

## THE REVOLUTION STARTS AT HOME



Two Decembers ago, after clearing holiday decorations to prepare for the New Year, I noticed how much roomier our house felt with the Christmas tree banished to the curb, ornaments stowed in the shed,

and wrinkled wrapping harvested from the floor and delivered to the garbage can. The extra space felt liberating, and it made me wonder: If an emptier home seemed a happier one, why stop there? Maybe I could clear other things from my life and earn an extra bit of serenity in the bargain.

From this musing, a New Year's resolution grew. Every day, or so I pledged to myself, I'd get rid of at least one personal possession. Over time, the exercise taught me a lot about household economy, and I also learned a little about the nature of personal change.

Decluttering isn't a new idea, as a cursory look at the bestseller list makes clear. Books about scaling down are all the rage, although most experts would find my one-a-day plan for simplification a bad one. Meaningful change, they often argue, comes from drastic action, not nibbling at the edges.

But there was a method to my moderation. I wanted to be at least as intentional in getting rid of stuff as I was in acquiring it. Maybe, in thinking hard about how I'd gotten these belongings in the first place, I'd be a more careful consumer in the future.

And so I started. Each day, like a hawk circling for prey, I'd scan the house for a shirt no longer worn, a book no longer needed, a kitchen appliance gathering dust in a drawer because we hadn't used it in years. These odd discards found a place by the front door, poised for a trip to Goodwill or The

Salvation Army. The pile looked negligible at first, but over the next few weeks, a mound rose as high as my knees, then my waist. Scanning the small hill of castoffs — paperbacks and power cords, tools and tennis shoes, a road atlas and a recipe book — I thought about the British critic V.S. Pritchett's take on Simone de Beauvoir. She "is one of those writers," he observed, "who dig and dig until they pile up the monumental."

Pritchett's description charms me because it dramatizes change as an incremental art, which isn't the way we Americans typically think of transformation. Born by revolution, we tend to regard change in mythic terms — as something bold, big-lettered, sweeping.

What I was practicing, on the other hand, was change in the lowercase. Could one man thinning his household so glacially — one pair of socks or tattered board game at a time — really make a difference?

I was comforted by the example of Henry David Thoreau, whom I'd later write about in *The New York Times* as America's first

*Could one man thinning his household so glacially  
— one pair of socks or tattered boardgame at a  
time — really make a difference?*

declutterer. He used a small private gesture to advance a broader public good, living as simply as he could for a couple of years so that his example might inform his fellow citizens about the degree to which they owned things, and to which those things owned them. "I do believe," wrote Thoreau, "that the outward and the inner life correspond."

His point — that our domestic habits also shape our spiritual and intellectual habits — was shared by Benjamin Franklin, that great figure of the American Revolution. In youth, Franklin devised a chart on which day by day, halting step by halting step, he recorded his struggle to master basic virtues: temperance, silence, resolution, and frugality, among others. The resolve he built through self-improvement would later sustain him as he challenged the world's most powerful empire.

Now in its second year, my regimen of ridding my life of one possession each day continues. I'm inspired by Thoreau and Franklin's lesson — that real revolution starts from within.

---

**DANNY HEITMAN**, Phi Kappa Phi 1986 (Southeastern Louisiana University), is a columnist for *The Advocate* newspaper in Louisiana and the author of *A Summer of Birds: John James Audubon at Oakley House*. He frequently writes about literature and culture for national publications, including *Humanities* magazine and *The Wall Street Journal*.