

# Downsizing

MARIANNE PETERS



Tim and I eyed the purchase agreement on the table in front of us. Were we seriously contemplating trading our home, a 3,000-square-foot suburban Dutch colonial, for a house half that size in town? I wish I could say that we were doing it to save the planet. Mostly we were doing it to save our sanity.

Home sizes in the United States have been increasing. The National Association of Home Builders reports that, despite shrinking family size, average home sizes expanded from 1,400 square feet in 1970 to more than 2,300 in 2004. When we were freshly employed out of school, a roomy suburban house seemed a logical next step. We figured we would grow into it.

We didn't expect the house to outgrow us.

We expected weekend toil in the yard, then gathering with friends over barbeque to complain about it. But Tim and I discovered we are unequally yoked. I'm an avid gardener addicted to perennials. He's a triathlete whose training does not include hauling mulch. To fill in the gaps, we hired a weekly mowing service.

We didn't expect clutter. As time went by we began to drown in so much stuff—toys, clothes, books, gadgets—that plastic totes could not contain it all. We stashed the extras in rooms we rarely used and shut the

doors. To pick up the slack, we hired a monthly cleaning service.

We didn't expect isolation. Our subdivision was a minute from town, separated by a busy road with a fifty-five-mile-an-hour speed limit and no shoulder. It was like living on an island, where people stayed inside except when they took their cars to the mainland. I discovered that large lots made it hard to meet my neighbors—a walk around the subdivision yielded few casual interactions. Everything from a few groceries to coffee with a friend required me to bundle up the kids and drive somewhere. The feeling of disconnection drove me slightly crazy.

We hadn't contemplated moving until we visited a charming house for sale on our town's main street, mostly out of curiosity about its architectural style. If we moved there, we would have to shed three-fourths of our possessions. On the other hand, it was a block from downtown. I could do almost all my errands on foot. The kids could walk to the library or the park—and we were right across the street from our church! Smaller house, smaller garden—it just made sense.

Downsize? Was this God's leading? People usually waited until their kids left home. But as Tim and I talked and prayed about it, something clicked. Moving to town meant living deliberately with less and spending time and money on the things (and the people)

we truly cared about. Our lifestyle would more closely reflect our green values, too—something that our large suburban house never did, despite our efforts to live sustainably.

We called the realtor.

Offer accepted! We started downsizing. We hauled stuff to local charities and sold furniture—the grand piano, the china cabinet, several sofas, end tables, bookcases, and a queen-size bed—and donated about 300 books to our local library. (I figured this would make up for all the overdue books.) Downsizing resembles losing weight. The first five pounds are easy, but the next twenty take effort. With each carload I felt lighter. And to my amazement, the day after a drop-off I could not remember what I had given away.

At this writing, we are preparing to move. Friends and family have reacted differently: some are supportive, some are downright mystified. A few people have pulled me aside to confess their own desire for a simpler lifestyle.

Saying goodbye to my garden has been the most difficult thing—here I learned to nurture plants and taught my kids about Monarchs, microbes, and mushrooms. But I'm thankful for our small legacy. We transformed a plain suburban lawn into a habitat that will bless the new occupants of our house—perhaps a family who could actually use all this room. ■

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