



Issue 15 December 2021: Minimalism; The Suitcase Game; Hard Muscles; Art

One thing I know about myself for sure is that I crave privacy. When I was a young girl I begged for a room of my own. And when my mom refused me the upstairs landing as a bedroom, I dreamed of running away. My life at home was far from unbearable, but never having a place of my own to be left alone was truly excruciating for me. In my fantasy I would pack a small bag containing all my most important possessions and make my way out there somehow – just me, my diary and the elements – this is what I imagined freedom to be.

In fact, I still imagine freedom to be solitude, especially now, as a mother of three, wife daughter sister friend citizen. I don't get much time alone, and while at times the constant contact of living in close quarters grates on my nerves, I find solace knowing myself well enough to know that I crave privacy. It is a hard-won gift to know oneself, and I am grateful that despite taking on the responsibility of others and the clutter of their individual lives I am able to see my own unique shape clearly even when I am overwhelmed or unhappy.

We're often sold the idea that minimalism is a hygge house and a capsule wardrobe with less visual clutter, clean lines and simple shapes, white walls and neutral colors. While I don't personally subscribe to this aesthetic, I don't see anything wrong with taking pleasure in it, however, my opinion is that focusing on the end result of minimalism deters from the process of learning how to be efficient and well-prepared for living life as our unique selves. Don't get me wrong, I'm a materialist to the bone! I appreciate inanimate objects and curate my own aesthetic for the joy of it. I am simply suggesting that what many of us may seek when we declutter, organize, and streamline the outer world is not a specific aesthetic outcome, but the process of learning who we are precisely. Life is bizarre, an unsolvable mystery and yet, not so wild as to go unnamed and shapeless. As we roll forward into the new year and reflect on who we were and who we are becoming, I suggest becoming familiar with the clean lines of your unique form so that you may see yourself clearly, know yourself well, and act with intention.

As a mother, an artist, a writer, a poet, a gardener, and one who likes to work outside of the home, how do you choose where to focus your precious life energy? When you have many gifts and skills - as I know you do - how do you sort through your passions and loves and decide which one or two or three you will devote yourself to? As Mary Oliver says, "Attention is the beginning of devotion." One only has the capacity for so much attention; how to choose?

xoxoxo

Z.

When I'm emotionally disorganized I organize my closet. I go top to bottom, touching each item and assessing what stays and what goes according to how the item makes me feel and whether or not I actually wear it. I pair up socks, make a stack of discarded items for the thrift store, and air out some of my heirloom dresses or shine my jewelry. I must confess that like diary writing, for me, this activity is entirely compulsory – it's not a practice that I've cultivated, but a coping mechanism handed down by generations of women who really care about "things".

In my mind, this is called "the suitcase game" which must be derived from my runaway from home/live alone fantasy. Playing the suitcase game is all about knowing what I do, knowing what I have, taking good care of what I've got, and having faith that a little less can lead to a lot more.

In my youth my bag was packed for the future – everything it contained was chosen for potentiality : what I wanted to look like, what I thought I would do, who I wanted to be. I found myself dragging around canvas supports but no canvas or clothes I couldn't move in. It meant that sometimes I looked like a clown or a pile of trash because I was performing ideas of myself rather than simply being myself. Middle age has been a time of relief and resignation. I've tossed all the costumes and guitars and diets out the train window. These days my suitcase contains simple, androgynous, all-season clothes. Inside I have my ipad, a book light, a library card, a diary and some pens. Not much else to be honest, a sewing kit I guess, and a few sentimental items.

And this is all rather new for me! Up until two years ago I was still wondering whether I should join the circus. It felt like I had too much on my plate and not enough time or money to live the life I craved. Rather than run away, or start over, or learn something new, I resigned myself to doing what I must do, what I have always done, which really isn't that much. I can fit caregiver, companion, homemaker and artist in one bag. A bag is a bag after all, explicitly designed to make it easier to carry more than one thing. However, even a generously sized bag has limitations, and a heavy one can restrict freedom of movement or take a toll on the body. This is the reason I check in with my myself frequently; to touch, fold, discard, air-out. I like to know what I'm carrying, name it and devotedly reclaim all my old loves: clothes, books, making things, writing and drawing, folk traditions, good conversation, deep sleep, resilience and love.

Since starting The Talking Mirror, I learned that to make a choice one can stay committed to, one must first know themselves well (it certainly helps anyway!) Attention will always wander and commitment brings attention back home. This is the perfect time of year to take a look at your bag and see what you are carrying around with you, to unpack and repack the materials you need to best live out your journey as you. Discard what doesn't fit, honor what stays, and show yourself compassion for doing just enough, plenty really, the perfect amount for you.

I've spent most my 20s in a fist fight with uncertainty. I feel, somehow, as I approach my 30th birthday that my hands are unclenching out of exhaustion and a deep, quiet self-acceptance. There's really only so long a person can stay grasping at the future or the past, ya know?

I'm curious if you have any insight about this kind of internal transition... or how to continue staying soft in uncertainty.

There's a good chance you won't always stay soft whether certain or uncertain, so enjoy softness while you can. Sometimes life peaks and we get to rest in the downhill ride for a bit. Wisdom tells us there will be shadowy valleys to come, and more climbing and delicious peaks and again the ease of coming down. With self-acceptance as your compass you can develop a healthy sense of hardness, not necessarily rigidity caused by anxious tension, but strong muscles useful for climbing tall peaks. Maturity is about having a willingness to really look at the landscape within and around you and responding appropriately. Knowing when and where to rest, to push on, knowing how to read the sky and the ground, seeing shadows as shadows and not monsters, enjoying the sunrise and sunset, sleeping in uncomfortable craggy corners, accepting help and respite when it comes to you – these are the skills of a well-journeyed traveler.

Self-acceptance is a lot like resignation, but prettier sounding, and seems to mean that one has come to terms that they are a predetermined process of nature rather than a malleable bit of clay. Or that one is malleable as clay, but clay nonetheless, never the objects clay is sculpted to portray. Self-acceptance is a sacred agreement with the grander forces of nature, in which a person accepts that they are not everything, and that through their body everything is not possible. Through self-acceptance one becomes familiar with the limitations of their personhood and specifically the combinations of quirks and qualities that make up their humanity. As we become more familiar and more aware of what we like and what we do and how we do it, the world expands before us. Now it is not so much about being anyone but being someone who is able to be present with the wider world as the world truly is, within us and without.

This is how self-acceptance is like a compass, not necessarily pointing you in the direction you ought to go but with an arrow pointed inward so that you know how to respond to the outward world. Honor your body with softness and strength, sharp vision, and the power of connection. With time you may find this journey takes you forward in time and back, and that the present is your body in all the ways it responds to life. May your body be well.

I feel directionless. I'm a person who has accomplished what she's set out to do in most cases, by my most recent career endeavor has left me feeling helpless. I wonder if the weight of the world during this frenzied time has just deeply infiltrated my way of being to the point of being this way. Everywhere I look there is doom and sorrow and stress and anxiety. I have outlets and resources I rely on for comfort and suit me well, but ultimately I keep coming back to this life we are in together – it is so big— the feelings are powerful. I'm not even sure what my question is. I know many other folks who feel the same –just overwhelmed. To be honest I feel as I'm growing older (almost 30) that more anxieties come with age. Many older folks I see around me are medicated to ease anxiety and depression or self-medicating with alcohol, so I don't. I enjoy a clear mind. But sometimes I wonder if their mind struggles are similar to mine— should I be medicating these thoughts or experiencing the full spectrum of human emotions humans are privileged to have? My thoughts are not dangerous (not suicidal) – they are just deep. I suppose I am seeking some comfort from you – something to quell my mind through your words. Is there something you have found to bring you comfort as you walk through the chapters of life?

Sometimes we experience ourselves trapped in our own lives, and it's hard to know how to get out – almost as if we are in a room full of doors and every door leads to another room full of doors. Life is an unsolvable mystery, yea, it is also the fucking twilight zone. Our imagination is real. When we conjure images in our mind we are really conjuring images in our mind. Those images are real, which is not to say that our imagination replaces reality, only that imagination is a part of reality. Imagine that room full of doors also contains a desk and on it, paper and pen. Imagine that instead of trying to get out of the room that you have spent your life craving to have to yourself, you sit down at the desk to write a story about a girl who draws a room full of doors and sits down to draw herself free.

If you have been a reader of The Talking Mirror for some time, you are aware that I often advise y'all to take it to your notebook or make art out of madness. I offer this advice to you, but I don't often tell you how to do it or why. Art is a loaded word and it means a lot of things for a lot of different people, heck, even among artists there is disagreement about what constitutes as art or craft or decoration. When I advise you to make art I am suggesting not that you make a pretty thing, or a utilitarian thing, or an object to replace what you would otherwise purchase. Instead I am suggesting that you gather materials and use your body to invite your imagination beyond the confines of your mind.

Sometimes its as simple as free-writing, which is terrifying and liberating, but easy enough once you get going on it. You could fill a page or several pages with sketches or paint expressive watercolor paintings on large paper. Store bought clay is fun to make shapes with, so is collage and assemblage. You could make up weird songs, hard dance to industrial music or compose a poem. The point with this kind of art is to be expressive, easy, and wild. The point is to let it out or get it down, to explore your imagination innocently and with little inhibition.

With some practice, art can be something you lean on to help you process the wild terror and beauty that comes with just being alive. You can turn to the page when you are hot with rage or numb with exhaustion and the page will not judge you, or have an opinion about what you ought to do with your emotions. The page, the clay, the dance floor can be a safe place for you alone – a place to feel, track and learn about yourself. Making art like this is conveniently inexpensive and accessible and most people simply aren't doing it. In my opinion all of us ought to be drinking water, eating well, moving our bodies and making art. To make art is to be human. Honor your humanity by reclaiming the joy of making material your inner shapes, learn more about yourself by witnessing these shapes take form. Make art as gift to yourself, as a gift of truth and beauty to this weird world.

Just a reminder to send your questions to The Talking Mirror so that I may answer them in a forthcoming issue. You can get in touch with me in one of three ways:

email at chatterboxpress.home@gmail.com

submit on my website at www.chatterbox-press.com/ask-the-talking-mirror
password is mirrormirror1

Snailmail Chatterbox Press P.o. Box 303 Cedar MI 49621