

welcome

What's It Worth to You?

My son and I were in the kitchen one evening preparing dinner; I was expecting a friend to join us—a rare occurrence. It's too bad I don't entertain at home more; someday I'll have time to do it. My kitchen is a great place to hang out; it was designed so that whoever is cooking can have lots of company, and stir risotto on the stove while talking to people on the couch. A couple of decades ago, we gutted the old kitchen, much too small for a family, and added onto the back of the house. We decided that the design of the house—a vaguely Shingle-style center hall Colonial—should be carried through to the kitchen; so rather than build in the cabinets, we installed a large, freestanding cupboard on one wall, and opposite it we placed a sideboard. Both pieces were made by a woodworker in Vermont; he used a beautiful cherrywood and trimmed it with oak. (The entire kitchen was the result of a stroke of luck. It was designed by an architect, William McDonough, who agreed to take it on only because New York City was in a building slump at the time. By now he has designed and built gorgeous houses all over the country; we have published his work in these pages. I was thrilled to have the benefit of his discerning eye and judgment about what would be tasteful and appropriate focused on so humble a project.)

When the kitchen was completed I was struck by the luxury of so much storage space; I would open the doors of the large cupboard and admire it—plenty of room for each piece of the tea set, lots of small neat stacks of dishes, an entire shelf for my vases. (Naturally, the whole thing was filled to overflowing within a couple of years.)

The sideboard made me a little more wary when it first arrived. I've never been big on displaying things that aren't meant to be used, and this piece of furniture had six cubicles that were crying out for stuff. I filled a few shelves with books of poetry and some cookbooks, and then stopped worrying about it. Over the years, the shelves seemed to fill themselves: a couple of beautiful teapots, one made by a North Carolina artisan, one an ancient thing from a friend who had been to China; a gorgeous old English mold, its glaze cracked, the arcane recipe for corn flour blancmange stamped in elegant

lettering on its side; a mold of my older son's hand, cast in sand-coated plaster, an elementary school project—when was that hand so small? how did it get so big? The sideboard had become a display of journeys made together.

By the time my friend walked into the kitchen, preparations for dinner were in full swing. There was an awkward period of greeting between him and my son. I was stirring something on the stove. My friend rooted around in the refrigerator, bearlike. We chatted awhile, caught up on the day. I turned to the sink; silence fell. I turned around, and my son had started throwing a baseball in the air and catching it; up and down it went. I wondered where that behavior was coming from; he isn't a ballplayer. But, figuring it was a nervous mannerism, I ignored it and turned back to the sink. The conversation was sputtering, my son on one side of the room, my friend on the other. Then my friend, who is a nut for baseball, clapped and cupped his hands together in the universally accepted sign for "Throw it to me." The ball swooped over the sofa, was caught, then returned. Back and forth, and as it traveled, the conversation began to pick up, the very air relaxed. I watched the guys for a few moments before the Mom brain kicked in—"Wait just a minute; isn't there a rule about throwing balls in the house?" said a tiny but firm voice inside my head, addressing my son. "And wait another minute," went the tiny internal voice, a little shriller this time, to my friend. "Aren't you standing right *in front* of the sideboard? If you miss that ball, it'll be the end of a teapot." And those teapots, I noted ruefully, had plenty of life left in them.

Luckily, another voice kicked in, just in time, to override the disciplinary voice. "So what?" it said. "So what if a teapot is shattered? What is that worth, compared with the graciousness of the gesture—here, catch!—between two people trying to find common, comfortable ground." I stood quietly, admiring their dexterity and precision, the rhythm of the ball passing from one to the other, and the graceful arc it traced so predictably was soothing even to me. My heart filled with love and pride and gratitude for a son who had the manners to know when it was right to throw a ball in the house. That was worth more than any old teapot.




Dominique Browning, EDITOR