



# JEWELRY FOR WATER

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## HOW I SACRIFICED MY POSSESSIONS, LIKE HARRIET TUBMAN

*I have had the applause of the crowd and the satisfaction  
that comes of being approved by the multitude, while most  
of what you have done has been witnessed by a few  
trembling, scarred, and footsore bondmen and women,  
whom you have led out of the house of bondage,  
and whose heartfelt "God bless you"  
has been your only reward.*

—From a letter Frederick Douglass wrote to Harriet Tubman

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Last year we tried to sell our house. Before we put it on the market, the real estate lady told us we had to de-clutter. Well and good; I looked forward to the chance to get rid of the things that seem to accumulate in the nooks and crannies. To help us get started, the agent came and did a walk-through, me trailing behind with a pen and paper. She pointed to things that we needed to get out of the house; I dutifully wrote them down, room by room. The list was long.

We had about two weeks before the house opened to the public. We started by pulling stuff out of rooms, drawers, and

closets. We cleaned out the attic, the space under the house, and the garage. We begged, cajoled, and threatened my mother, who lives with us, to sort through her things too.

So within 14 days we had a garage sale and got rid of a bunch of things. We rented a storage unit, the portable kind dropped off in your driveway—you fill it up, and a truck comes to take it away and store it in a giant warehouse. We gave away boxes of things to Goodwill. We put a few things on Craigslist.com. I gave some stuff to my sister. I sold some books to a secondhand store and donated a bunch of others to the church library. A local food bank took some canned food. We sent extra sporting equipment with friends on a mission trip to Mexico. Even then, we still had some stuff left over, so we put it out on the curb with a big “FREE” sign; everything was gone the next morning.

It was a lot of work, but it really felt good, kind of like taking a long hot shower and scrubbing yourself down with a washcloth after a long camping trip where the dirt has settled into the cracks on your feet. Afterward, our house looked much neater, bigger, cleaner, and more comfortable. There was less stuff to dust (not that I dust that much) and I could actually see the back of the linen closet. I was really proud of myself. I felt a little self-righteous even, as if I had it just a little more together than most messy people.

Why did we have so much stuff? I remember asking myself that question when it became obvious that the truckloads of useless detritus we had culled from the house would never be missed. All that stuff didn’t make us happy. And when originally purchased, it had cost a lot of money, only a fraction of which was recovered when we discarded it.

We aren’t the only ones who have too much. “Early 21st-century America is the most materially saturated society in glob-

al history,” writes Jeanne Arnold, an anthropology professor at the University of California in Los Angeles, in a study of how working families use housing spaces. “It’s no wonder that clutter jams so many of today’s homes. Americans are bombarded with opportunities to buy.”<sup>1</sup>

Because Americans have so much, they need somewhere to offload the surplus, so the self-storage business is booming. “The self-storage industry grew from about 289 million square feet in 1984 to nearly 2.2 billion square feet by the end of 2007, according to the Self Storage Association.”<sup>2</sup>

I was congratulating myself on escaping my own personal bondage to our stuff, and I was still basking in the glow of my de-cluttering success, when someone e-mailed a *New York Times* editorial to me. It’s called “My Days Are Numbered” by actor Rick Moranis, and it starts with this: “The average American home now has more television sets than people.”<sup>3</sup> *Hmmm*. I did a quick tally of our TV sets: four. *Ha! We don’t fit that stereotype*. I gloated and kept reading. “I have two kids. Both are away at college. I have five television sets. I have two DVR boxes, three DVD players, two VHS machines, and four stereos. I have 19 remote controls, mostly in one drawer.”<sup>4</sup> *Gulp*. The list was starting to sound familiar, and the glow of my de-clutter was beginning to flicker.

Rick goes on to list the number of his phones, cookbooks, soy sauce packets, shoes, and CDs, and it becomes quite clear that he has a lot of stuff too. Then I had a thought: *What if I counted up my things? What if I did a sort of inventory of my own possessions? Would I be any different? Did I still, after our collective family pre-moving purge of the year before, have loads of possessions that we didn’t really need?* I had to know.

So I did some counting of my own. Here’s part of my list:

## Post De-clutter Inventory

I have 1 husband.

We have 2 kids.

We have 8 phones.

We have 6 computers.

We have 11 remote controls (3 that work).

We have 63 knives, 62 spoons, and 79 forks.

We have 47 coffee mugs. (We use 3 a day.)

We have 30 decorative teapots. (I use one when I'm feeling particularly ladylike.)

We have 11 unused kitchen appliances, including a George Foreman grill and a Suzanne Somers deep fryer. (It's mint green.)

(Note: I'm not making this up, but while I was typing up this list, the mailman delivered another kitchen appliance. It turns out my mother had ordered a GT Xpress 101, a snack maker she saw on a TV infomercial. It comes with a booklet filled with recipes like "stuffed spaghetti pies" and "sloppy Joe and egg breakfasts." I love you Mom, but no more appliances. Please.)

We have 4 dusters (rarely used).

We have 39 photo albums and 533 books.

We have 14 wicker baskets. (The longer I looked, the more I kept finding.)

We have 10 pillows on our bed.

I have 7 purses.

I have 11 lipsticks (I use 2).

I have 26 pairs of underpants, 36 pairs of socks (and 11 singles), and 25 pairs of shoes.

I have 18 human teeth in my underwear drawer (the tooth fairy stores them there, although my kids stopped losing teeth years ago).

I have 9 gold and gemstone rings (I wear 1.)

I have 3 gold bracelets and 2 gold necklaces. (I never wear them.)

I have 6 dresses, 7 skirts, 32 sweaters and jackets, 22 pairs of pants, and 77 tops. (I have nothing to wear).

When my list was finished, I began to wilt a bit. There was no longer a reason to feel so proud of de-cluttering, and it was rapidly becoming clear that I had much more than I needed. All I had to do was look at the numbers. We Americans really are wealthy compared to the rest of the world. We have too much stuff, and it was time for me to do something about it.

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No one would ever accuse Harriet Tubman of having too much stuff, because she gave everything away. Writing about her is not easy. She was still living less than a hundred years ago, but the world she lived in was so different than mine that I have trouble understanding the reality of a world in which people were bought and sold like animals. Most people know she escaped slavery and became a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. She led a large number of slaves to freedom without losing one. Most people don’t know she also served in the Civil War as a Union spy, scout, and nurse. What makes these feats even more astounding is that she was physically disabled, illiterate, uneducated, and was never paid a dime for her work.

Harriet was born in Maryland in 1820, the middle child of 11. Her family lived in a one-room slave cabin behind the white owner’s house. She grew up in a rough wood shack with one room, no windows, and mud packed in the gaps. Meals were usually ashcake, a mixture of cornmeal and flour cooked on an open fire. Harriet slept on a straw pallet and ran around bare-

foot, supervised by an elderly slave woman while her family worked in the fields.

When Harriet was six, her owner rented her out to a young couple who wanted someone cheap. She slept on the couple's kitchen floor and ate table scraps with the family dog. Her new master took her out into the woods and made her help him set muskrat traps, but the harsh conditions made her ill and she was sent home.

At seven she was rented out to a couple with a small baby. Her job was to sit up all night and rock the baby's cradle whenever he cried. The baby's mother kept a small whip on a shelf above her bed. If Harriet fell asleep and the baby cried out, the woman lashed out at her young slave with the whip. As a result, for the rest of her life Harriet's neck bore a crisscross of scars.

The experience toughened Harriet. "I prayed to God to make me strong and able to fight, and that's what I've always prayed for ever since," she said.<sup>5</sup>

When she was 15, Harriet tried to protect a fellow slave from a beating. An overseer threw a heavy lead weight at the fleeing boy and instead hit Harriet in the forehead. She suffered a skull fracture and fell into a coma. For the rest of her life this brain injury caused seizures, headaches, and sleeping fits. In spite of this physical disability and being just five feet tall, she earned a reputation as a hard worker. She often worked side by side with men driving oxen and was known for her physical endurance and strength.

Enslaved men and women were accustomed to hardship and abuse, but ex-slaves agreed on this: the most difficult and painful consequence of slavery was the tearing-apart of families. There was no advance warning, and slaves could be sold at a moment's notice, often to slave owners several states away. Harriet faced this nightmarish situation when she heard that two of her sisters

were about to be sold to plantations in the Deep South, where conditions were notoriously bad. She began to think about escape, but she had no money, guide, or maps, and she knew the punishment for escape was severe: whipping, branding, or having your ears cropped. Just *helping* a slave escape meant years in prison.

Harriet always felt very close to God and energized by her many mystical experiences. She often talked to God “as a man talks with his friend.”<sup>6</sup> When her owner, who had long been ill, finally died, Harriet’s visions increased, and she heard voices that said, “Arise—flee for your life.” So she did.

Her brothers went with her but soon chickened out. She went on alone, avoiding slave catchers on the roads by following the Choptank River on foot for 67 miles. After weeks of almost nothing to eat and hiding in thick woods or potato storage pits, she crossed the state line into Pennsylvania. For the first time in her life, Harriet stood on free soil. “I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person,” she said. “There was such glory over everything. The sun came like gold through the trees.”<sup>7</sup>

Harriet worked for a while in Philadelphia, “a stranger in a strange land.”<sup>8</sup> She supported herself by working as a nanny, laborer, and cook. But she could not forget those she left behind, and it wasn’t long before she returned to slave country as a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad, the secret network of people who helped slaves escape to freedom in the North. Over a 10-year period, she led 300 slaves to freedom, including whole families with babies. She rescued her entire family, including her two sisters and her aged parents, whom she supported for the rest of her life. The stories of Harriet’s exploits began to spread. At one point a reward of \$40,000 was offered for Harriet’s capture, but it was never collected.

As a young girl, Harriet had a vision that birthed her nickname: she had seen a line dividing freedom from slavery. On the northern side people stood with hands stretched out in welcome, bidding her to come forward and calling her “Moses.” That childhood vision was always before her as she planned her rescues. She was known for her ingenious disguises (she could appear to be an old, crippled woman), her knack for finding secure hiding places, and her sixth sense for avoiding capture. Harriet said she could sense when danger was near; if slave catchers were in the area, her heart went “flutter, flutter.”

There are so many miraculous stories about Harriet and her trips to freedom, but one struck me most. She was leading a group of fugitives through the countryside on a wintry cold day in March. They came to a river, and Harriet looked for a place to cross. Bridges were out of the question, as slave catchers often staked them out in hopes of catching a slave and collecting the award. Finally she found a spot where she felt God prompting her to cross. The water was icy cold, and at first the men in the group refused to wade into the water. Harriet led the way and went down into the river up to her armpits, then made her way to the other side. The group followed, frightened, and came out behind Harriet, soaking wet and freezing cold.

Harriet knew they needed shelter and a place to dry out and warm up—fast. She scouted out a small cabin with a black family who agreed to help. They welcomed the band of fleeing slaves, fed them, dried their clothes, and let them rest. Harriet wanted to give the brave rescuers something in return for their help, but she had no money and no possessions except the clothes on her back. In an act of unbelievable sacrifice, she took off several pieces of clothing and gave them to the rescuers. What strikes me most is this: Harriet was leading slaves to freedom at great personal risk, and she was not paid for her dangerous work. She



gave everything she had to the cause, and when she had nothing else to give, she sacrificed her own clothing.

Here's one last story. After she finished her work on the Underground Railroad ("I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger"<sup>10</sup> she often said), Harriet worked as an unpaid army scout, spy, and nurse for Northern forces. While an army nurse in South Carolina, she was given no resources, not even basic medical supplies to care for the dead and dying soldiers. "In the early years of the war, wounded men died on the battlefield after lying there for days, untended, in the hot sun," wrote one historian.<sup>11</sup> But lack of planning and lack of resources didn't stop Harriet. Every night when her work was finished, she made 50 pies, as well as a large amount of gingerbread and two casks of root beer. The next day, former slaves she had hired went out and sold the food and drink in the camps. Harriet used the proceeds to support herself and to buy the much-needed medical supplies for her patients. In addition, the ex-slaves learned useful business skills, which they would need to make their way as free men and women.

William Still, in his book *The Underground Railroad*, called her "a most ordinary specimen of humanity." Another historian wrote that "her aggressive agenda helped bring the war against slavery above ground and paved the way for its ultimate downfall and defeat."<sup>12</sup>



Harriet changed the world by bringing freedom from dream to reality for hundreds of slaves. Trying to come up with a project to follow her lead stumped me at first; how could I ever do anything remotely like what she accomplished in her life? Learning Harriet's story made me feel, more than ever before, guilty about having so many extra possessions that I clearly didn't need.

The numbers didn't lie; they stared smugly up at me from my inventory list.

Then I found a way to live out one small aspect of Harriet's life. I was at a conference, half asleep and nursing a cup of tea. A video popped up on the huge screen above the stage. It was water, pure water, bubbling and burbling across the screen. It was clear and blue and beautiful. Then there was some music—happy, bemused, thoughtful, and yearning all at once. I began to pay attention. A new scene popped up: filthy greenish water being collected in jugs by African women and children from what looked like a weedy ditch.

Statistics were provided: Every day 25,000 people die from unsafe drinking water. Eighty percent of all sickness is attributed to unsafe water; it's the world's number-one killer. And women and children often walk up to ten miles a day to collect water. The video, from the Africa Oasis Project, requests support for a charity that drills deep wells and brings fresh, clean, drinking water to African villages where none exists.

I thought about the bottle of water in my bag, taken for granted. I looked at the pitcher of ice water on the table, also taken for granted. But I didn't have any money, so how could I help? It was then that I looked down and saw my watch, my chunky gold ring, and I remembered my inventory list. I was about to do something pretty crazy, something that my mother would not appreciate, something Harriet Tubman would have done.

At home I checked the price of gold. It was trading at more than \$900 an ounce. I found a certified jeweler about 25 miles away from me who bought jewelry. Then I gathered up rings, bracelets, and necklaces and headed down to Lovelady Diamond. Owner Glenn Lovelady buzzed me in. I sat and waited for him to finish with another customer. While I waited, I won-

dered if I was doing the right thing. My heart began to beat hard. *What was I doing?* Many of the pieces had been gifts for special occasions. A gold nugget necklace had been created by melting down my father's college ring; he had died when I was 20. A stunning Italian gold bracelet had been a graduation gift. One of the rings had garnets, my birthstone. I began to have serious second thoughts. *Was it really worth it? Would I be sorry in the morning? Would people think I was crazy? Would my family be offended? Would anyone understand my sacrifice?*

Then I remembered Harriet giving her clothing away. I thought of Jesus, telling the rich young ruler to sell everything he had. I thought of the children from the video, filling plastic jugs with green water. And I remembered my inventory list overflowing with so many things I really didn't need nearly as much as those children need fresh water. My jewelry for fresh water; it seemed a good trade.

So I sold my jewelry to Glenn—and shortened my inventory list.

Now that I look back on it, it's simple. We have jewelry; we don't need it. They need water; they don't have it. Jewelry for water. *Thanks, Harriet.*

## HOW YOU CAN HELP CHANGE THE WORLD BY SACRIFICING YOUR STUFF

- **Make your own de-clutter inventory list.** You might be surprised at the numbers and by how much extra you really have.
- **Trade your jewelry for water.** Sell your jewelry, and give the proceeds to recognized charities that are drilling wells and purifying water for people in Africa. You can find Africa Oasis Project at <<http://africaoasisproject.org/>>. Watch the same intriguing video I watched, and hear more about this heroic effort to bring clean drinking water to Africa. Other charities working to provide fresh water include UNICEF, Sisters in Service, and MercyCorps.
- **Freecycle.** Most towns and cities have freecycle groups. The idea is to recycle possessions by giving them away to people who need what you have. Type "freecycle" into an Internet search engine, and find a group near you.
- **Have a garage sale.** Sell items from your de-clutter inventory in a neighborhood garage or yard sale. Donate the proceeds to a local women's shelter. Let customers know where the proceeds are going; they might want to add a little extra to the pot.