



Smart and Simple Matters 005:

Curating Part 1: The Awesome Importance and Benefits

Show Notes at: <http://valueofsimple.com/smart-and-simple-matters-podcast-005-curating-part-1>

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In this episode you'll learn about:

- Just what the heck curating is and why it can make you look **amazing**
- The types of struggles a curator can be a master problem solver for
- What we all spend *three-fourths* of our day doing without realizing it
- What kind of simple system I use to curate
- The best three minute video about curating ever made
- What high quality and low class curating systems look and feel like
- The truth behind the **100,000+ words a day** we're exposed to

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Now for the transcript.





Hey there, and welcome to the [Smart and Simple Matters](#) show with your host, **Joel Zaslofsky**. He may have peaked athletically at the age of 14, but he's still hoping to hit his intellectual peak in the near future. This is episode number five.

<Intro music>

Welcome to another exciting episode of the [Smart and Simple Matters](#) show! This is part 1 of a multi-part series about a topic that I'm *endlessly fascinated* by and always trying to help people with. And that would be curating. There's a reason why I made my first [Ask the Community](#) article on Value of Simple related to curating and it's because I'm *super* passionate about the topic. If I get a little carried away or animated during this episode I want you to understand why.

Now, many of you aren't familiar with the word curating or the term curation, at least not in the context that I'm going to be talking about them. I'm not talking about curating in the traditional sense, like the role of a museum curator who manages a collection of art, written documents, or a collection of historical material.

I'm talking about curating as the act of intentionally sifting through your experiences and what you consume, archiving and categorizing the best stuff, and making it all accessible, and sharable, for your future benefit and the use of others. If you want to think about it more loosely, a curator is someone who continually finds, groups, organizes, and shares the best and most relevant stuff on a specific topic.

So, why should you care about what a curator does, what value one has to offer the world, how they approach curating, or anything else related to curation?

Well first of all, a really good curator can be a master problem solver of struggles we all have in a world overflowing with technology and information. I *guarantee*, either you have one of these problems or someone you care about has many of these problems that a great curator can partially or completely solve. Problems like:

- Information overwhelm
- Poorly or non-existent organization of key files, data, and resources
- Being an information junkie but not benefiting from it
- Creating physical or digital material without using all your tools so that a message spreads faster, your "stuff" is distributed more widely, and whatever you create has a bigger impact

But wait. There's more. I'm also talking about:

- Unintentional hoarding of great resources that other people could benefit from
- Not being able to get the information you want from a Google search
- Having the same information in multiple places, each set being different from the rest
- Not being able to attract people to participate and collaborate on the shared topics you all love
- Or, if you're like me, you have a terrible memory

I'm going to stop now because that's just the tip of the iceberg. Here's what I'm implying. As an example, maybe – just maybe – there's a better way to sort your books than by alphabetical order? Maybe there's a better way than a highlighter to determine, and later find, the most relevant parts of those books, especially since the important passages are likely to change over time and be different for each person reading it?





If that example doesn't resonate with you, here are some other examples off the top of my head. I *strongly* believe that everyone should curate and could get enormous benefit from it, but some people are better candidates to have an easy transition into the world of a curator.

- Were you the kid who always got excited the day new encyclopedias were delivered?
- Are you the type to research future travel plans a lot and document the best stuff you come across related to a specific place or trip?
- Do you do freelance work that requires a stash of inspirational material or proven resources to rely on when a new project comes up?
- Do you collect recipes like someone's going to come along and pay you a thousand bucks for each one?
- Or do you have this giant list of all the books, music, TV shows, videos, and other media you want to consume, but haven't had a chance to yet?

For all the people who said yes to one or more of those scenarios and for all the people who normally don't think about the way you filter, archive, access, and share your experiences and knowledge – and how to make the entire process more valuable – you're going to love this.

Curating is much more than finding a decent holding tank for all your experiences and information. I'm aiming to help people find an optimal curating system, not simply one that's less bad than the rest.

But before you can find an optimal process that suits your unique needs and personality, let's get a collective understanding of *why* curating is so valuable and who it's for. Since I can't cover everything in one show, future episodes will address the best practices of curating, discuss common obstacles to overcome, I'll have curating experts on the show who are helping shape the role and value of curators today, and a whole lot more. If you're even remotely serious about making better sense of the world around you and how to get the most from it, dig into this.

First, I'm going to hit you with something mind-boggling. An [academic study](#) in February 2012 by the University of California at San Diego, said that the data people in the United States absorb *every day* is the equivalent of consuming *12 hours* of information or media.

Now, putting that in another way, three-fourths of every waking moment for an average person is spent consuming data of one kind or another. I gotta assume that this is true of most developed countries in other parts of the world. And guess what?

The average daily consumption of *just words*, whether through email, social media, texts on your phone, browsing websites, magazines, books...whatever, is more than **100,000 words!** I mean, how do we sanely deal with such an onslaught of pure text vying for our attention and action?!

The thing is, most of these words, and information in general, is just the same thing over and over. There might be slight variations, but the core message or data is the same day after day. Now. If I curated already existing words from the best sources on a specific topic in a way that made me eliminate the need or desire to know whether something new was better or more relevant to something I already filtered, archived, and organized, wouldn't that be valuable?





One of my favorite online curators – Maria Popova of BrainPickings.org fame – says in a beautiful three minute video about curating, which I'll link to in the show notes because you [really need to watch it](#), “Just because something is new and it floats to the top, doesn't make it better or more relevant than something that came before it.” I can't tell you how many times I've read, watched, or listened to something and felt the same way and you probably have too.

The sense of information overwhelm so many of us have can be directly combatted with good curation. And a good curator is always looking for something new and relevant to their topics of interest, but they are also content with their current knowledge of a topic. And they realize that just because something is new, doesn't make it superior in any way to something created years, decades, or even centuries ago.

Think about it like this: libraries don't give you access to every book and video ever created. That would be a waste of their time and yours. They have a system: to sift through the crap, pick out the best of the best, and present it in a way that's useful to you. Museums don't display every piece of art work created. They just show you the categories that they specialize in.

Alright, now let me ask you: if you had ten thousand hands, would you even be able to count high enough for how many times having a poor or non-existent curating system has bit you in the butt?

When you look at your current curating system, is it just a giant spreadsheet with tons of text but lacking quality and a rhyme or reason? Does it look like a ton of unstructured bookmarks in your web browser, or maybe a bookcase without the ability to sort and filter its contents?

Perhaps it's a bunch of Post It Notes...scattered all over your living space, that have lost their context because they've been around so long? Or could it even be a text file on your computer with random notes you planned to use in the future but that seem obsolete now? Good curators exist to solve the issues of poor technique and how to address best practices.

I do it with a series of spreadsheets because it makes the most sense to me, it's highly efficient, and allows me to follow all the best practices of curating. I'm talking about things like easy sorting, filtering and exporting of information. Or being able to differentiate the good stuff from the best stuff.

There's a lot more like instant access and searching of a system from anywhere, storing my information in a way that won't render it obsolete in the future, being able to attribute content back to its original source (really important stuff), owning my own data – which I don't get with something like a proprietary database, Evernote, Springpad, or Pinterest – and being able to deal with different mediums like text, audio, video, and pictures.

Now, I don't hide the fact that I have a terrible memory. An atrocious memory. Actually, it's probably the reason why curating is so important to me in the first place.

Now, you might laugh, but I curate many of the experiences you take for granted with your superior memory. But heaven help me if I want to access or share information without my spreadsheets about that Italian restaurant I went to on October 22, 2010 with Melinda. I'm looking at it right now, which is the only way I knew when it was and who I went with.





But I need this spreadsheet to help me with other very specific things that are important to me. Was it paleo friendly? What was my overall assessment of it? Do I have a desire to go back there? Based on the service, food, and atmosphere, did I get a good value for my money?

Without my spreadsheets, I wouldn't be able to answer questions like this for myself, understand whether my experience was clouded by a bad headache or a super-happy mood, help a friend determine whether they should take their spouse there, or probably even remember the freakin' name of the joint. I'd be just a schmo with an opinion and a bad memory.

But with my spreadsheets, I get to feel good about being the go-to person for family and friends when they need knowledge or resources about a specific topic. Hell, I've had people tell me how much they personally and professionally respect me, trust me, or see me as an expert without realizing the reason *why* they think this is because of my ability to excel at curating on a certain topic.

It could be the topic of curating itself, a facet of health and fitness, an aspect of personal finance, articles about simplifying and organizing life, or a bunch of other things. My spreadsheets mean I can leverage the collective knowledge of all these people doing all these wonderful things to help folks from various parts of my life. And I do it quickly, with an appropriate hat tip to the creator of something cool, and in a way that doesn't require me to create anything myself for them.

When I can access and share what's most important to me, with the context to make it relevant and valuable to whomever I'm sharing it with, I feel confident knowing I'm providing real value to those who want it.

If you saw my spreadsheets, you might think having columns for categories, sub-categories, the source of a piece of content, the format of that content, who created it, whether it's worth consuming again, what the synopsis, purpose or notes from experiencing it were, the date it was created, the date I added it to the spreadsheet, and various tags...it's all overkill. I assure you, an approach like this is actually really simple and there are equally good ways – if not better ways – to go about curating with purpose and value. Mine happen to be super light on aesthetics and super ~~happy~~ heavy on functionality and ease of access. I like it that way, but you could come up with your own solution.

Now you might be asking, a solution to what? How about to far too much “stuff” in the world today. We need to help each other find the best and most useful parts – of all of the information, all of the knowledge out there – for ourselves and for others. And curating is a primary way to do this.

Now, I know this episode isn't giving you much in the way of how to curate well and I'll admit that's intentional. I need a whole episode, if not multiple, to do justice to various methods of curating and exploring the pros and cons of each. But before we get into how, I'd like you to have a good sense of what curating is from an individual perspective and why it's something that can be a personal growth opportunity for you and even improve your professional skills and prospects. Other people want folks in their lives who shine at sifting through all this junk for them, to put it in a format that's easy to use, and to be able to access or share it instantly and effortlessly.

The tools of the trade, they're doing to change depending on who you are, your needs, how you plan to use your curated stash, and your personality. But getting the “why” behind curation is the most important thing I can do for you which is why I'm focusing so heavily on it first.





OK. Shifting gears for a moment, I want to share with you the words of a new curator I've come across. His name is [Robin Good](#) and he said that, "The ultimate quality of the curator is like the one for a DJ." By this I think he meant a good curator understands their audience, only gives them what's most relevant or enjoyable, and does it in a way that maintains or enhances the context of it. Without curating, you might as well put your playlist on random and hope things work out for the people listening.

On a more emotional level though, I have a friend who described curating as a journey about how you express yourself. I love that and I thought there was a lot of beauty behind it. Curation can be this *amazing* opportunity to express who you are and why it is you've come to be this way.

I gotta tell ya folks, there are better ways to curate than with your email inbox or putting something in a special folder within Evernote. Curating is going to help a ton if you need to get feedback from your business customers or clients and struggle to make good use of it later.

I could throw out all these other scenarios where great curating is going to lead to great outcomes in your life but I think it's time to sum up the first part of this curating series. In my mind, with the way technology is evolving and the exploding rate of information being created, a great curating system is not a "nice to have" kind of deal.

It's mandatory to avoid being overwhelmed. It's essential, to be able to rely on something other than Google to find what you need. It's perfect to deal with a bad memory or poor organization skills. And if having immediate access to the information that's most important to you and bringing simplicity to a life that can sometimes be too complex is something you want, you can find some of that through curation.

The bottom line is, as more people and automated systems create more and more lines of text, more podcasts like this one, more videos, pictures, clothing and anything else that can be created easily, a paramount challenge is to sift through it all, determine what the best stuff is, and be able to access and share it easily.

If I can help it, I don't want you to hear you ever ask a question like, "How the hell do I filter all this data and make it into a useful format?" Or a question like, "I want to email my friend that useful article that I've seen before...but where...and when?" Or even something like, "There's so much useful content out there but, once I find it, how do I archive it?"

And I definitely don't want to hear anyone saying, "I already read that, but I forgot where and what the key information was. Please don't tell me I have to read it all over again!"

Whether you realize it or not, you're already curating. Most of us are just doing a really crappy job and unaware what tremendous value can be found in doing it at a high level. It can be simple enough that even the biggest technophobe can come up with a system and processes to do it well. It's absolutely worth spending some time and energy on.

If you don't think you're actually curating right now, or believe you are and are doing it close to optimally, answer some questions like:

- Am I satisfied with how I summarize or categorize an experience I've had or content that I've consumed?
- Do I wish the contents of my journal could be sorted and filtered by person, place, thing, emotion, or experience?





- Can I really get out what information I need – when I want it – from [Evernote](#), [Bit.ly](#), [Pinterest](#), [Instapaper](#), and [Springpad](#)...just to name a few?
- Have I ever accessed the websites for [Etsy](#), [Goodreads](#), [Library Thing](#), [Scoop.it](#), [Bundlr](#), [NextDraft](#), the Brain Pickings [weekly digest](#), [Rhizome](#), or [Big Think](#)? By the way, most of those websites I just mentioned are really cool and I'd advise you to check some out.
- But last, I want to ask you, have you ever read or listened to the words of [Michiel Gaasterland](#), [Steve Rosenbaum](#), [Robin Good](#), or [Maria Popova](#)? All of them are wonderful curators and I'd encourage you to seek them out wherever they reside on the web.

And as you answer these questions and think about what role curating might play in your future, remind yourself of the **Value of Simple community's definition of curating**. It's the act of intentionally sifting through your experiences and what you consume, archiving and categorizing the best stuff, and making it accessible and sharable for your future benefit and the use of others.

I don't want you to feel like a librarian, museum curator, or university professor. But I want you to borrow some of their best attributes, blend them with a mix of tools and mindsets from other places, and develop your curating powers for your own benefit and the well-being of everyone else.

Now, I'm going to stop here because I want to save some awesome stuff for upcoming episodes in this series. As I said before, future episodes will contain tips about the best practices, common hurdles to overcome, interviews with curating experts, and lots more.

So, if this first part of the curating series has made you think, confused, or become desperate to ask a question, please leave a comment about it in the [show notes at Value of Simple.com](#). I'll cover some of your questions and comments in upcoming parts of the series and would love to hear what's on your mind.

And, as always, if you appreciated this specific episode or the Smart and Simple Matters show in general, go to the show's [iTunes page](#) and leave a review. Every review is a *really big* help to our community and enables more and more people to become aware of what we're up to and what we're trying to achieve. A link to the [iTunes page](#) where you can leave a review will be in the show notes.

All right folks. It's time for your partner in simplifying to sign off again. You've just listened to the [Smart and Simple Matters](#) show with Joel Zaslofsky – creator of all things [Value of Simple](#).

Thanks again for reading the transcript of the Smart and Simple Matters show folks!

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