

Toss It, Cherish It
August 2021

Lately, I have noticed a neighborhood phenomenon, one that may border on desperation, the loss of hope. It may occur in the waning moments of a garage sale. It may occur all on its own. Items that once were a part of the household's dynamic—once lovingly dusted, held onto, tossed in play—are heaped with no regard for aesthetics on the front lawn, near the public's sidewalk. The heap is adorned with a dashed off sign, black marker on white cardboard: FREE.

The sign's subtext is a plea: Take these, even if you trash them soon after, as long as we don't know. They just don't fit anymore. We cannot or will no longer practice accumulation.

Discarding that which we have accumulated over the years seems to be a rising practice. FREE is everywhere. Near the sidewalk, in ourselves.

As a child, and in the years beyond, I accumulated. The acquisition of a cache of material goods soothed me, took the place of the identity and personality that was quite late in forming. If an object came my way by gift, purchase, or find, I formed a tight and emotional bond with it. In no way could I FREE it. Little knickknacks, stuffed animals, the slips of scratch paper that might someday have worked themselves into legitimate compositions. A picture that a high school classmate drew and slipped surreptitiously to my desk—Was this love?—while Mr. Mulderrig went on and on about matters algebraic. I saved everything, as if these everythings would, like the tillage of garden soil, nourish me, grow me. Known by what I owned.

In those early days of my life, though, ownership was not to be. A child in a Navy family, I watched, almost yearly, as my mother, upon learning that my father had received military orders to a new assignment, leapt into gear and threw overboard all but the essentials. If an item had no bearing on moving my father up the promotional ladder toward admiralty, it was deemed flotsam or jetsam and quickly jettisoned. In terror, I hid my treasures. My cunning mother found them.

Perhaps pitying me that rather upsetting feature of my younger days, when I became a mother, Life reversed the roles. My beautiful sons love life, Nature, music, adventure, a good book, a lovable furry pet, and friendship. Fond of sharing and giving and of the strength of memories, they do not cling to possessions. Their mother does. What they determine to casually toss, I tearfully cherish. Dresser drawers, closet shelves, and large plastic totes stow away what they see no need to keep.

In these past years, my sons have moved to homes away from home. When they return to the place from whence they flew, they pull out the unexamined that they left behind and start "going through it to get rid of a bunch of it." I hover, murmuring nervously, "Oh no, you want to keep that." I am dismissed to another part of the house almost immediately. I have to refrain from imagining what is going into the garbage bag or being placed in boxes for charities. It's a sort of grieving that I experience.

From an altogether different perspective, and in my defense, I could be considered frugal or prepared. My cupboards and closets do not lack in necessities. I have done my best to care for

appliances, gadgets, or furniture so that I will never have to replace them. Even though a number of these items have become dinosaurs, I saved them because surely one of the boys will want them. Or perhaps their cousins will. Perhaps not. I must be honest with myself, but old habits die hard.

Lately, though, I have noticed a phenomenon growing within me. Grief and frugality seem to be on the wane. Just a bit, but clearly noticeable. To describe more accurately, more dynamically, I feel a need to come up for air. To breathe deeply. To fling wide my arms and feel the freedom of space. Some might whisper in my ear, "Swedish death cleaning." Perhaps I am not facing reality, but I would rather label what I am experiencing as "Rocky Mountain life cleaning." Or minimalism. Or, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, "Simplify, simplify!" That's where truth lies, right? In the simplification of matters?

During the months of COVID, the clutter of our house anthropomorphized. It crawled and oozed, and slowly and surreptitiously multiplied, taking over the house. What had once been items of interest became stuff in the way. What had once been a peaceful setting became disorder. I find that I am slowly and covertly making decisions that bump up against my past phobia of flotsam and jetsam. Just to be mentally calm, I prefer instead to think more euphemistically: I will find new homes for these items.

A few weeks ago, our youngest son, newly moved into a house he will rent with a friend, newly moved into an office space, dropped by the house to ask if we might be willing to part with some of his granddad's oil paintings hanging on walls about the house, including in his room. He also asked if he might take the bookcase his dad built for his room. And of course his books that fill that bookcase. And a standing lamp, built by his granddad. At first, I was reluctant. I'm not used to empty walls and vacant places.

I knew, though, that he would cherish what he had asked for. He will breathe in his new space.

I stood in the doorway of his old room, which over the years has become my writing nook. I pictured it without the items he would cart away. Here, I thought, is what I will cherish. Here, I will breathe.