

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
August 16, 2009**

“Forgive Us Our Trash Baskets...”

by Donne Hayden

I’m talking trash today. Trash as in unnecessary stuff, useless clutter. Like the old organ here at the meetinghouse. It was donated to Cincinnati Friends in April 1963, a few months after the first Meeting for Worship was held in this meetinghouse on January 27 that year. Though worth something when it was new, the organ is now just trash. Why? Because it’s a Baldwin organ—you can’t get parts for it any more; no one uses regular organs these days—everything is digitized; and it’s not old enough yet to qualify as an antique. I thought the wood at least should be worth something, but it’s just veneer. For years, the Meeting tried to *give* the organ away, offering it to other churches, individuals, anyone who would come haul it away. No takers, so it sat and cluttered the corner of the Meetinghouse. Fortunately, I found a man who will pay us \$50 for the organ and haul it away because he wants the old Kenwood speakers in it. At least some of the organ will go to good use and we didn’t have to pay him to haul it off. Trash is something that no longer serves a useful purpose, something that no one wants even if you offer it to them free, like this old organ.

On the subject of trash and clutter, I came across several references this past week. One is a snippet from an email making the rounds about children in church. This one has to do with how a child heard the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who does art in heaven, Harold be thy name . . . And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets . . .

Hard to do, forgiving those who put trash in our baskets . . .

Most of us already have too much trash, stuff no longer useful or wanted, in our houses and in our hearts.

A couple of years ago when my family had to go through my mother's lifetime accumulation, we threw away fully 2/3 of what was in her house. By the time we were sorting through her things, Mom had been in the throes of dementia for several years. What we threw away had meant something to her at one time—like the stack of ancient alternative medicine newsletters she kept as a reference, or the many unnecessary plastic objects and doodads she acquired as, time and again, she bought something from Publisher's Clearinghouse thinking (in spite of their assurances to the contrary) that it would increase her chances of winning ten million dollars. At the end of her life, she could no longer read the yellowed newsletters, and no one else wanted them, or the cheap plastic objects

or dozens of boxes filled with other useless stuff. So much of what she held onto was trash.

The experience made me think about all the stuff I have—will my daughter or grandson want it when I'm gone? How much of it will they have to throw away, wondering all the while why I kept such a thing? I've decided to try to make that task easier for them, to get rid of some of my trash and lighten my own load for the remaining years of my life. Easier said than done, of course.

I've recently been much involved with stuff, possessions, and ultimately, trash, because, as most of you know, I just moved from my house into a nearby one-bedroom apartment. Moving requires us to become reacquainted with all our stuff because we must decide whether to keep it and move it, sell it, give it away, or throw it away.

I've moved a great deal in my life—you'd think I'd learn and not have so much stuff now. I used to be able to move everything I owned, including my daughter, in a Datsun sedan. My most recent move took a 10' U-Haul truck and a dozen back-and-forth car loads.

One of my most dramatic moves was when I left the U.S. and went to live and work in Brazil. I sold my townhouse in Fort Collins, and gave away or sold most of what I owned, keeping only family heirlooms, a few antiques, and some

artwork, which I stored in my parents' basement. When I left for Brazil, I had three bags of clothing and incidentals. For five years, I lived in furnished, rented apartments, managing to acquire very few material goods. Within a year of returning to the U.S., I had replaced everything! House, car, furniture, appliances—I had it all and more.

We Americans now have so many possessions we have to rent storage units to hold all the stuff we can't fit in our houses! What is more, much of what we have in our lives could really be classified as trash. Yes, yes, "one man's trash is another man's treasure," but think about the stuff in your house. Does *all* of it serve a useful purpose? If you offered it to someone free, would they take it? How much of it could disappear without your noticing anything except a little more room?

Now, what about the trash in our hearts?

In a delightful essay titled "The Trashcan of My Heart," Liz Plummer, a member of First Friends Meeting in Greensboro, North Carolina reports the following conversation with her son, Benji:

One evening, when Benji was about three-and-a-half, he joined me in the kitchen as I packed my lunch for the next day. Soon he was nibbling on cucumbers

and hummus while I worked. As a result of talking nonstop while eating, he got the hiccups. I gave him a glass of water, and they went away.

Here's the conversation which took place, and I swear I'm not making this up:

"Hey, Mama, do you know where my hiccups went?"

"No, where?"

"They went into my heart. With Jesus and God."

"Really? Your hiccups are in your heart with God?"

"Yes. They're in the trashcan in my heart."

"Okay. Let me get this straight—God is in a trashcan in your heart?"

"No. That's just where he throws away my hiccups."

"So what else is in the trashcan in your heart?"

"All of my hiccups, coughs and sneezes."

"So God puts all of your hiccups, coughs and sneezes in the trashcan in your heart?"

"Yes, because I can't reach it."

"Well, what happens when the trashcan in your heart gets full?"

"Jesus empties it into the dumpster in my heart."

"Why does Jesus empty it, and not God?"

“Because Jesus is God’s son, and sons are supposed to be good helpers and do chores.”¹

Many of us haul around huge quantities of non-essentials, from out-dated business papers we don’t want to sort and shred, to all those “oughts” and “shoulds” we carry—“I ought to do this, should do that, must do another thing.” We have plastic tubs filled with stuff in our basements, and trashcans in our hearts filled with regrets, old hurts, self-doubt, self-criticism, judgment of others—in short, all our “hiccups, coughs, and sneezes.”

One of the heaviest things we carry in the trashcans of our hearts is the loss of time and focus we incur by having our “stuff,” i.e., our material goods, and all that comes with them. Listen to this description from Carola Dunn, a mystery writer.

Modern life is so complicated I have a dozen things on my mind distracting me from my story (already 4 weeks overdue): medical insurance changes to be studied; what do I do with the trash and recycling when tomorrow's my monthly pick-up and the street's going to be paved so nothing can be put out; the garden needs watering; the bird feeders need filling; what am I going to have for dinner? have to call in a prescription refill--and pick it up; teach the dog sit, stay, come,

¹ Liz Plummer, “The Trashcan of My Heart,” *Quaker Life*, July/August 2009, page 23.

don't bite that other dog because some day you're going to have to go and stay in her house; vet appointment; medical appointments (I suppose I couldn't get someone else to attend those for me!); friends' dogs need feeding while they're away; etc, etc;

and then there is her work:

not to mention writing-connected distractions: send stuff to UK publisher for their website; find a new web host because Geocities is shutting down; local author signing table at the county fair (did I really sign up for 3 sessions? I must be mad!); multi-author signing at the coast; workshop in Portland; PNBA; talk for Portland Friends of Mystery (3 events in Portland--about 100 miles--on three successive weekends); signings in Portland and Seattle; must contact friends to find beds for several nights; and I haven't even started planning my usual California signings, nor guest bloggings for when Sheer Folly [her book] comes out.

Housework? Forget it. Mow the lawn? Forget it. Cook? Forget it.

...

I did remember to bring in the mail, not a major operation but yet another thing to remember. I shouldn't complain--there was a nice royalty cheque among the junk. Of course, that means I have to remember to go to the bank...

Must remember to breathe...²

Sound familiar? Notice what is un-stated but readily apparent in her heart. Feelings of inadequacy, perhaps even guilt that she can't handle everything better, and frustration at not being able to focus on what is most important to her—writing.

This sounds much like my own experience. I try to imagine where the unnecessary parts are, where the “trash” is in my daily life. What could a person do to eliminate some of the soul-killing details? How can we live so that we can focus time and attention on the meaningful and significant? This question is not new or limited to our own time, of course, though I do think it's gotten worse. In the 19th century, Henry David Thoreau commented that “Our life is frittered away by detail.” “In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life,” he wrote,

such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds.

² “The World is Too Much with Us,” *The Lady Killers: Rhys Bowen, Mary Anna Evans, Cara Black, Jane Finniss, Sharan Newman, Carola Dunn, Ann Parker: Seven female writers of mystery fiction share their wit and wisdom, writing tips and travel experiences (blog)* http://theladykillers.typepad.com/the_lady_killers/2009/08/the-world-is-too-much-with-us.html

Thoreau's solution was to eliminate all that was superfluous, but then, his definition of the superfluous was fairly extreme.

"Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!" says Thoreau, "I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. ... Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion."³

So long as our houses and hearts are filled with unnecessary stuff, we have little room for the things that really matter. Like a beautiful antique buffet piled high with stacks of junk mail so that we can't even see the swirled oak, our time is piled high with minutes & hours of dealing with our possessions—houses, yards, etc. We have to work so many hours at such and such a salary to keep all the stuff we currently have, and, we must spend time maintaining things when they break or wear out. Where do we find the minutes and hours to talk with our children? To rest with friends, to listen to music? To simply do *one thing* at a time? To refresh our spirits with quiet and silence?

A book I picked up yesterday fell open to a story about Madame Marie, a Catholic woman who helped Jews escape Poland. The story is narrated by Odette

³ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, "Where I lived, And What I Lived For."

Myers, who was seven years old when Madame Marie hid her and her parents in the closet while Nazis searched the apartments for Jews. Before that, however, Odette lived in an apartment managed by Madame Marie, who taught the child her “simple philosophy.” “The heart is like an apartment,’ she said,

‘and if it’s messy and there is nothing to offer, no food or drink to offer guest, nobody will want to come. But if it’s clean and dusted every day, and if it’s pretty and there are flowers and food and drink for guests, people will want to come and they will want to stay for dinner. And if it’s super nice, God himself will want to come.’”⁴

Housework involves getting rid of clutter; heartwork does too. If we unclutter our heartspace we leave room for the Spirit to live and move within us.

We read in the New Testament, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mat. 6:21). It is also true perhaps, that where your trash is, there will your heart be also.

If you talk with people who’ve lost everything, say in a fire or tornado, they mourn the loss of family photos and memorabilia, but a number of them report feelings of relief and freedom. Both in our houses and in our hearts, stuff that is

⁴ Odette Myers, “Madame Marie,” *Lighting Candles in the Dark: Stories of Courage and Love in Action*. (Philadelphia: Friends General Conference, 2001), pages 156-157.

not really related to our self or our soul becomes a weight around our lives, becomes useless trash cluttering our spirit's path and the corners of our hearts.

I leave you with this thought from the great Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart:

*It is a fair trade and an equal exchange: to the extent that you depart from things, thus far, no more and no less, God enters into you with all that is his, as far as you have stripped yourself of yourself in all things. It is here that you should begin, whatever the cost, for it is here that you will find true peace, and nowhere else.*⁵

⁵ Meister Eckhart, *Talks of Instruction*, <http://www.eckhartsociety.org/meister.htm>