear chickens softly clucking, then a sheep softly baah, then a loud thump which sounds like it is coming from behind the front door. As I listen, I realize the animal noises are indeed coming from inside the house. I turn to the woman and ask her if she has chickens. “Yeah,” she says, “got ’em in the house, just not safe out here with all these people.” Inside I hear more clucking, a shuffle of feet, and another low baah.

“Are they OK in there?” I ask, meaning is the house OK.

“Sure,” she says, “they’re fine, they like it.”

I say goodbye and walk to my car past tables filled with an amazingly random collection of things: assorted pots and pans, more Christmas ornaments, piles of DVDs, hip waders, black ski pants, a baseball bat, more battered suitcases. It’s not just the bargains that make yard sales fun, it’s the people you meet.

I think of the saying, one man’s garbage is another man’s treasure. There is no way to assign “true value” to anything at a yard sale, because its value depends on a capricious and idiosyncratic market. But one thing is certain: Our great summer pastime, the modern bazaar is only possible because of our Orwellian consumer culture.

Next to me on the seat is my last find, an inflatable unicorn horn for cats. It was so weird, and just 10 cents. How could I resist? And it begins to dawn on me, I’ve been caught up in the treasure hunt, the journey, the unexpected sense of chase, and now my car is loaded with stuff, most of which I don’t need.

Leila Philip is a professor in the English department at the College of the Holy Cross. Her latest book is “Water Rising,” a collaboration with artist Garth Evans.