

A Quaker Home – But is it Quakerly?

by *Linda Seger*

Home – a place of comfort and beauty, where family and friends gather and life is meant to be lived in a nurturing environment. Since I work in the arts, I have sometimes felt there is a conflict between the Quaker value of Simplicity and my deeply felt love of aesthetics. Quaker aesthetics is, according to some, much like Shaker aesthetics. Clean lines. Wood. Light. Utilitarian. Practical. Nothing fancy or cluttered or overbearing. As John Woolman might advise, always made of fine materials which will continue their beauty through the test of time.

And yet, when I invite people into my home, I try to create a welcoming environment that I find is rarely simple. I love the painting on the wall that my brother-in-law gave me after my sister died – a piece of art from an artist friend of my mother's. It sits above the tea cart my mother had since the time she married my father in 1941. (Photo 1) I inherited 125-year-old French Haviland Limoges china from a great-uncle, and love setting a table that is both beautiful and welcoming. (Photo 2)



Photo 1



Photo 2

The atmosphere has led to a great many deep and insightful conversations. At my favorite season of Christmas, I decorate – a lot! (Photo 3) I love the lights and color of Christmas – and love inviting people to our home to share the festivities. One of our Quaker friends said I've gone too far – beyond Quakerly. Maybe. But maybe not. Is the point of Quaker Simplicity to be simple in our aesthetics? – including the decor of our home? Should we

give up all of our beautiful things in order to follow the Spirit? Should we turn away from the beauty of paintings and lights on a tree and the soft fleece throw we put over our sofa to wrap us in its warmth when we're cold? Should we care that the color of the orange flowers on our table catch the color of the orange in the vase and the orange in the stained-glass window? (Photo 4) Is this too much attention to detail – or is it an appreciation of beauty?



Photo 3

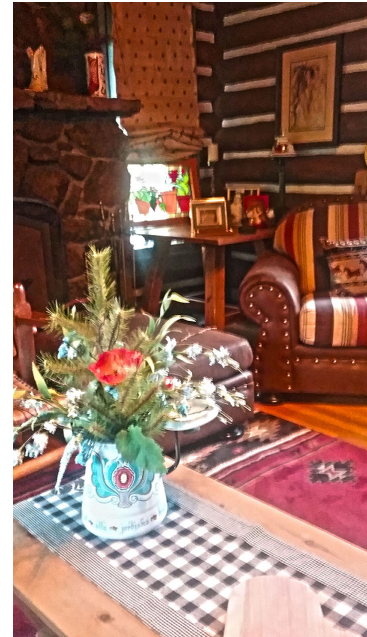


Photo 4

Isn't the point that we are not burdened by our belongings or attached to what we have? We can enjoy them, but let them go if necessary. Although some call this Detachment, I call it Non-Attachment. A test for me came when we were evacuated for eight days because of the Waldo Canyon Fire. As we prepared to leave, I walked through every room in our home and decided it was "just stuff." It was beautiful stuff. I found so much of it pleasing to the eye. But it was stuff. I chose not to take anything except the cat, my wonderful husband, and a few jeans and t-shirts. We stayed with our dear friends, Bill and Genie Durland, and I felt quiet and peaceful. Whatever happened would happen. I couldn't choose between one or another beautiful thing. It all stayed behind. And I didn't want to start an evacuation being frenetic and anxious.

I think about this relationship of aesthetics and simplicity. I sometimes think I'm supposed to feel guilty about what I own and what I like, but I don't. So much carries a rich history and stories. So many objects speak of love from the giver and good times surrounded by things that add color and texture and shapes to our home. And I realize most of the Quaker homes I've visited contain paintings of things the owners value – banners about Unity, pottery from Palestine, calligraphy of what matters to us. Most of my friends don't have homes that fit the Quaker stereotype of clean utilitarian lines and light from the clerestory window. Yet, perhaps, they contain a symbol of values of what we hold as long as we are given this beauty for now and the knowledge we can let it go. Simplicity. Our own individual aesthetic. Can we have both – and be both?

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