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English 312

13 September 2011

Trash and Treasure

Perhaps “stuff” is what makes a family. I often feel that it is a key component in mine, anyhow. From boxes of aged magazines and mysterious computer parts to worn-out toys and seemingly pointless papers, our house has no lack of insulation within its walls. I come from a family of nine, so it seems natural that things are limited in our small home: money, patience, privacy, and especially living space. But I know we’ve all grown closer because of it despite the constant competition for our single bathroom over the years. In fact, I’d never have things any other way, except for one thing: the overabundance of “stuff” that continues to encroach upon my comfort.

It seems there are so many things in my house that attempting to clean is more like a juggling act than an actual purging of items. After another daily routine of clearing up one room just to clutter up another, I decided to approach my mother about the issue. Why couldn’t she get rid of at least some of this “junk”? It didn’t seem to possess any special value or sentiment, and most of it wasn’t really recognizable. My mother’s answer was simple enough, and luckily she took no offense. “I guess it’s because of how we grew up,” she said. “We always lived by the saying, ‘Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without.’” Provident living was the guiding principle for her family.

I knew that my mother came from humble circumstances, but many of the things that she told me came as a surprise. My grandfather received very little pay as a part-time miner down in

Spanish Fork when my mother's parents moved to Provo in 1939. He would pick up what jobs he could here and there as they came up, but rarely was he able to maintain any steady work. My great uncle had originally offered my grandparents a modest home but when they failed on their monthly payments he soon began dividing it up into apartments, thus squeezing my mother's family into tighter and tighter living space. Out of desperation, my grandparents eventually bought a small plot of land in the middle of a city block and with the help of my great uncle, converted a chicken coop into a home by raising the walls, insulating them with sawdust and installing window frames that they found at the dump. That humble house was where my mother and seven of her nine siblings grew up. In a very literal sense, they made do with what they had.

Waste was never an option for my mother's family. My grandmother would save boxes upon boxes of clothes that she received from neighbors and friends, which consequently provided my mother with endless amounts of fun in the shed behind her house as she and her sisters would play dress-ups. Scraps of cloth were kept in a wooden buffet for homemade clothes and hand-sewn quilts, along with stacks of newspaper for making patterns for dresses. Endless amounts of books on nutrition and healing lined the walls as a daily reference in case anybody got sick. Not even shoes were retired when they grew old. When a pair would wear out, my grandfather pulled a large metal box out from under his bed to reveal a full shoe mending kit, and would proceed to replace the soles with a piece of cardboard or some other material he had handy. Everything in my mother's house had a purpose even if it had outlived its original use.

Apart from material goods, my mother's parents also grew, collected and stored fresh fruit and vegetables. My grandfather would often ask permission to pick unwanted fruit such as apples, apricots, pears and peaches from the neighbors that were only going to let it fall to the

ground. He also picked fruit for large orchards in order to take a portion home as payment. Some of the fruit was eaten fresh, but most of it lined the shelves as it was either bottled or dried. Potatoes and carrots were stored in a root cellar during the winter, and because of lack of space the squash was kept in my mother's small room. Despite the limited space in a very crowded and cluttered house, it was only through saving for the future that my mother and her family found any sense of security.

Of course, this isn't to say that my mother never had any frustrations of her own. In an already small and crowded house she often grew tired of "never knowing where to put everything" because someone always laid claim on something in the house, making it nearly impossible to clear things away. She also experienced much discomfort as her mother crowded things further by caring for foster children in order to earn some extra money, or when doctor's aprons waiting to be mended piled up in the corner as a form of repayment of the medical bills. But as time went on she grew to "understand the importance of frugality" and provident living. Perhaps she began to understand that the value of what lay around the house outweighed the temporal discomfort of lost space.

As my mother described her experiences growing up, I paused to take another look around at the house I often feel so enclosed in. I saw the same stacks of papers, but rather than seeming so pointless, they began to convey a sense of life in progress. Some contained the memories of family and old school projects that have passed on through the halls of time. Others were less significant, but still held pieces of history in action. As I glanced over at the broken toys, I began to consider that perhaps they don't seem so useless when they bring joyful laughter to my ten nieces and nephews. Even each item of old furniture seemed to come alive with its own story: my mother's favorite rocking chair being a case in point. What once was in pieces at

the dump eventually became the very thing that drew my mother close to her children as she rocked each of us to sleep. Maybe it's true that we have a lot of "junk." Then again, perhaps that is exactly what has helped us become the family we are today.

Works Cited

Last Name, First Name. Personal Interview. 5 April 2011.