

# Our Eternal Things

A few years after my father passed, my sister and I took on the task of going through his numerous file cabinets. Dad was an activist and he kept a copy of every document that he felt was important, as well as every letter he wrote to newspaper editors, business leaders, organization heads, and elected officials. Within his many files were gems, including a black and white glossy photo of W.E.B. DuBois and NAACP members taken in the early 1900's; news clippings with details of local and national civil rights cases; personalized correspondence signed by Jackie Robinson, Jesse Owens, Roy Wilkins and Thurgood Marshall; and an invitation to attend the inauguration of John F. Kennedy.

Dad's file cabinets were his treasure chests; my sister and I never anticipated the delight we would experience at combing through them. We took occasional pauses to read aloud, sigh in amazement, laugh or cry. This project was a celebration of our father, with each item reflecting some aspect of his spirit and character. As significant as they are, Dad's material treasures are mere symbols of a life well-lived; when my sister and I lovingly hold him in conversation, those symbols never ascend higher than an incidental mention.

I have moved many times in my life – twice across country with the means to hire a car carrier and ship furniture. Those burdensome moves now seem very distant; one of my most recent moves fit into a single, small piece of carry-on luggage and a backpack. The circumstances of each successively smaller relocation forced me to decide what I valued most, which was difficult. Letting go of more and more books, art pieces, framed family photos, and specialized baking pans felt like I was peeling away my skin.

I am in the process of losing the weightiness of possessions that once attached themselves to me like barnacles on a ship. As I began this "lighter" journey, I was faced

with making good use of what I kept – baking my favorite chocolate cake in a covered skillet on my stovetop; inhaling the beauty of flowers and their insects to indulge my artistic sense; relying on the library for books. I am becoming more aware of how little I need to have or spend in order to live well; ironically, this realization enables me to live more contentedly than I ever have.

My sense of completeness once rested largely on the size and scope of my living environment because I thought I needed a space with accessories that could accommodate and reflect all of me – my work, creative expression and moods. But of course, we are *so much more* than the spaces we inhabit; of all the things I have ever possessed, my exploration of this “so much more” that resides within me is the only thing that will forever breathe. I tend to measure every new purchase against this personal treasure, asking myself: *How will this thing improve my life? Can I live well without it? Will the Earth and her species be harmed by my use of it?*

Living in the Dominican Republic for four years heightened my awareness of the illusory value of material possessions; they absolutely add beauty and convenience to any living environment, but this can also be said of a creative mind. I watched my ingenious Dominican and Haitian neighbors fashion expert tools from what most Americans would consider trash – motivating me to notice and utilize the world around me. Having lived in a foreign country where many conveniences were unattainable, I am becoming more creative and satisfied with making use of what is available.

This level of satisfaction with simple practicality is not widely enjoyed here in the U.S. One’s ability to buy things is praised and rewarded by society and is often accompanied by a high level of self-esteem; surely, the opposite is also true. This high esteem has the propensity to steer us away from a deep sense of gratitude toward an egoistic sense of entitlement and a resistance to letting go. It can tolerate severe class division, even unbearable suffering. Our society has developed a ritual with objects – putting aside savings to purchase them, searching for the right ones, buying, displaying, and relying on them – behavior that can impede discovery, experience, and personal growth. On the whole, our relationship to things supersedes our relationship to the natural world, thus disparaging a connection essential to our ability to thrive.

The experience of going through my father's file cabinets was exciting, but it was also intense and exhausting. I remember thinking that Dad saved way too many pieces of paper – certainly with good intention, but I wished he'd done an annual purge. The file cabinet adventure was life-changing; when the work was finished, I decided that I didn't want to leave my family with a major clearing-out project when I die; I was determined to live simpler.

Having let go of many possessions, I've been fortunate to catch a mere glimpse of the treasures found in the continual discovery and exploration of eternal things – the questions, insight and creativity that dwell within. My life has consisted of a series of transitions that have motivated me to seek meaning and endeavor to live according to what matters most. This era of pandemic virus, economic depression and reckoning with racism is an opportunity for those of us with purchasing power to examine how we're living. When we identify and prioritize that which is eternal in our lives, we free ourselves from bondage to materialistic values that serve only to divide and diminish us.

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