

Sweeping Away Cobwebs—Or Not

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Many years ago, when I worked for a time as a paraprofessional, my colleagues and I would take our students (teenagers with autism and other developmental disabilities) to clean a local movie theater once a week, as part of their vocational training. Our little crew had a number of tasks—vacuuming the carpet, washing the glass in the candy display cases, cleaning the bathrooms. My favorite, the one I always tried to get assigned to the student I was supervising, was polishing the brass railings on the short, shallow flight of steps leading from the mall to the theater lobby. The proper tool for this task was some stuff that came out of a tin can. It looked something like pink fiberglass insulation and was saturated in a no-doubt highly toxic chemical—though it didn't feel damp to the touch. As we polished the railings the fingerprints and grime disappeared and the pink stuff turned black and the brass began to shine.

I've never enjoyed a cleaning task as much as I enjoyed that one. I suppose I was attracted to the dramatically visible outcome, and to the ease with which it was accomplished. Cleaning my own home has always been a chore to be avoided whenever possible. I know there is truth in the words of Brenda Peterson, that there is much to be shined bright and scrubbed down to its deepest most illuminating level. Truth in the assertion that we do chores because home is holy. I know there is wisdom in the query of Dorothy Morrison, how can you think success if you've got yesterday's trash clouding your brain? I even know that I enjoy life more, find the going a bit smoother, when my home is neat and tidy. And yet, more often than not, my mess and I coexist in a sort of perpetual domestic cease-fire.

I do make some effort to practice what I preach. This is not, therefore, my admonition to you that the days are growing longer and lighter and it's high time you got around to your spring cleaning. I do suggest, however, that Lent has begun, the Vernal Equinox is approaching, and it is high time we all get on with a seasonal cleaning of another sort.

In his book *The Heart of the Enlightened*, Anthony de Mello tells of a woman who

complained to a visiting friend that her neighbor was a poor housekeeper. “You should see how dirty her children are—and her house. It is almost a disgrace to be living in the same neighborhood as her. Take a look at those clothes she has hung out on the line. See the black streaks on the sheets and towels.

The friend walked up to the window and said, “I think the clothes are quite clean, my dear. The streaks are on your windows.”

Cleaning the streaks from the window of our perspective on life is one of the central tasks of the spiritual life. Daily living deposits plenty of dust and grit and grime on our hearts, in the form of disappointment, heartbreak, disillusionment, resentment, anger, grief, hurt feelings. And daily living fills our minds with a jumble of memories, ideas, emotions, thoughts and questions, creating a clutter worthy of an attic or cellar, or both plus a shed and a rented storage unit for the overflow. Our days are filled with experiences of beauty and despair, ugliness and truth, comedy and tragedy, song and art and news accounts of death and destruction, Tweeter feeds, Facebook posts, chance words of friends or children and the flowing prose and poetry of great writers. All this and more enters our minds and our hearts daily, and much of it sticks.

Harry Potter was reluctant to admit to Professor Dumbledore that he had never known a time when he had too many thoughts and memories crammed into his head. Well, he was young, just fourteen, and perhaps hadn't had time to accumulate a backlog. More likely, he had simply never thought about it in quite those terms. After all, it's hard to imagine a more thought jumbled time than teenagehood. Most of us, I think, know just what Dumbledore was talking about.

Our thoughts build up over time and occasionally become cluttered and confusing, too numerous and intertwined to examine thoughtfully, clearly. But we, unlike Dumbledore, have no magic wand with which to draw them from our heads, one by one, no Pensieve in which to deposit them, so that we may attend to them at our leisure at a more convenient time. Our minds and our hearts don't polish up, nice and shiny, free of accumulated grime and marks of the passage of time, as easily as brass railings.

Though we may lack Dumbledore's magical stone basin, and have no spiritual equivalent to the chemical saturated pink stuff in a can, still spiritual spring cleaning is a task that enriches our lives, and we are not entirely without the necessary supplies.

Devotional reading, music, gardening, journal writing, prayer, meditation, dance, yoga, silence, walking, running, are but a few of the tools that, with regular use over time, can clean the streaks from our eyes, leave our hearts shiny, and our minds navigable.

Cleaning of any kind is easier and more effective if done on a regular and continuing basis. Save it up or put it off long enough and you end up with a mess too overwhelming to even approach. Smart housekeepers know this and so keep on top of things. They follow a housecleaning schedule, by which tasks are done daily, weekly, monthly or annually—according to need. One of my colleagues, the Reverend Arvid Straube, suggested a similar schedule of spiritual maintenance: daily practice of meditation or prayer or silence; weekly Sabbath-keeping, and an annual retreat for intensive maintenance. I think that's a good plan. If we neglect our cluttered mind and tarnished hearts for years on end, or even just sweep them out once a year, we'll never make much headway. Our minds will be perpetually cluttered with yesteryear's trash. We will lose sight of the holiness of our very lives.

But even the most conscientious housekeeper finds it necessary to engage in annual or semi-annual bouts of intensive cleaning (or so I hear). The white tornado kind—in the spring or before Yule or in preparation for Passover. Such cleaning gets to the corners that are sometimes missed and takes care of chores that need regular but infrequent attention. Such cleaning also puts the cleaner back on track. It's easier to keep a clean house clean than to it is to clean a dirty one. So seasonal cleaning gives the housekeeper a fresh start and renewed motivation to follow the daily and weekly and monthly schedule of chores.

The same is true of spiritual seasonal cleaning. We'd keep our hearts and minds and souls in the best order, shiny, uncluttered, healthy, with regular maintenance, but we're only human, and so we, no less than the housekeeper, need a fresh start and renewed motivation every once in a while.

The Christian liturgical calendar offers occasions such as Lent (which started this past Wednesday) in which one might engage in spiritual seasonal cleaning. The timing, in the northern hemisphere, fits well with the spring cleaning urge carried by warming breezes and brighter skies. Traditional Jewish homes are thoroughly cleaned in preparation for the festival of Passover—a practice that encompasses both physic cleaning nad spiritual cleansing, with the ritual removal of all traces of leavened bread. Dorothy Morrison, in

this morning's reading, suggests that those who live according to the rhythms of the pagan year might find the days leading up to the New Year, that is the Winter Solstice, the best time for sweeping dust from their homes and their minds. In Unitarian Universalist church we tend to follow an academic calendar, so annual soul, mind, heart maintenance might come naturally in September as we gather again, or in the early summer as we settle into a more casual routine slower pace.

There is no correct time or one proven way for sweeping away the cobwebs in our minds and cleaning the streaks from our hearts. Each of us must find the schedule and the tools that work for us. And, as I said last week, the church is here to help—striving to offer a variety of classes, groups, worship experiences, relationships, and information from which to gather the tools and start blocking out the routine.

I set out to call this sermon *Sweeping Away Cobwebs* because I wanted a spring cleaning metaphor for talking about the spiritual disciple of Lent. I added the tag *Or Not* because a story from my childhood kept intruding my thought process. *Be Nice to Spiders* was the story of a boy who was compelled for reasons I no longer remember to give his pet spider to the zoo. The spider, I think her name was Helen, took up residence in the zebra house. One day a visit from the mayor was announced, and all the zoo keeps spent the next few days sprucing the place up, in preparation for His Honor's visit. They swept and polished and painted, bathed the animals, and brushed away all the cobwebs from the cages. On the day of the mayor's visit the zoo was neat and tidy, but the animals were miserable. The elephants and giraffes and tigers, the bears and the penguins and the monkeys. Everywhere the mayor and the head zoo keeper and the reporters and television cameras went the animals were surrounded by clouds of flies. Flies swarming around animals' heads. Flies biting animals' noses. Flies buzzing in animals' ears. Everywhere except in the zebra house. There Helen had emerged from a crack in the wall after the cleaning frenzy and woven her web again. The zebras, clean and well-fed, were content and peaceful when the mayor arrived, and there wasn't a fly in sight.

The moral, of course, be nice to spiders, because even cobwebs serve an important function. The same is true of the jumble of thoughts, memories and ideas that clutter up our minds and our hearts. We can't polish our mind clean of all traces of past experience, nor do we want to. The clutter is who we are. Some cleaning out is necessary. Some organizing and shining and polishing. To keep our perspectives clear

and fresh. To allow us to think straight and make sound decision and engage in meaningful, satisfying relationships. But spring cleaning doesn't mean we throw uout every stick of furniture or piece of sentimental paper. And spiritual seasonal cleaning doesn't mean we empty our hearts and minds and start over empty.

True, as the Zen maters teach it is impossible to pour any more tera into an already full bowl. But you don't have to empty it completely to make room for more. The Zen approach to meditation and emptying the mind is difficult for many western minds to grasp. I don't mean to suggest that it is without virtue. But I do want to suggest that spiritual practice, during Lent or at any time, does not have to be an all or nothing endeavor. Some of the clutter serves a purpose. Some of it gets in our way. Dumbledore didn't just removed the overflowing thoughts from his head and toss them away. He put them in the Pensieve to observe and examine and ponder later, to search for patterns and insights. That's an important step in any spiritual practice.

The cleaning must begin with discernment. What are the streaks that keep us from seeing ourselves and our neighbors clearly? What do the patterns of our jumbled thoughts tell us about our lives? What ideas capture errant thoughts, useless and enervating memories, and other pests that buzz and bite and annoy? And which ones simply clutter the place up? When your time in silence, or prayer, or reading, or quilting, or gardening, or careful, honest conversation, has brought you answers to some of these questions, then you will be ready to do your spring cleaning. And once you've begun, you may find, that with regular tending and care of your heart and mind, you enjoy living a bit more, find your going smoother, delight in inhabiting your life, and give praise for its holiness.

May it be so. Amen.