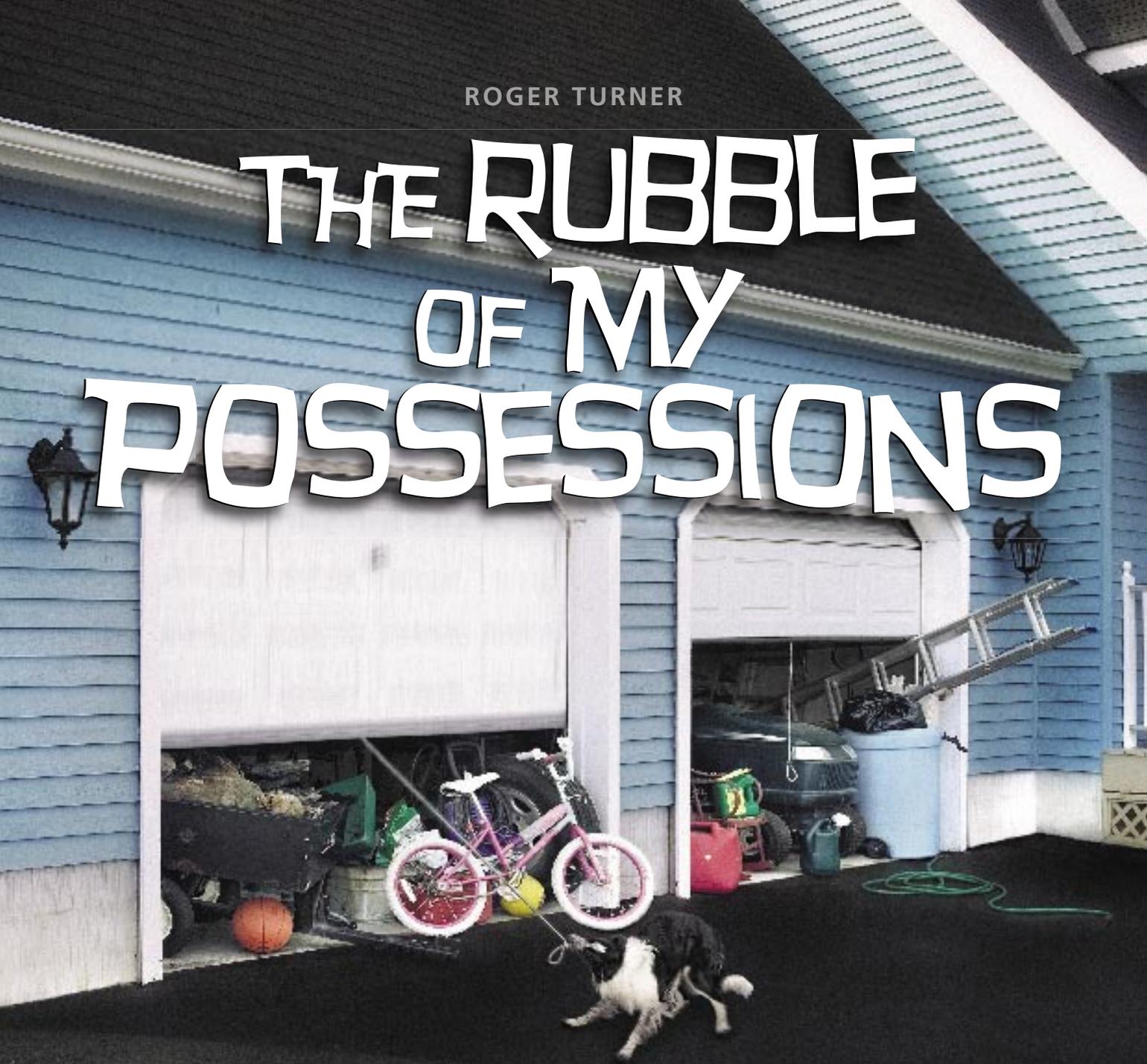


ROGER TURNER

THE RUBBLE OF MY POSSESSIONS

A photograph of a cluttered garage with a dog in the foreground. The garage is filled with various items, including a pink bicycle, a blue trash can, a ladder, and other household items. A dog is running in the foreground. The background shows the blue siding of the house and the white garage doors.

HOW MOVING TAUGHT ME A LESSON IN TITHING

MOVING IS STRESSFUL. In fact, when a move is combined with a new mortgage, this transition scores higher on the SRRS stress chart (the Social Readjustment Rating Scale) than being fired from a job, the death of a close friend, or, oddly enough, a foreclosure on a mortgage. It seems only things like a jail term, personal injury, divorce, or the death of a spouse score higher than the combined totals of a move and a

mortgage. Because my family and I just moved into our new house, complete with a thirty-year mortgage, we have seen this stress up close and personal.

Since we knew this would be a stressful time, we carefully planned the transition between two houses to assure a calm process. It didn't work.

A number of things contributed to the challenges of moving. Some of them were small. My daughters quickly tired of searching for their favorite toys. Ordering out every night got old fast.

But the greatest contributor to the anguish was all the stuff—the clutter that had to be gathered up, packaged, and transported.

Due to closing schedules, my wife, Linda, and I had several weeks overlap between the purchase of one house and the sale of the other. With this time available, our plan was to rent a truck, get a number of family members and guys from the church together, and transport furniture and other large items. The other things—clothing, kitchen



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a vacuum. Nature has nothing over a group of men and an empty U-Haul truck. Once the truck was parked, our friends and family threw open the back and started putting anything they could get their hands on into the truck. Trying to intervene, trying to keep things orderly, trying to stop my wife’s dresses from becoming packing insulation for my oil-stained tools proved futile. The flood was in full fury and there was no stopping it. The truck got loaded—actually stuffed—with most of the remaining contents of the house.

Upon arrival, those contents were summarily strewn about the new house. My wife’s dresses ended up somewhere in the cellar with boxes of my daughters’ toys. My tools were scattered throughout the house interspersed with dishes and diapers. But the bulk of the second load landed in a pile in the garage. Linda and I were convinced that it was more likely that some future archeologist would see the bottom of that pile before we ever would in our lifetime. Within a week, however, most of the boxes were emptied and the house was assuming an orderly appearance.

There was, unfortunately, one problem. The old house wasn’t empty.

With the closing date for the sale of the old house looming, we had to get the remnants of our possessions out. Those remnants added up to about 20 percent of our possessions, and we soon realized that though our new house was larger than the old one, there was no room for them.

The simplest solution would appear to have been a quick trip to the dump. But it wasn’t that easy. The fate of the remaining items was in dispute: each member of my family staked out a position, and no one was willing to

budge.

Those remaining items fell into three categories.

There were the items laced with sentimental value. Take the large stuffed bear that was my oldest daughter’s first toy. Though she hadn’t touched it in years and would probably never miss it, I could not leave it behind.

Then there were the things that seem too important to part with though they haven’t been used in years. This included boxes of holiday decorations last used during the first Clinton administration, notes and textbooks from college courses taken in the distant past, and the work boots that were in disrepair but could still be used someday.

And finally there was the classic catch-all category for moving—yard sale items! No one in the family could justify saving these things, yet they argued that someone would pay money for them, so they had to be brought along.

As we dealt with these items, I recalled a scene from *Apollo 13*, the movie depicting the harrowing flight of astronaut James Lovell and his crew. In the early stages of this mission to the moon, a malfunction in the batteries caused a large explosion that blew out a portion of the spacecraft. Lovell summed up the situation with the now famous line, “Houston, we have a problem.”

After the explosion, the debris from the damaged spacecraft didn’t float off into space. Instead, it trailed behind the Apollo 13 capsule. As the crew hurtled through space, they were accompanied by useless particles and chunks of their spacecraft.

As I packed away the last items from

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items, wall decorations—would be moved at our leisure in the days that followed.

The first day went exactly as planned. We loaded the piano, beds, chairs, and sofa into the truck. They were transported smoothly and we got them all situated at the new house. At this point, Linda and I were feeling pretty smug about our strategy. Then, we went back to the old house with the empty truck.

It has been said that nature abhors

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our old house, I realized that much of what I owned was simply hurtling through life with me, providing a permanent clutter that was serving absolutely no useful purpose in my daily existence—my mission if you will. As I considered this image, I recalled the story of the rich man from Luke 12:16-21.

Remember this parable? It told of a man who, after great prosperity, tore down the barns that were too small to hold his crops. He built new barns, stuffed them full, and sat back to enjoy life. But that night, God came to call.

“God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God” (vv. 20-21).

I had always viewed the rich fool as a contemptuous villain, a self-centered individual beyond redeeming. But, standing amid the rubble of my possessions, I thought, “Am I that much different than the rich fool?” As I moved from one house to a larger house, desperately clinging to what I thought was mine, I couldn’t easily answer that question. It seemed that I had met the rich fool and he was me.

So, how were we ever going to regain some semblance of order in our lives and reach a point where we could walk across the garage without stepping over this pile of stuff?

We tried a yard sale, joining with another family on our new street. Between the two families, there was lots of good stuff that we knew would sell quickly and get us top dollar! As the morning wore on, the only things that seemed to sell were the items my wife put on the twenty-five-cent table.

None of the large items got much more than a passing sniff. We wound up

with about \$20 in quarters but then we bought a set of dining room chairs for \$60 from the other family. At the end of the day, we had to find room for four new chairs and had a net loss of \$40. Not exactly what we had envisioned for a day’s efforts.

After the yard sale—and the salvaging of those items with sentimental value—we still had a substantial pile, equivalent to about 10 percent of our earthly belongings, that had no useful purpose in our lives and probably never would. It also occurred to us that 10 percent was also the same amount as a tithe.

“What would have happened if we had been tithing all along the way?” I wondered.

We are fairly faithful givers and supporters of our church. I cannot, however, in all honesty say we have tithed consistently. Would tithing have stopped the accumulation of the clutter now strewn across our cellar floor? Maybe not. But here are a few things that tithing might have accomplished.

If I consistently gave 10 percent of my salary right off the top and the first check I wrote was to the church, I would be more deliberate on how the remaining 90 percent was spent. Simple economics seems to indicate that after the mortgage and other large obligations were paid, we couldn’t afford the frivolous spending that had led to the pile in the garage.

Second, tithing would help me better focus my resources to on-going ministries I come in contact with, and possibly change my priorities. If, for example, I was attuned to the needs of the poor and set aside money to give to charity, I’d be able to respond when the local food pantry needed help. I might also start reconsidering my purchases—and pause to consider that perhaps a ministry could use the

money I’m about to give to the big box retailer in exchange for more stuff that may end up piled up in the garage next time I move.

Finally, giving 10 percent of what I owned and earned would certainly help me develop a deeper relationship with the living Lord. If my focus turned from the material clutter to ministry opportunities, chances are I’d begin to see things as God does. I might find his priorities becoming my priorities.

But there’s still the lingering problem of what to do with all the clutter that is hurtling through life with me.

The answer was crystal clear—give it away. There seemed, however, a second part to that answer: look for someone who specifically needs the stuff we have. Why? Because if we were to gather things up, put them back in boxes, and give them to the Salvation Army, I doubt we would part with items that had any value.

If, however, we prayed for God to lead us to situations and people that have specific needs, chances are we would be releasing items that could have a great impact in someplace other than our house. And wouldn’t you know, that’s exactly what happened.

We soon learned of a young woman that was re-establishing herself after a very difficult passage in her life. She was able to find an apartment but had nothing with which to furnish it, outfit the kitchen, or basically make the place livable. Much of what we had fit her needs precisely. Oddly, I think we received the larger blessing.

We found releasing items to a place where God could use them was freeing and fun. We all learned it is exciting being a conduit for God’s provisions to others. And, I hope, we will continue to seek other ways to let what we possess and, more importantly, ourselves be used by the Father. □