



QUAKER EARTHCARE WITNESS

Freeing Ourselves From Possessions By Tom Small

"Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful."

-William Morris

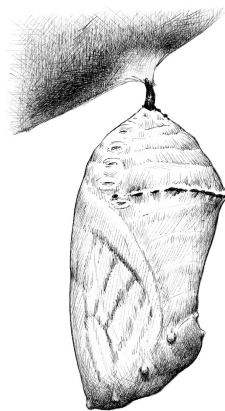
For some time now, my house has been becoming more transparent. I can see across it, sometimes almost through it. There's a little more clarity. More space.

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. Perhaps the space it occupied has now become clear, transparent.

I am discovering 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 dream-selves visible; thereby we gain status, a kind of false identity. 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. A gifted person must pass the gift on to others.

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 many years ago: I changed my image of myself and so changed my behavior. Can we re-imagine our status, our identity, as depending not on things but on space, open to action and possibility?

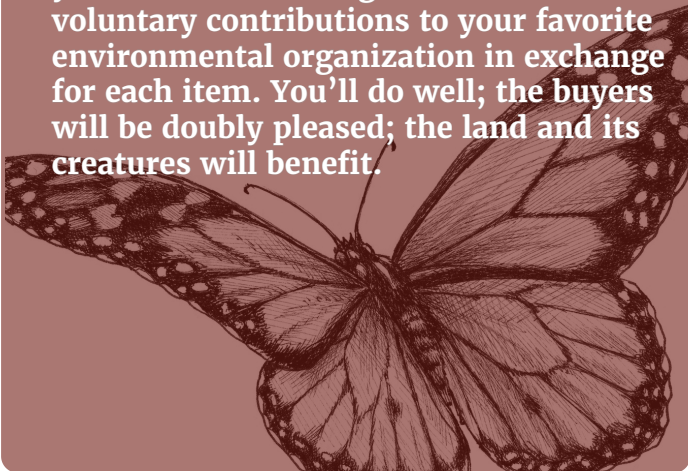
What then shall we do with our surplus of images?

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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 where these things that stand in your way really belong. The extra coat that rarely leaves 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.
- Or hold your own fundraiser, the way a friend of ours does. Bring out that stored-away surplus of nice things you'll never use, and have a benefit sale. Don't bother pricing everything; let your friends and neighbors make voluntary contributions to your favorite environmental organization in exchange for each item. You'll do well; the buyers will be doubly pleased; the land and its creatures will benefit.

**Icon or Doodad?**

It's not as easy as it sounds, though, is it—this changing of our ways? 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. Should a Quaker have icons?

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. Your icon has become a doodad.

In the Preface to *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*, Gary Snyder asks for “An open space to move in, with the whole body, the whole mind.” In the final poem of the volume, “Ripples on the Surface,” he invokes “The little house in the wild, the wild in the house.” The little house, the wild—both of them are ecosystems. They are what we live in, the habitation of both body and mind; and they live in us. But they are, Snyder warns, “Both forgotten.” We strive to control and enclose them. Only in remembering that they are both of them, together, our true home—only in that recognition will we find wholeness, restoration, the sudden freedom of “an open space to move in.”

This little house in the wild—our home. Awakened, we must remember that we do not possess it. It is a gift. Long before we die, we are called on to pass it along to our heirs—even to the seventh generation.

