

Mud Room Messiness

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
April 2, 2017

Every year around this time, I preach about Spring Cleaning. I am much better about preaching about it than I am practicing it, but I hope that the preaching this morning may inspire me and others to get in gear and get to those piles of clutter we have been ignoring.

This sermon is stitched together from a bunch of previous clutter sermons, and that illustrates why it is so hard to throw anything out; you might actually find a new use for it!

It is kind of a paradox to do spring cleaning because spring is inherently messy. The orderliness, the spareness of the winter landscape, particularly the snowscape, gives way to the swirling variety of the springscape. It used to be called mud time, and some of us have a mud room in our houses which is where some of the clutter tends to congregate. The theory is the mud gets confined to the one room and does not spread over the newly vacuumed carpet in the living room.

But the mud room is not the only place where stuff accumulates, and garages, attics, closets, screen porches, sheds, are all waiting for your attention to liberate whatever you can do without.

There are two logical ways to deal with clutter. One is the intake and one is the output. If we can restrict what is coming in to the house, we can start to get a handle on it. What drives the input, of course, is the conviction that our happiness will be complete if we just acquire that one thing more. The fact that unhappiness persisted even after we did buy that one thing doesn't seem to keep us from falling for the same delusion the next time something on sale catches our eye. So restricting input is difficult.

And the real test comes in trying to throw stuff away. Here we have to learn to let go. The Taoist Sage learns to let go of that which he no longer needs. The Buddha teaches that craving and clinging is the root of suffering.

Easy to say, but hard to do. Why is letting go so hard? In order to trash our stuff, we have to understand why we treasure it. Or as Jesus says, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

We know we are not supposed to be materialistic. We come to church and sing the Shaker hymn and give great lip service to people who live in caves or sparsely furnished houses.

My wife and I lived off-campus my last year of college and one of our neighbors was a kind of hippie artist woman. One day, she went to her grandfather's funeral in Rhode Island, and when she came back she reported to me that he had spent his life in the Merchant Marine, and at his death his entire possessions fit into a steamer trunk. That just seemed to me the most desirable thing in the world, but of course I haven't lived my life that way.

There is some sort of Noble Savage ideal in me, but that is only one of the people I am. Why can I not live that lightly on the earth? Chief Sitting Bull said of American whites, "the love of possessions is a disease with them." Why is that – is it that we can't bear to part with all this stuff?

As I think about my own stuff, I don't think so. There are some objects which are precious to me, but they are a minuscule percentage of the stuff I actually have. If my house were on fire and my loved ones had escaped, I could rescue the things I care about in about two armfuls – I'd hardly get singed.

I think most of us hold on to stuff for other reasons, and that is explored by a passage from an article I read several years ago in the AARP magazine about the accumulation of stuff particularly by older folks. It was copied by our late and sorely missed Chuck Chesnut and sent around to his children and he put the original in his funeral file so I could read it at his memorial service, which I did. Chuck was well aware of his own stuff problem.

The author of the article has this to say about cleaning out his parents' house preparing to move them:

“I expected that the chore of emptying it would be just that: a chore, slow and grimy and unpleasant. But there were unexpected difficulties. Discarding even the most innocuous bits of junk from the garage—a half-emptied propane tank, a stack of catalogs, full jars of paint and weed killer—seemed strangely painful to my parents...

“What I didn't understand until it was much too late was that the objects going out the door were not objects at all. Often the items that had been used the least were the hardest to throw out, symbolizing as they did not fond memory but never-tapped potential. They were, as my father said while I hauled off a nearly new portable gas grill, ‘artifacts of unused life.’”

This is what we hold on to: not the objects which represent our past, but the objects which represent our unfulfilled plans for the future. To throw them out is to die a little prematurely, to have a funeral for the scheme that each object represents.

Or from an article on hoarding in an issue of the online magazine Salon a few years ago: “... our inability to get rid of certain things is sometimes tied to our hesitation to give up on some idea of ourselves: ‘I might still be a size 4 someday,’ says the 40-year-old size-8 mother. ‘I might still train for a marathon following this program in this 1998 issue of Runners' World Magazine, I might still learn something from my old philosophy books from college, I might still break out my old acrylic paints and read all of these back issues of the New Yorker.’ We all want to feel that our lives are filled with endless possibilities, that we have all the time in the world. Hoarding can be a way of denying that there's an end point to your timeline or boundaries around your opportunities.”

Spring cleaning of the house, my friends, might have to be preceded by some spring cleaning of the soul. With the Buddha's noble truth that the root of dukkha, of suffering or unsatisfactoriness is craving and clinging, we can try with each object we encounter to ask ourselves if we are clinging to a future in which this object might come into play, and we can then ask ourselves whether we might have a happier future if we could get all such objects taken to the thrift shop or otherwise out from underfoot.

Andrea shared with me yesterday some Japanese wisdom about letting go: keep the things you love and love the things you keep- don't keep what you don't love to take care of.

That Japanese ideal of simplicity, of a stuff-free existence is expressed in a famous story

in Japanese Buddhism about the poet/monk Ryokan, who lived in a remote hut high in the mountains. One day a robber came to Ryokan's hut. Ryokan told the robber he was very sorry, but there was nothing in his hut to steal. The only thing material was the robe that Ryokan was wearing, so Ryokan gave the robber that. The robber left and Ryokan was naked and shivering, but satisfied. He looked out at the moon rising and wrote a poem in which he wished that he could have given the robber the moon instead.

In the 14th Century, Dante's *Inferno* depicts two types of people in the Fourth Circle of Hell: Hoarders and Wasters. These move perpetually around the circle, shouting at each other, "why do you hoard?" and "why do you waste?" We may gather from this picture that in his day both were considered equivalent sins and there was no way they were reconciled: a two-sided argument never resolved.

Open wide the windows of our souls. Let us understand our attachment to objects. Let us also understand our guilt feelings and not be overwhelmed by them. Everyone has them.

Everyone feels bad because the house is too dirty, even if it is spotless, just as your friend with the perfect figure, the figure to die for, thinks that she's fat. You can wallow in your guilt, that's a choice you can make. Or you can laugh at your guilt feelings and try to take each day at a time.

Remember Herakles from Greek mythology (Hercules in Latin). He had a series of impossible tasks, one of which was to clean out the Augean stables. Augeus was a rich man, king of Elis, and he had over a thousand head of cattle and his stables had never been cleaned out. On top of that, the livestock were immortal and each produced enormous quantities of dung. You can imagine the sight; you can imagine the smell. Herakles' task was to clean out the stables in one day. He solved the problem by diverting two rivers, Apheus and Peneus, through the stables to wash out the filth.

Herakles had only a day to work to clean out the Augean stables. You can give yourself more time. You can break down the Augean stables into mini cleaning projects so that the whole doesn't seem so scary.

In the end, a certain amount of spring cleaning may be good for the soul. The little stuff-moving I have done this week for my guests have made me feel more at home. But our days stretch out ahead of us in a finite number, and few of us want to have a clean house as one of our life accomplishments. Well, I don't know that – I can just speak for myself. I don't want a gravestone that says, "here lies Edmund Robinson – he finally got his house clean." When we open wide the windows of our souls we will see many things worth doing besides cleaning house.

All that is a long way of saying that if we think that our homes and churches and offices are messy, they are not nearly as messy as the larger reality in which they are situated, nor as messy as the space in here where we have to think about them. So my take-home this morning is that the great attraction of cleaning up our homes or offices or cars or churches is that it is actually much simpler than cleaning the clutter in the larger world or the disorder in our minds.

Open wide the windows of my soul, that I may see good in all things. There is good and bad to be seen, let's try to remember to see the good. May we all find the courage, patience and time to tackle a little in the other places we inhabit. Three years ago, I wrote a little hymn of praise to spring cleaning, and I will leave you with that:

Spring Cleaning by Edmund Robinson (Tune: The Ash Grove)

The robins are singing, the buds are a-bursting,
Spring is unfolding its colors pastel.
Daffodils blooming and bees are out buzzing
Bunnies are hopping right down in the dell.
But inside my house the chaos is swirling,
With musty reminders wherever I roam,
The dust bunnies caucus right under the sofa,
Alas, grow the cooties alive in my home.

In every small cranny there's months' worth of junk mail,
And articles I'd been intending to read,
Old shower curtains pile up in the basement,
Atop all the other stuff I don't need.
It's time to take arms 'gainst this sea of detritus,
It's time to wade in with trash bags and mop,
I'll save all the good stuff to take to the Thrift Shop,
Our town Transfer Station will be my last stop.
Amen.

Opening Reading: My Psalm by John Greenleaf Whittier (1859)

I MOURN no more my vanished years:

Beneath a tender rain,
An April rain of smiles and tears,
My heart is young again.

The west-winds blow, and, singing low, 5
I hear the glad streams run;
The windows of my soul I throw
Wide open to the sun.

No longer forward nor behind
I look in hope or fear; 10
But, grateful, take the good I find,
The best of now and here.

I plough no more a desert land,
To harvest weed and tare;
The manna dropping from God's hand 15

Rebukes my painful care.

I break my pilgrim staff, I lay
 Aside the toiling oar;
The angel sought so far away
 I welcome at my door. 20

The airs of spring may never play
 Among the ripening corn,
Nor freshness of the flowers of May
 Blow through the autumn morn;

Yet shall the blue-eyed gentian look 25
 Through fringed lids to heaven,
And the pale aster in the brook
 Shall see its image given;—

The woods shall wear their robes of praise,
 The south-wind softly sigh, 30
And sweet, calm days in golden haze
 Melt down the amber sky.

Not less shall manly deed and word
 Rebuke an age of wrong;
The graven flowers that wreath the sword 35
 Make not the blade less strong.

But smiting hands shall learn to heal,—
 To build as to destroy;
Nor less my heart for others feel
 That I the more enjoy. 40

All as God wills, who wisely heeds
 To give or to withhold,
And knoweth more of all my needs
 Than all my prayers have told!

Enough that blessings undeserved 45

Have marked my erring track;
That wheresoe'er my feet have swerved,
His chastening turned me back;

That more and more a Providence
Of love is understood, 50
Making the springs of time and sense
Sweet with eternal good;—

That death seems but a covered way
Which opens into light,
Wherein no blinded child can stray 55
Beyond the Father's sight;

That care and trial seem at last,
Through Memory's sunset air,
Like mountain-ranges overpast,
In purple distance fair; 60

That all the jarring notes of life
Seem blending in a psalm,
And all the angles of its strife
Slow rounding into calm.

And so the shadows fall apart, 65
And so the west-winds play;
And all the windows of my heart
I open to the day.

Sermon reading,

Matthew 6

19 Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

