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Clothesline carries way of life on the breeze

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Reader's comments: Requested by Vivian Maylone, Hillman.

As I'm getting to know someone new, I like to ask, "What tangible thing do you want most right now?"

Most people mention a new house or a new car, although one woman wanted a pair of orange high heels, and one guy wanted nothing but a new muffler.

If they ask me, I can honestly say I want a clothesline.

I want a clothesline not because I need one. I have a serviceable dryer that's ready to do its duty around the clock.

I want a clothesline because it symbolizes the life I want, one whose pace allows time to stand in tall grass to hang sheets and shirts and underwear with wooden clothespins. It means a quiet life, a few minutes at dusk to take down the laundry and press your nose into it for the aroma of fresh air.

It suggests thrift and respect, not only for the vagaries of weather but for a practical tradition as old as humanity.

A clothesline also would mean I finally lived among people who appreciate the look of laundry against the sky.

Breezy condemnation

So many suburban neighborhoods, including mine, ban clotheslines or would if the neighbors could vote on it. A recent story in the Charlotte (N.C.) Observer deemed clotheslines to be low-class, an "endangered eccentricity," along with upholstered furniture on porches and cars parked on lawns.

And I guess it's probably true now that most people with clotheslines can't afford dryers. A neighborhood of clotheslines is not upscale, but feels cozier.

When my grandmother was a child, her mother hung clothes on a pulleyed clothesline on the back porch of their flat in Pittsburgh. It was my grandmother's job to touch the clothes every other minute, then haul them in the moment they were dry, or else soot from the steel mills across the river would dirty them anew.

When I was a child, my mother left our basement dryer unused in the summer, instead carrying her wicker laundry basket out behind our garage in Dearborn Heights to hang everything in the air. She said towels dried outside were softer, and sheets easier to sleep on, and so I've believed all my life.

I took the wash down. I was always alone, in peace behind the garage, a few steps from a wide open field where birds and small animals skittered and cheeped. Those 15 minutes were the most sensual and satisfying I knew.

I suspect that's why I want to re-create them.

Gust of a chance

Clotheslines lost their allure, I suppose, when immigrants begat children who begat children whose ethnic values were lost in the glare of the American values of convenience and privacy.

Why wait for sun when you can dry tomorrow's shirt at 2 a.m. in 10 minutes on low?

And why expose yourself to neighbors by hanging your laundry in view of their kitchen windows? Your faded flowered sheets might indict you, as might your underwear, yellowed and frayed, or the little black nothings you bought by catalog.

But every time I pass a load of laundry flapping in the breeze, in all the colors and conditions of life, I think nothing is more invigorating or sincere.

Real people live in those homes. No matter what they lack, the wind and the sun are theirs.