

Dislocated: A household move unleashes demons

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [January 22, 2014](#) issue



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I need to acknowledge right from the start that I'm moving from one great situation to another great situation. After six years living with Episcopal nuns on an organic farm, my husband and I find that we need to slow down a bit and give more space to the young people who come here to work and pray on the farm. Bill has been the farm's handyman—a relentless job in this complex of old buildings and new gardens. I've served as the community's priest, flower gardener and intern director. We will miss this gorgeous life of liturgy, laughter and close observation of nature with passionate people committed to the environment.

Now we're moving to our own home in Woodstock, New York, near many old friends. The house is a bit of a fixer-upper to keep Bill happy for a long time; for me, it means a landscape tabula rasa. I will continue teaching and writing. It's a great move.

So why the interior drama? Why demons and zombies? How do I pull out of a downward spiral of selfishness?

With the contents of the house turned inside out, my interior life takes a cue and turns inside out. Old demons slither out from under the bookcases: *You buried your talents in the ground. You've built the house of your life on shifting sands. See this STUFF? Do not lay up treasures where moths destroy and rust consumes. The wind bloweth where it listeth, baby. Clinging to your life, you lose it. Now's your chance to really do something useful for humanity!* I'm

demurring, obviously. The demons use specific barbs to catch my conscience, weakness by weakness. Fortunately, over the years and with lots of professional help, I've come to know these guys.

The good thing about the demons coming out of hiding is that they are coming out of hiding. Not for the comfort of their presence, because, of course, there's something delicious about the familiarly negative that attracts—like moving your tongue to the bloody cave left beneath a pulled tooth. It's necessary to know that the barbs still catch and that more inner work needs to be done.

Old feelings erupt like zombies out of the graves where they've lain buried after other moves and traumas. One move was during a divorce that separated me by an ocean from two of my children. One time a moving company lost a crate that contained six generations of family photos and five boxes of unrecoverable research and writing for a book. One move was animated by anger, another was motivated by fear.

Then there are feelings that were hiding and found while packing; I came across a hastily stashed cache of treasures and books that I'd been saving for my grandchildren—a boy and girl who died a few hours after they were born last summer.

Feelings are a great inconvenience when there is so much to do.

And then there's stuff itself. Things accumulate to fill empty space, so that if you are moving from a big space to a small space, extra things will complicate the logistics of moving. It's like anxiety. Anxiety fills space proportionally, no matter how big or small.

I allow too much space for anxiety. And too much stuff. My youngest son reminds me, "Jesus said to the rich young man, 'Sell all you have and give your money to the poor and come, follow me.'" He doesn't say this in a mean way. We're in the midst of talking about Syria, Somalia and perspective. "Yeah, yeah," I say. "But I'm taking the Mission style furniture with me. Visitors to my Bible studies might as well sit on faux Stickley as broken folding chairs."

My son is right about perspective, though. Over a million Syrian refugees cling to borders of neighboring countries at this moment. The famine toll in Somalia for one year was 260,000, and over half of those were children under six years old. Over

3,000 peacekeepers have died serving in Somalia. Most people in the world bear images of horrors that are inconceivable to most Americans.

I don't keep Syria, Somalia and other places in mind to make me feel guilty. Aside from being a part of daily prayer, using my imagination and intellect to connect to unimaginable and unthinkable suffering quickens my humanity. If I'm feeling dislocated living rather comfortably among boxes full of nice things, I can surely redirect my excess of feeling toward a refugee seeking sources of food for her child. She teaches me to examine the anxiety filling up all my empty space. There's danger in that half a thought, however. Am I creating some Somali woman as an imaginary friend to benefit my growing in empathy? There's something solipsistic about this—as if the world's suffering is there to increase my human potential.

What can I do with the excess of feeling pouring into the liminal space opened by a move? Something practical, surely, however small. To begin with, I think I'll call a friend who works for the International Red Cross. If she's not on the border of Syria right now, and if I can reach her, I'll see how she's doing and tell her I appreciate her work and am praying for her and for the people she serves. And then I'll resolve to do the best work I can in my new life, trusting that God will reckon as righteous my faithfulness to the relatively comfortable vocation of writing and teaching.