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“Things That Gather”

I spent most of my life, about sixteen years, in rural Russia. And if I were to tell you *one* thing about those years, it would be how ordinary things *felt* back then. Things like the heat of fire or the taste of food and drink.

The winters where I grew up, were severe; and snow was on the ground for six months a year. During the winter, the inner space of the house was very important because for the most part life went on indoors. My house did not have much space, only two rooms, and I spent my childhood sleeping with four other people in the same room.

As small as it was, my house was not easy to keep warm. It was heated by a big wood stove, which occupied its very center. We would start preparing the wood for the coming winter in early spring. We would order a truckful or two of birch logs and hire a local man with a chainsaw to saw them into stumps. My father would pay him several bottles of vodka and a meal. When it got a bit warmer, maybe in April, we would chop the wood and stack it in the yard to dry for the summer. When it started raining more, towards the autumn, my father would transport it in a wheelbarrow to the shed bit by bit. And it is when the cold finally sets in that you are happy you’ve got all that wood in your shed.

Early in the morning, my father would bring an armful of wood up to the stove, and I could hear the loud thunk of the wood on the floor from my bed. At this time of day, the air inside the house could be so cold that it was almost painful to breathe. But then something magical happened. The fire gained strength in the stove, and a wave of warmth spread from the center to the margins of the house. The warmth came together with a peculiar smell of burning wood. It marked the morning; it was an invitation to start the day, have a hot breakfast and a conversation.

Things also tasted different back then.

When my brother was in college, he would come for a weekend every other week. Apart from holidays, this was only time when we would buy fruit juice. We would wait for Saturday night to drink it. When our parents had gone to sleep and the house had quieted down, my brother and I would be in the other room. We would fill our mugs with juice while talking, reminiscing, or drawing. The juice was

delicious; and it was not just for quenching our thirst, it was for maintaining the feeling of hominess and full relaxation. We were fearfully anticipating the end of the juice, because that would mark the end of the evening. It was almost uncomfortable to stay up past the point where the juice ran out because without it it felt like something was missing.

The life I had as a child was about *cherishing* things as if they had an existence of their own, *separate* from their relationship to me. And I mean nothing mystical. We were not in full control of the heat; it exercised power over us, which we had to listen to and abide. The heat was not there just to make us comfortable. It set up a mood in the house. It made some places in the house more welcoming than others. The stove made people gather around it, and have a meal next to it, and enjoy each other. And fruit juice was so precious that it, so to say, demanded to be drunk in a special situation. It was like a sacred object to be used only in a ritual. Here, the food and drinks in the dining hall are provided simply to satisfy my needs. The cup is a tool for my use. The heat warms up my room homogeneously so that I don't notice it. It has no existence for me other than when I complain that there is not enough or too much of it.

Here, we see the world as a web of tools and obstacles. We love to think we're in charge. Don't we think that everything is up to us or *should* be up to us? The thought that something cannot, *in principle*, be willed or achieved through effort -- doesn't this thought make us anxious?

But here's what I am telling you: true fellowship and camaraderie *cannot* be willed; something over which we have no control has to *gather* us and let us enjoy each other.

Think of this dining hall. We like having a chat here with people whom we wouldn't see otherwise. But isn't it sometimes so uncomfortable having to go here to grab a snack or some tea in the evening? If it were truly up to us, wouldn't we choose to have our own house with a kitchen full of stuff? And a big living room? several bedrooms? Maybe a balcony? Isn't it reasonable to desire a house like that?

But I can assure you: things in *such* a house would never feel the way things felt when I was a child.