

Saving Space Making Room in Our Lives

by

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One Saturday morning, a few years ago, my father-in-law opened his garage doors and went outside to start his car. (He doesn't keep his car in his garage because he doesn't have room for it.) While doing so, a car pulled up behind his, out of which came two strange women who walked straight into his garage and began rummaging around. It turned out they had seen a sign pointing to a nearby garage sale and when they spotted all the stuff cluttering his garage, they just knew they were in the right place. My father-in-law wasn't amused in the least by their honest mistake and made clear to them, in no uncertain terms, that nothing in his garage was for sale. But the incident has since left our family with a humorous memory and ample evidence in support of our long held accusation that he is a consummate pack-rat.

I begin this talk about saving space at my father-in-law's expense, but, in truth, I don't know too many of us who don't have more clutter in our lives than we need. Living in a small house myself, with too few closets, I'm always battling mounting piles of clutter threatening to take the place over. As an admitted bibliophile, I keep ending up with piles of books around the house, no matter how many bookcases I build. My allotted book space simply cannot handle my consumption of books. It wouldn't be so bad if I could actually boast of having read all the books in my home, but most of them fall under the category of "books I'd like to read someday." Given the rate with which they are outpacing me, however, they might better be categorized as, "books I hope to read next lifetime."

I think my father-in-law's cramped garage and my overflowing bookshelves are indicative of just how little most of us really concern ourselves with spaciousness until we lose it. But even then, some of us are incapable of recognizing our addiction to stuff, and to stuffing ourselves and our homes with more than we need. Because we don't recognize the source of our discomfort, we keep filling our lives and homes with even more stuff, hoping to find the right meal, the right gadget, the right knickknack, the right conversation piece to finally make our lives complete; to finally satisfy our insatiable craving and give us the feeling of fullness; to make us feel full so that we might, at long last, be fulfilled.

Of course, much of our desire to accumulate comes from being part of a consumerist society that begins training us to consume when we're very young. Perhaps it starts when corporate advertisers convince us that a certain kind of meal, from a specific place, with a unique toy inside, will make us happy. From happy meals we eventually graduate to happy clothes, happy cars, happy homes, and all kinds of other happy stuff, which, in the end, only seem to make the bankers, creditors and investors happy—although, we must wonder if even they are happy since, no matter how much wealth they amass, they are always hungry for more too.

It's estimated corporations spend more than \$150 billion a year on advertising, an amount that easily adds ten percent to the price of everything we buy, not to mention the \$35 billion our federal government loses every year because corporate advertising costs are considered tax deductible.¹ But not all the hidden costs of our consumerist ways are monetary. In her book, *The Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life*, Cecile Andrews reminds us, for instance, the \$5 billion in advertising that cigarette and alcohol makers spend each year promote products that kill over half a million people annually.² She goes on to warn us that advertisers are increasingly marketing toward children and have even begun invading schools. Furthermore, the freedom of the press is hampered when advertisers threaten to pull their money if the media airs stories or programs they don't like. Andrews cites a 1992 Marquette University Study in which 90 percent of newspaper editors said advertisers tried to influence story content, 37 percent of which complied.³

But the threat to the spaciousness in our lives isn't limited to filling our homes with useless and costly junk. The human habit of filling up space effects practically every arena of our lives, from stuffing the cavity of our Thanksgiving turkeys; to overstuffing our bodies; to urban sprawl; to filling our air, water and soil with pollutants; to the human encroachment upon and subsequent devastation of vital ecosystems, from the Florida everglades to the Brazilian rainforests. By not recognizing and valuing the spaciousness of space, we not only have to fight obesity and clutter in our personal lives and homes, we are also ruining our global home by stuffing it full of garbage—a deadly habit environmentalist Alan Durning calls *throwaway economics*. "In the throwaway economy," he writes, "packaging is the essence of the product. It is at once billboard, shipping container, and preservative. Seven percent of consumer spending in the United States goes for packaging. Yet, it all ends up in the dump."⁴ He goes on to estimate that "Each year, Japan uses 30 million 'disposable' single-roll cameras, and Americans toss away 18 billion diapers and enough aluminum cans to make about 6,000 DC-10 jet airplanes."⁵

Now, in order to save our world and our lives from such waste, and the accumulation of waste, we must find creative ways to loosen the constrictions we have put on space by emptying out the clutter in our air, soil, and water as well as in our homes. To begin with, we ought to adjust our paradigms so that we begin to appreciate space for what it is—empty! The word "space" comes from the Latin *spatium* which describes those quiet and empty intervals that occur in both time and space. When writing, for example, we call the emptiness between two lines of text a "space," and the silence we experience in music is called an "interval." The idea is that space isn't really space if it isn't empty. When we pollute it with objects, noise or activity, space no longer exists and our environment has been destroyed.

We humans seem to have a great aversion to emptiness, probably because we are afraid of facing the emptiness we feel inside. Yet, according to many religions, the only way to experience that which is divine in us and in the world is to enter the great void. The *Genesis* story says, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void." I wonder if, as co-creators with God, we must also

create and recreate our world out of emptiness instead of stuff! In the *Tao Te Ching* it is said,

The world is formed from the void,
like utensils from a block of wood.
The Master knows the utensils,
yet keeps to the block:
Thus she can use all things.[#28]

Our consumerist mind asks us to focus on the utensils, but the divine mind in us says keep to the block, to the void, to the emptiness out of which creation emerges. Spaciousness is the Tao, it is the Way, the way of the Universe. Today our physicists have discovered the Universe itself is expanding, that all that exists is becoming more spacious. 13.7 billion years ago all that exists was about the size of a tennis ball. Today, even though there is nothing outside the Universe, it is managing to create even more space. The point is, the way of the Universe, the way of Creation, is the expansion of space, not the filling of space. When we obsess about filling space up, then we are out of harmony with the way of all that is, and we end with imbalance and injustice in our lives and our environment.

In the Hebrew language, when the letters *yodh* and *shin*, or Y and S, are combined, they form words like *yeshah* and *yeshuah* which refer to "salvation." In his book, *The Awakened Heart*, Gerald May tells us they combine to form a root that connotes, "space and the freedom and security which is gained by the removal of constriction."⁶ We're use to thinking of salvation in terms of the soul, not the salvation of space. How different our world and our lives might be if we start thinking about saving something besides ourselves. The Hebrew idea is that we must work to save the entire creation, not just a part of it, and the way to save it is to free it from constriction. The more constricted our lives become, by filling our homes and lives with more stuff than we can use, or by pumping toxins into the air, water and soil, or by depleting our natural resources, the less breathing room we have, and we find ourselves choking to death along with the entire planet.

The opposite of this constriction, then, is openness, or spaciousness, and that is the idea of salvation we must learn to embrace. It happens whenever we make a little room in our homes, or when we make our environment a little cleaner, or when we open our hearts and minds to others.

Grandfather,
Look at our brokenness.
We know that in all creation
Only the human family
Has strayed from the Sacred Way.
We know that we are the ones
Who are divided.
And we are the ones

Who must come back together
To walk in the Sacred Way.
Grandfather,
Sacred One,
Teach us love, compassion, and honor
That we may heal the earth
And heal each other.
Ojibway prayer.

1 Michael Schut, ed., *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*, The Morehouse Group,
Denver, CO, 1999, 2001, p.129.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p.98.

5 Ibid.

6 See Schut, *ibid.*, p.42.