



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: Towards a theory of dust

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 01.26.26



I've discovered a curious mathematics to aging: not the dreadful arithmetic of wrinkles and wayward hairs, but rather the accumulation of small wisdoms, trifling revelations that arrive unexpectedly, carrying with them embarrassment and enlightenment in equal measure.

One such epiphany concerns dusting.

Now, dusting – that most mundane of domestic rituals – never much occupied my thoughts until lately. It seemed a task as ordinary and unremarkable as breathing. But then came the peculiar afternoon when I pushed open my front door and an odor greeted me that was so specific, so insistent, that it stopped me on the threshold like an invisible hand pressed against my chest.

The study, my sanctuary of leather-bound companions, was compromised. I recently indulged in a bacchanalia of book buying – as one does when restlessness strikes – and among the precious arrivals were two elderly hardbacks, their spines cracked with character, their pages yellowed like old teeth.

They carried the unmistakable perfume of their previous life: dust, certainly, but also that acrid ghost of cigarette smoke that clings to matter as memories cling to the heart, refusing eviction.

The solution, I thought, with what I considered admirable pragmatism, was simply to dust – everything. To banish the offending particles and restore my refuge to its former olfactory innocence.

And here – *here* my genius revealed itself to be its dimwitted cousin instead.

Why, I reasoned, should I engage in the tedious business of wiping each individual book, each crowded shelf, each cluttered surface, when I possessed in my garage a magnificent machine of modern convenience: the leaf blower.

Efficiency! I would simply blast all the detritus away, and *voilà* – paradise regained.

Except paradise had other plans.

The moment I squeezed that trigger, my study transformed into a small apocalypse. Books, those patient scholars, tumbled from their shelves like drunken acrobats. Papers I had completely forgotten about – receipts, notes, photographs – took flight like startled birds, swirling in mad circles above my head. Little treasures, the precious bric-a-brac of a life accumulated, launched from their perches: a jade paperweight, a brass compass, bookends shaped as duck heads all crashed earthward while I stood there, conductor of chaos, maestro of disaster.

I tried, heaven knows I tried, to arrest this catastrophe. But turning off the infernal device required flipping it just so, and in doing that, I redirected the tempest upward, where a framed photograph met its doom against the hardwood floor, glass exploding into a thousand glittering accusations.

Later, humbled and bruised, I texted a friend with my hard-won wisdom: “Never use a leaf blower to dust.”

His response arrived with the maddening swiftness of one stating the obvious: “Well, duh.”

But he continued, patient soul that he is, to explain what any housekeeper could have told me from the beginning: that even had I not demolished my own possessions, I would have merely redistributed the dust, sent it floating to new territories where it would settle with quiet satisfaction.

The purpose of dusters, he lectured gently, the reason we anoint them with oils and sprays, is that these substances trap the grime, create a kind of sticky embrace that pulls them from surfaces and holds them captive in the cloth’s weave, removing them entirely from the equation rather than simply shifting them around like unwanted relatives at Thanksgiving dinner.

And isn’t that, finally, the truth we spend our lives learning? That there are no shortcuts through the rooms of our existence, no magical machines that can blow away our troubles without consequence. That wisdom – real wisdom – resides not in grand gestures but in the patient, humble act of actually removing what troubles us, one careful motion at a time, rather than simply scattering our problems to the wind and calling it progress.

Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Capital Markets Initiative and a Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn

University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at AllenMendenhall.com (<http://AllenMendenhall.com>).

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