

## **Holding on and Letting Go**

*By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg, RCC*

One recent summer day we found our friends at their home: Mollie\*—froze plums and blackberries in the kitchen, while Tessa\* cleaned the garage. The two activities were connected like this: Tessa was cleaning the garage in order to make room for the new (for them) upright freezer. A replacement for the old chest freezer, to be pressed into immediate service holding among other foods, the very blackberries and plums Mollie prepared.

In the garage meanwhile, longing for a dumpster, Tessa sorted the items that needed to be stored, those that needed re-homed, those that needed re-cycling, and a small pile to be trashed. Mollie would periodically go to the garage and retrieve things from the trash pile, some that she discovered, were missing parts from something else, and others because she was certain that they could still be used. Tessa would sigh deeply, and loudly, and make more shelf space.

The first serious fight, that either of them remembers, was about recycling. They were moving in together; a project that for a tense moment almost stalled right then and there. Tessa insisted that there were exceptions to recycling, and that moving house was one of them. There was a time to be expedient and just throw things out. Mollie was appalled, and refused to move into a shared house with someone who did not recycle. “But I do

recycle!”, protested Tessa, “just not today!” Mollie, who had the high ground, won that round.

The fact is they have opposite responses to stress in many ways. Tessa is not naturally tidy, but she has managed fairly well in the past by keeping the number of possessions down. She can handle the clutter of two or three pairs of shoes, but not of twenty. So, Tessa periodically likes to pare down. Mollie, on the other hand, although not a natural at organization either, is a natural farmer and finds comfort in preserving. She holds on and re-uses almost everything, from clean aluminum foil to last summers’ bug zapper. She composts, not just vegetable skins, but dog hair, and buries in the garden their old turkey bones and salmon leftovers. She saves salvage strips of fabric and uses them to tie plants.

Tessa is discomfited by too much plenty, but Mollie gets comfort from putting up supplies. Food, wood, and fabric speak of security and warmth. After three generations of being war refugees, Mollie’s family has a strong appreciation for a well-built house with a full larder.

Tessa feels easily overwhelmed by material objects because she has never been very good at organizing them. Hers was the desk at school that overflowed papers and broken crayons. She often does not



remember what is in the cupboard, and things below knee height in the refrigerator might as well be on another planet; Tessa won't see them. To Tessa, it is a happy luxury to be able to see all of the things she needs; this helps her to remember where things are. Mollie, when calm and collected, has a good idea where most things are, but sometimes is amazed and embarrassed about her storehouse of wealth. Mollie admits to being overwhelmed herself at times and has been delighted and relieved when Tessa did an organization blitz.

Sometimes Tessa dreams of a tree house with minimalist furnishings. When she was a child, she liked to imagine turning rooms upside down and walking on the clean, uncluttered ceilings.

Tessa has wondered at times if perhaps Home Despot is right, and good shelving is the secret to domestic bliss. She dreams of yards and yards of enclosed cabinetry, with glass doors and labeled bins. A place for everything. But what if eventually, all cabinetry fills up? And there it is again, only on a larger scale: the need to de-clutter? And how about this: if the item finally is thrown away, how long until a new one is needed after all?

What, we have wondered, if de-cluttering is a fad encouraged by the very people who want them to buy more stuff? And where does the mess go, anyway? Is there, for every un-naturally clean room, an acre of landfill somewhere? Or a rusting

car body sitting in a creek bed? We're surely running out of space for cast-offs, just as we are surely running out of resources for making the replacements for what we've made "go away".

Mollie and Tessa are trying to live responsibly amidst abundance, which is a blessing and consumerism, which is a curse. There ought to be a spiritual dimension to organizing and keeping, sharing and letting go. If we buy something, it's really ours now, and we are ultimately responsible to have it end up somewhere other than polluting the creek.

Where do all these very cheap items, luxury and otherwise, come from that fill up the stores? How can it be that 400-count cotton bedding are affordable? What has happened to allow us to purchase a new electric coffee grinder for under ten dollars? Or buy a hand-quilted bed cover from China for two hundred? Surely, these numbers hide suffering and exploitation somewhere. There is a much greater cost than we are paying. The experience of luxury that is build upon suffering elsewhere in the world can't be good for us.

In the meantime, Mollie's and Tessa's old freezer found a new home at the food bank and some of the too many pairs of shoes are waiting to go to the thrift store.

Maybe we need a serenity prayer just for this: Goddess, please grant



us the courage to let go of the stuff we do not need, the persistence to find homes for the things that we can't use but someone else will, the shelving to store the stuff we do need, and the wisdom to know the difference.

\*Mollie and Tessa are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of our friends.

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