

Dealing With the Stuff of Life

This week, I've been dedicating a lot of time to going through a lifetime's worth of stuff. It's not that I like having a lot of things. I can wear the same set of clothes day in and day out, eat more or less the same limited diet, and depend on a minimal amount of possessions. At the same time, I find it nearly impossible to make time and space to sort through my many belongings in order to determine what goes, what stays, and what gets given or thrown away. No doubt you readers know very well what I mean.

People are buying bigger houses nowadays, and storage facilities are multiplying everywhere. This allows us to accumulate more, and more, and more. But my parents moved from a bigger home to a smaller one, and now to a modest condominium. We five kids have had to go fetch whatever we kept in the basement. In my case, this meant old artwork, journals, essays, and all those books that one day would surely be read.

Add to that fourteen years' of collecting things since I arrived in 1993 with almost nothing. I had lived three years with the Missionaries of Charity in Tijuana. My belonging had all fit in two medium boxes. Strangely, I'd never missed all the things that I once had and would one day have again.

Now that I'll be moving into a smaller space myself, I can't avoid my destiny anymore. One by one, pulling all my boxes from storage and from the closets where I live, I've got to evaluate every item. This is my karma. It is my personal consequence for having far too many interests in life.

As much as I'm fascinated with this sentimental journey into the archival past, I resent taking vital time away from parish work and from what must be far more important. Maybe I should just haul everything to the dump.

But what if somebody could benefit from that book? And what about the gifts I bought in lands far away and never succeeding in giving? Have I forgotten how desolate I felt at losing a whole bunch of childhood creative writing? What of those journals spanning fifteen years? If only I took the time, I'd find priceless treasures buried among all that personal stuff.

Suddenly, a scene pops up in my memory. In the movie "Brother Sun, Sister Moon" about the conversion and life of St. Francis, the merchant's son has a great awakening. After a near-death experience, he rises up free from the attachments that plagued his stern, money-centered upbringing.

One day his father returns home to Assisi to witness his son throwing fine linens and expensive imported materials out the second-story window. The precious merchandise floats down like descending angels into the hands of the poor, as a seemingly insane Francis cries out, "Throw it away, throw it all away!" The skinny kid is ecstatic, as if declaring his independence for the very first time. Later, dragged before the Bishop by Pietro, he will literally strip himself of all that belongs to his earthly father, in order to be bound by nothing except the possession of God's love, and the commandment to share that love with those most in need of his mercy.

Beyond being possessed by our possessions, there are many other reasons to avoid accumulating wealth and material objects. In *The Republic*, Plato, the Greek Philosopher, traces the political logic of his mentor, Socrates.

The latter argues that when any community of people begins to accumulate wealth and a greater store of possessions, they necessarily have to obtain locks, guards, weapons, and eventually an army to keep everything secure.

James, in his New Testament letter (4:1-3) writes: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

If James' description seems too harsh, we can at least agree with Jesus, whose Sermon on the Mount calls us to a total dependence on Providence.

Our Lord put it this way: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Matthew 6:19-20).

Last Tuesday, in Mass, we heard a most depressing passage from Genesis:

"Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold...Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot...So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have

any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company."

Was there no other solution? Couldn't the two have held their possessions in common? The Bible doesn't explain the finer details. All we know is that Abraham gave Lot, his nephew, the option: "If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." (Genesis 13:2-9).

Lot made a selfish choice, opting for the Jordan valley, so abundantly rich in all that he and his family could desire. Unfortunately, there, too, lived the wicked inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, soon to be reduced by an angry god to a pile of sulfurous rubble. Lot would lose his wife in the process, and barely escape himself. Craving for everything, he lost it all.

Meanwhile, "The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, 'Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.'" (Gen. 13:14-17).

If our youth learned nothing else in our trip to Tijuana, it's that people can not only be satisfied, but can enjoy honor and dignity, with only a fraction of the possessions we consider so essential. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:3,5). As we prepare to celebrate the Fourth of July, let's pray for the true freedom, the authentic independence which comes from God alone. It's the liberty from obsession with having more and more, the deliverance from dependence on material things as our basis for security, satisfaction and self-esteem. Remember the rich young man: he came to Jesus searching for heaven, but wasn't willing to pay the price.

Speaking of which: I'd almost forgotten about those boxes. Writing this reflection has become, I confess, just another way to avoid the primary task lying before me: my stuff. But my buddy priests just invited me to see "Evan Almighty". I'm sure the movie will provide some valuable tips on how to get a lot of things into a confined space. As God says, "If you'd just build an arc, you'd have a place to put them all." Hmm. Not a bad idea. But building an arc for my stuff seems like an awful lot of work.

June 28, 2007, Fr. Dean McFalls, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop