

# beginnings: SIMPLIFYING SPACE

The desert dwellers used the image of a muddy pond or dirty mirror to describe a mind cluttered by distraction. They believed that what we cling to says a lot about the state of our souls. Their beliefs were rooted in Jesus' injunctions to stay focused on the one true thing—the pearl of great price, the treasure in the field.

## **Ash Wednesday: Clear Out a Junk Drawer or Closet**

*Abbot Pastor said: If you have a chest full of clothing, and leave it for a long time, the clothing will rot inside it. It is the same with the thoughts in our heart. If we do not carry them out by physical action, after awhile, they will spoil and turn bad.<sup>1</sup>*

### MEDITATION

Recently, we moved from our rambling old place to a new one in the back of our property. We call the new place Acorn House. The two living spaces, one showing its scars and the other still smelling like lumber and fresh paint, sit 317 feet apart; they are connected by a trail that meanders through the pines and—in springtime—heaps of blue lupine. We have been on these four acres for twenty-five years. Acorn House is meant to shelter us through the next quarter century while our grandchildren, we hope, grow up as our children did: in the big battered house on the hill.

In this new little home, built for two, there are more windows than walls. A spectacular view gives us a sense of space we really don't have. Though there's a second bedroom and bath upstairs, we're committed to living on the first floor only, saving the upstairs for guests or someday a caregiver. Our goal in building the house this way was twofold: we were looking for a way to live more simply but also more contemplatively—that is, more deeply connected to God. In this case, our connection to God was strengthened by the peaceful beauty of nature. And so our life of twenty-five years has been shrink-wrapped into 925 square feet that includes a single bedroom closet, a few cupboards and drawers in the kitchen, and a slender pantry, lined with shelves.

In a house this size, there's no leftover space for a random junk drawer. Yet we had plenty of them in the old place—crannies stuffed with unrelated items, some of them

easily tossed but others evocative of life phases weathered and nearly forgotten. What were we to do with these stashes when it was time to move?

My husband's initial response was to pull his favorite junk drawer from a nightstand we were leaving behind and carry it through the woods to the new house where it sat on the floor beside the bed for several weeks. Though I was sorely tempted to cart it away, I instead decided to wait for Mike to surrender to our new reality; the days of heedless squirreling were over. Everything we carried on into the future had to be essential. Eventually, he accepted this fact. One day, the drawer disappeared.

The great third- and fourth-century flight made by thousands of Christians into the Egyptian and Syrian deserts stemmed in part from a similar impulse: to strip, to cull, and to give away or eliminate anything that might tie one to the past. The Desert Fathers and Mothers were on a quest for purity of heart, and they understood that physical items are never just themselves but rather symbols and reminders of the life we must, however reluctantly, be willing to relinquish if we are ever to change.

Mary Margaret Funk points out that the narrow way Jesus describes in the gospels involves a fourfold renunciation, the first of which is giving up our former way of life. We must be willing to undergo what she calls *conversatio morum*, or ongoing conversion.<sup>2</sup> This process necessarily involves breaking our strong emotional ties to the familiar

(and comfortable) past and turning our faces, with however much trepidation, toward an unknown future.

A junk drawer is the classic repository for what we are meant to leave behind. Not only does it symbolize our histories, but it also reveals the speed at which we lived through them: how did a sunflower seed wind up among the rubber bands and old corks, and this seventy-five-year-old baptismal gown stuffed into a brown paper sack?

When we clean out a junk drawer for Lent, we are in some small way dealing with the detritus of breathless hurry and our corresponding inability to focus. We are beginning to tear through the sticky web that binds us to our past: not only to the fine and happy times, the poignant seasons of growth and change, but also to the tears we once shed, the idols we once worshipped, the myths we once believed, and the lies we once told ourselves.

#### PRACTICE

On this first day of Lent, spend some time going through a favorite stash, asking yourself what these items represent. Many of them will no doubt qualify as genuine junk, things that were simply stuck away instead of being carried out to the trash. Others might be useful, except for the fact that they are never used; these are easily bequeathed to someone else. If you come across something you cannot yet bear to part with, don't struggle with yourself too long. Instead, pack it in a box, label it, and seal it up; then store it in an

attic or the garage rafters for a few years, remembering that, if you leave it there too long, someone else will have to deal with it. Meanwhile, pray for liberation from these ultimately ephemeral reminders of the past.

Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. (Mt 7:24)

### **Thursday: Scrub a Dirty Corner**

*An Elder was once asked when the soul acquires humility. He answered, "When it thinks about its own vices."*<sup>3</sup>

#### **MEDITATION**

As we began the job of transferring furniture and appliances to the new house, hidden pockets of grime began to materialize all over the place we'd lived in for twenty-five years. At first, I cringed with embarrassment. I then moved to defensiveness. After all, who in her right mind regularly scrubs behind the microwave? Cleans the oven? Even bothers to glance at the top of the refrigerator?

The great irony was this: like my Norwegian grandmothers before me, I have always been what they once called "house proud." I make sure that linen closets are maintained

in a rational order, that dishes get washed and stacked each night, and that wandering pens, newspapers, bills, and socks are firmly corralled within their proper places the moment they dare stray into the public arena. Yet, unlike those Norwegian grandmothers, when it comes to hidden grime, my philosophy has always been “out of sight, out of mind.”

Others have noticed: my mother-in-law, who on our honeymoon got after the “slurpage” beneath the veggie crisper in the fridge; my Dutch aunt, who stayed with us a week and spent much of it ferreting out greasy dust balls under the stove; and our daughter Kelly, who moved back in for a few months between jobs and assigned to herself the role of window track scrubber. For them, it was the hidden dirt that inspired their zeal.

I had to wonder: how could I obsess about surface messiness but blithely ignore concealed potential health hazards? And did this propensity toward shoring up appearances at the expense of getting after what was deep and hidden extend, perhaps, to my spiritual life? The appalling grime revealed during our move inspired me to revisit this question. And I had to admit that the answer was yes; the same dynamic was clearly at work in me when it came to, for example, confession.

For years, two patient priests, first Fr. Bernard and then Fr. Isaiah, have listened to long, funny stories, fielded earnest theoretical questions, and been subjected to cartloads of charm but heard very few genuine confessions from me.