



A Contemplation on Moving and Stuff

By Monika Carless

“Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.” ~William Morris, Socialist, Designer, Poet 1834-1896

For some reason known only to the gods, our whole family moved house last year: my partner and I, my mother, my parents-in-law, my brother-in-law and his family, and our two daughters. I was responsible for sorting, packing, and moving two of those households, and although not a pack rat by any stretch of the imagination, I have been overwhelmed by the magnitude of stuff that has sifted through my hands.

My intention was that I would pack only what we truly needed; the rest would be re-purposed. Trips to the dump would be avoided at all costs. Right. Our house is not cluttered; I crave order and clearly defined spaces. If something comes in, something – or two somethings – have to go out. With the exception of a growing library of books, I am not a collector. I do not hang on to clothes from my long elapsed youth, or odds and ends to remind me of my first kiss/lover/house/yada, yada. Or so the minimalist fantasy has always played out in my head.

Doggedly, I packed the contents of our home. Moving day dawned with an unnatural bestowment of rain. Darkness finally fell on the pride-filled image I had of myself as an organized, non-material girl. Then, the weeks dragged on as I unpacked, organized into new closets, and re-packed a new pile of stuff to take to the used goods store. Then the junk guys came to haul away an assortment of items. Twice. You know, the kind of stuff that the previous owners think the new owners will find useful.

We were consolidating. My mother, now no longer able to live on her own, was to share our household with us. We also planned to conserve as much as possible: time (mine, in caring for my mother’s household), utilities, the money to pay for those utilities, an extra set of house taxes, household supplies, gasoline for the car, etc. This was to be communal living at its simplest – the extended family. So the next four months were spent clearing and packing my mother’s apartment, moving her to

our home and finally dealing with the garage, to where all things with no immediate use are put. I might mention that my mother is not a minimalist of any degree.

In reality, I wanted to cry every day that involved sorting. No, I did cry. At some point I felt physically incapable of touching one more thing, making one more decision, getting rid of one more thing, using another garbage bag, even if it was the compostable kind. My mind was constantly working out the huge volume of goods that we consume and gather. A trip to the dollar store for tape made me practically convulse as I contemplated where all that stuff would one day end up. The garage was really my undoing. I considered arson. All these things that I *had* to keep! The tent, the rototiller, the snowshoes, the tarps, the “what the heck is all this stuff?!” And then my in-laws called to say they needed help on moving day....

Doing More With Less

Have we reached a new plateau in consumerism and hoarding habits? Does it truly take a household move to gain perspective on how much we own and keep? It could be that when our credit cards groan and we have to re-organize our priorities, we also take note of the habits we have formed around stuff. Sometimes, society as a whole realizes that it’s drowning in stuff and the subsequent garbage disposal issues that follow. Recycling, composting, and re-using are introduced to us as new programs. It’s been suggested that living with less creates space for more. More of what? We crave more leisure, more time with our children, more room in our psyche and spirit, more savings (remember those?).

Living with less is a captivating way to achieve these needs. Buying less makes room to live more, or even to be able to buy items that are of higher quality, that last longer and stay out of the dump for years, or that can be handed down to future generations. Consider these choices:

- Instead of piling up drawers full of cheap clothing that won’t wear well, purchase one well-made suit that will last more than one fashion season and that can be combined with other items to expand your wardrobe. I learned this in grade nine Home Economics class, and have made good use of it ever since.
- Every time you want to purchase something, ask yourself if you’d rather put that money into the “vacation with the kids” or the “take myself to the opera” jar? Then, do it!
- Give away what you don’t need to those who do and then make a conscious effort not to buy more of what you’ll give away a year later. You’ll feel good, someone

else will be grateful for their good fortune, and you’ll discover that lighter feeling that comes with downsizing. This is not a passing euphoria. Possessions truly do hold the spirit down. The more we have, the more we have to invest into thinking about our stuff and what it means to maintain that stuff or replace it.

- Sell enough things (possibly the second car?) and pay off a credit card. Then cancel that card. Think about all the time you’ll have now that you’re not agonizing over your finances.
- Combine two households, decrease debt, or eliminate it altogether. Pool incomes to purchase less food, less gas, less utilities, less taxes. It actually costs less in groceries for one household of three people than if those people lived apart, and there is less food waste as well. With all these savings, could you now afford to purchase your energy from a green provider? In our case, it is costing us an extra dollar per day for an alternative source of gas and electricity, and supports the building of more wind and solar facilities.
- Create space in your lifestyle. In a combined household, can one person now afford to stay home to be a caregiver to the elderly or the children? Can you take more family vacations as a result of the savings you’ve incurred by living together? Can you afford to invest more now into creative pursuits, dreams left on the back burner, savings for a rainy day.
- More people in the household could mean the personpower to grow more of your own food. We’re not just talking saving money now!

Searching for a new home to fit our newly extended family meant keeping our priorities straight. Finances were not the only consideration. How long would we be “extended” for? Although none of us wanted to say it out loud, we knew that at some point, we would not need the granny suite. So we looked for “just big enough,” for now and later, as each move increases the ecological footprint of the family. How much would we need to invest into furnishing, upgrading, and landscaping our new bigger home (landscaping meaning building new food gardens)? The bigger you buy, the more it costs to outfit and maintain. I admit that we bought on a love-at-first-sight basis of the area rather than the actual home. It had the least bling factor on a street where bling is abundant, but offered much in lifestyle, being situated adjacent to a huge forest and trail system. It also came with enough privacy and space (three-quarters of an acre) for being in an actual neighborhood. So we spent less, bought less pizzazz, but gained in spades of what means the world to us (pun intended). ▶

I've read *Living the Good Life* by Scott and Helen Nearing over and over. The subtitle reads: "How to live sanely and simply in a troubled world." One of my best take-aways from that magnificent manifesto is their habit of working half the day and spending the rest of the day in creative pursuits such as reading, playing music, talking. This concept has invaded my thoughts and dreams relentlessly. What a civil way to live: considering all our needs, not just financial. I am not so much of an idealist that I do not know how difficult it is to live the simple life without having adequate employment to cover the bills, or to think that everyone will live off the land or some such romantic foolery. I've tried it, loved it, and know what one gives up to have that dream. Admittedly, the Nearings lived an austere life, which they truly enjoyed, but I, alas, do love those beautiful things that the poet William Morris mentions: things such as colorful tapestries, books, white linens on the bed (thread count does matter), candles, art by local artists, and plants with their accompanying clay pots. Then there are the garden sculptures that I seem to be addicted to. The stones that made up my garden labyrinth were an extra trip to our new property.....yes, I moved rocks! My heart skips a beat over handcrafted furniture that I can earmark for this daughter or that one, and good pots to cook with, heart-shaped stones gleaned from beaches around the world, pots of divided perennials...the list goes on and all had to be packed.

So while I crave the simple life, it has to include these fineries, and my solution to not feeling too badly over it means buying strictly what I need of those items, and looking for things that are well made, which usually means waiting for something till I can afford it. I waited twenty years to re-upholster a chair and couch with material I coveted. It really did take that long for me to be able to afford it. The furniture to be re-done was well framed and stayed out of the dump, although not taking anything to the dump was a delusion quickly abandoned with this move.

The move has made me truly aware of everything I purchase. When we moved my in-laws, I screamed "NOOOOO!" every time something was offered to us to take home because we might very well be able to use it. "We don't need it, but thank you" became a constant refrain. I think that "I don't need it" is a sentence worth re-

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peating. And by the way, "useful" and "beautiful" seems like quite a huge category, Mr. Morris. Can we narrow it down a bit please?

Here are a few more tips for de-cluttering and moving:

- Can't decide what to get rid of? Try instead the art of keeping what you really love and discarding the things that don't fit that category.
- Barter items that you don't want to keep for services, such as a set of skis you won't be using for a couple of massage treatments. (You'll need these after moving day.)
- Start early before your move. Set a date by which you want to have all un-needed items to be out of the house, and this should not be on moving week. Start packing the day you sign the contract to sell. If you have one room to designate as the "box room," all the better. Label clearly!
- One thing to spend money on in a move is some good wrapping paper. It will save you much time at the other end washing dishes and glasses otherwise wrapped in toxic newsprint. Re-purpose that paper later for art projects or gift wrap.
- Scour your local telephone directory for government or private services that take items otherwise slated for the dump, or which are environmentally sensitive.
- Meditate on the spending and keeping habits that got you to where you are today. Ask for help if you're feeling overwhelmed with the task before you. Just putting it off until the week of the move might prove to be a recipe for a breakdown.
- If you are planning to live as an extended family, if at all possible, consider adding on to your home as opposed to moving altogether. It saves on a lot of resources, both physical and environmental.
- Have a packing party. Arrange a table of goodies to give away for your packers to choose from...like a garage sale, only easier.
- OR, avoid shopping, de-clutter on a regular basis, and never move!

Monika Carless lives in a small house on the edge of a great wood where she is planning a new organic garden, and taking up lawn to do so. She hangs her laundry out even if it is not really done in the neighborhood. She has hardly bought any new stuff.

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