

Downsizing My Wardrobe

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Lugging the huge dresser up the stairs to our bedroom was no picnic, but I was thrilled to inherit the beautiful old piece. I thought my mother had emptied it, but when I opened the top drawer, I found a white box containing what seemed to be a linen tablecloth. *Hmmm*, I thought. *Maybe Mom wants me to have this.* I held up the material and realized I had not found a tablecloth, but a pair of bloomers! They were my grandmother's, I discovered upon investigation—handstitched for her honeymoon. When I showed them to my daughters, they roared with laughter.

Despite my kids' reaction, I think I'll keep Grandma's underpants for posterity! However, this year I resolved to pare down my own wardrobe. Enjoying clothes isn't a sin, of course, but when I reduce the size of my wardrobe, I focus on what I really need and love. There are also good green reasons to limit my wardrobe. Here's an interesting fact: textile waste in this country added up to 13.1 million tons in 2010, according to the EPA. That number includes all the clothes we throw away, as well as other household textiles we dispose of. Cheaply made textiles are widely available to us, but they are often made overseas by people who don't enjoy fair wages or working conditions, and the quality is poor.

Just a note about truly worn-out textiles: I was surprised to learn that charities such as Goodwill and Salvation Army take unwearable textiles as long as they are clean. They sell those items to textile recyclers, which keep them out of the landfill, and they're used as components in items as varied as insulation, car upholstery, and paper. When I have unwearables to donate, I run them through the wash and bag them up separately from my other wearable clothing donations.

When it was time to purge, I set aside a whole day. I planned to empty my bulging closet and dressers completely, refilling them with only the clothes I truly planned to wear. Before I started, though, I made lists of the types of clothing

I wear weekly: work-at-home clothes, go-to-meeting clothes, gardening and chore clothes, workout clothes, underclothes, and special-occasion clothes. Under each category I specifically listed items I knew I wanted to keep, focusing on well-fitting classics that never seem to go out of style, such as a black suit, khaki pants, black jeans, a white blouse, or Oxford shirts. Most of my classic clothes are simple, but they can be worn in different combinations and with different accessories.

Making a list beforehand helped me think through my choices. How many t-shirts do I really need? How many pairs of twill pants are necessary? During certain periods of my life, I did fine on a very limited wardrobe, such as during my two pregnancies. Somehow I managed to get by with two pairs of borrowed maternity pants! This exercise also reminded me that much of the world "gets by" with just a few items of clothing. I knew I could too.

After making my lists, I laid each "keeper" out on my bed and ruthlessly purged the clothes that weren't on my list. I didn't let myself think too much—if it wasn't on the list, it had to go. I ended up with two garbage bags full of clothing I decided to donate—ill-fitting, poor quality, or just silly—and a tote full of nostalgic t-shirts that I'll put in my attic for now. (Who doesn't own a few nostalgic t-shirts?)

It's funny how old-fashioned it seems to own less of something. In a consumer-oriented society, having just enough is as current as my grandma's bloomers. I enjoy my smaller wardrobe, though. Limiting my choices paradoxically adds freedom to my life because I don't have the hassle of sorting through clothes I don't or won't wear—clothes that I might have purchased impulsively just to give myself a boost. When I know what I already own, I buy less and feel less temptation to shop. And I can actually see the bottom of my closet! ■

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