

Disencumbering (2009)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner on WLRH, Huntsville, AL USA

I've been disencumbering some. It's time; I'm nearly 80, we can't live in our two-story condo forever, the time will come when I'll be crawling up those stairs to get to my Macintosh computer, so we're considering smaller places and lightening ship. That means that a lifetime of accumulating has to be shifted into reverse, that we can't cram what occupies 1600 square feet into 900, that furniture isn't made to be stacked on top of other furniture. Thus: declutter.

I started close to the core of it, with the books. A minister's books are his life; his tools, his pets, his favorites, his battle ribbons, his historic markers. This is the one you taught those classes from, this is the one that those members objected to so strongly, this is the set that helped birth that new church. They're precious, even if you never finished some of them. Dreams of turning them into a tidy nest-egg for retirement vanish as soon as you consult with a used book-seller.

So I started giving them away, an adventure that began a year ago and is still continuing.

For a whole bunch of them, I chose the people I wanted to receive them; people I thought would like them, people who needed them! The J.F.K. biography went to the most adamant Democrat in the church where I work, so "Lincoln at Gettysburg" could go to the most dedicated Republican. The choir director got one of my antique hymnals, a woman who'd told me she liked a poem one day received the well-thumbed Longfellow. A friend who had spent some time as an Episcopalian received a lovely century-old Book of Common Prayer, the Anglican standard. I had a beautiful antique copy of "In Darkest England," by General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army... so naturally it went to a dear friend who was raised as a Sally Ann lass and even played in the street band, before she got diverted into Presbyterian ways.

For another cluster, I simply took the book boxes to church one day, laid them out on a table, and offered them free-for-all; and the unchosen remainder went to the library's used book room (and onto my tax return as a deduction).

You know what I found? With a little planning, it's not just as blessed to give as it is to receive, it's just as much fun.

Houston Hodges disencumbers himself of sermons about once a month at the Big Cove Presbyterian Church, at its two locations out in the Hampton Cove area.