

Simplicity does not seek the security of things but opens the soul to both the vulnerability and wonder of creation.

—Michael Hechmer

Burlington, Vt., Monthly Meeting

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Quaker Earthcare Witness

QEW Vision & Witness

WE ARE CALLED to live in right relationship with all Creation, recognizing that the entire world is interconnected and is a manifestation of God.

WE WORK to integrate into the beliefs and practices of the Religious Society of Friends the Truth that God's Creation is to be respected, protected, and held in reverence in its own right and the Truth that human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the earth's ecological integrity.

WE PROMOTE these Truths by being patterns and examples, by communicating our message, and by providing spiritual and material support to those engaged in the compelling task of transforming our relationship with the earth.

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Simplicity as Spiritual Exercise series

Freeing Ourselves From Possessions

by Tom Small



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Simplicity as Spiritual Exercise—Freeing Ourselves from Possessions

FOR some time now, my house has been becoming more transparent. I can see across it, sometimes almost through it. There's a little more clarity. More space.

Every few days I walk through it, very slowly. It's a kind of spiritual exercise: I try to see more clearly a few of the things that are in it, without the veil of custom that ordinarily obscures them. I ask them a few nosy questions: What are you? What do you mean? Who do you belong to? Perhaps I move something away, into some other space; then I check a few days later to see how much of a shadow it left behind. Or perhaps the space it occupied has now become clear, transparent.

I discovered that many objects in my house have become accidental. They no longer belong here or to me (perhaps they never did). They are images of a self that I dreamed, a self that never fully emerged from the shadows. Once I know this, I'm free—to give the image away, as a gift for the person it really belongs to: my stepdaughter; my neighbor; the poor person on the street. Or I can exchange it for something I need.

"Such Stuff as Dreams"

We dream many selves during our lives. We accumulate objects/images which make these selves visible; thereby we gain status. It's difficult, then, to part with the image, even if the self for which it stands has always been only a dream. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on," says Shakespeare's Prospero; and our "stuff" is made from dreams. When the dream, however, becomes only an object filling space, then it stands in our way.

Gifts, too, are embodiments of dream—somebody else's dream of who we are. Perhaps we keep the gift in recognition of the giver and her dream. But the ancients were wiser. For the

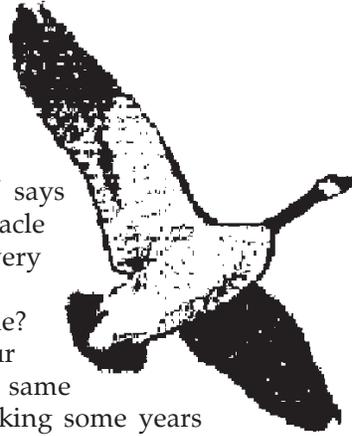
receiver of a gift to retain it for his own aggrandizement is to invite misfortune. The gift is in the giving, the action, not the thing itself, which must move. Or else lose its identity as *gift*.

An object is static; a relationship grows. Not to change is to falsify and atrophy. And yet the images that we dream or that dream us are so potent that we are charmed by them, transfixed. We are addicted. All change is a miracle to contemplate," says Thoreau; "but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant." How shall we participate in this miracle? How shall we escape our addictions? Possibly the same way that I stopped smoking some years ago: I changed my image of myself and so changed my behavior. Can we re-imagine our status as depending not on things but on space, open to action and possibility?

What then shall we do with our surplus of images?

The Art of Transparency

- * Try a spiritual journey through your home, just for the exercise. Meditate on your space as an ecosystem, a complex entity that consists entirely in relationships and endures by changing.
- * Look past the shadows. Try to see through the object, into the space it displaces. Possibly the walls will seem farther away, clearer, even transparent. Perhaps you will breathe more easily. Perhaps you will be free to act. Simplicity is not a noun; it's an active verb.



- * Discover who these things that stand in your way belong to now. The coat that won't fit in the closet: it belongs to the poor. The antique too precious to use: that's for the museum, for everyone. The boxes you never unpacked: straight to the fund-raising rummage sale.

MOST times it's not so easy; it takes a shock to make us see. A dozen years ago a visiting Episcopalian abbot, admiring my house, commented on how many "icons" I possessed. Startled to hear them so described, I worried, for a long time, over what he meant. It was a much greater shock when, a few years ago, I returned from travel in Africa to find that my ex-wife had moved out half the contents of the house. I was stunned. I made up lists of things I had to have back. Three weeks later I tore up all the lists—I realized I didn't need any of those things.

Such shocks seem extraordinary, but I think they come to us often: an unexpected word; a sudden change, loss, or separation; a flash of insight. If we open ourselves to its ministry, the shock releases energy, a new possibility. Suddenly we see things in a new light.

What has all this to do with the environment? Everything is environment. Our home. We must find out who it belongs to. Long before we die, we are called on to pass it along to our heirs—even to the seventh generation.

**We are close to waking up when
we dream that we are dreaming.**

—Novalis