

A Spring Cleaning of the Soul

It occurs to me that people who approach their spring-cleaning renewal program with great vigor are after something more than just a dust-free house.

To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven... -Ecclesiastes 3

As we embrace a New Year and a new season, our thoughts turn to another annual ritual: spring-cleaning. It is out with the old and in with the neat. We prepare to let go, release ourselves from what may have built up over the past year, and make way for a cleaner, fresher, less cluttered version of our previous lives.

Another clean-up effort should be added to the routine vacuuming and dusting of our physical surroundings—a clean-up effort of a much more serious kind. It is a hunt for the hidden cobwebs, the psychic dirt that may attract pesky and destructive bugs. It is more than a surface cleansing, it is a deeper endeavor, resulting in a kind of visceral satisfaction: we know we have accomplished something because we feel renewed and ready to begin anew.

It occurs to me that people who approach their spring-cleaning renewal program with great vigor are after something more than just a dust-free house. All this effort made in the direction of our physical environment may be suggestive of a deeper need. We have all heard the expression that a cluttered house or office is the sign of a cluttered mind, right? Is there something going on beneath the surface here?

I would suggest that if there is a deeper need at the source, it is unconscious. We may "feel" sluggish, disorganized, and crotchety, and this may manifest itself in our behavior, but we are probably not connecting this feeling with what is really wrong. If our physical environment is a reflection of what is going on internally, then it makes perfect sense that the need to clean-up and clear out the house is connected with a equally necessary cleaning of the mind, heart, and spirit.

Think about it. While you vigorously pursue this onslaught, are you making an unconscious statement? As you assign things to Goodwill and Am Vets and arrange for garage sales, are you even remotely aware that something may be ailing you that has nothing at all to do with a more tidy home or office? Are you able to stop, really stop long enough to listen without distraction to that voice that will only speak if you ask and believe?

While you consider what may be ailing you personally, allow me to indulge in a few suggestions that may sound familiar, no matter what your individual issues are.

Clearly, many of us have attitude problems that require some cleaning up. Some of them are blatant, to be witnessed daily by many, if not all, who come in contact with us. Other bad behavior hides issues that bear little to no connection to their source. Some of us are so good at disguising and sublimating our real problems that we do not even recognize it in ourselves.

It is our attitude at the beginning of a difficult undertaking which, more than anything else, will determine its successful outcome. -William James

Let us take three examples that are familiar to the majority.

Who among us has not suffered from "bad service," inflicted by a service provider who presumably was given training, or at least was assumed to have been trained to be courteous, when performing their job of assisting people. We leave such a situation often mumbling under our breath that this individual ought to find another, more suitable job.

The unfortunate reality is that inferior service is so pervasive that we have come to almost expect it, rewarding the "exceptions" handsomely because we are so pleased to have encountered what ought to be the norm in such service positions.

A few of us may choose not to mumble, of course, and rather either report the transgression or take care of it ourselves by returning the discourtesy, which is often not a pretty picture, one we likely live to regret. We have been pushed beyond our limits, we have succumbed to like behavior, now we may assign ourselves in the like "bad attitude" label. No winners this way.

Or, let us take everyday driving habits. There we are, minding our own business, trying to obey the rules of the road when "Mr. or Ms. Idiot" wanders into our path, cuts us off, or fails to signal a turn, which then causes problems for us. We become irate, indignant even, yelling obscenities at the driver, who has now gone on his or

her way, completely unaware of how upset we have just decided to get over their apparent offense. As the yeller, you may be the only person to experience high blood pressure in this case. Here is a situation where the unconscious bad behavior of one is followed by the seemingly conscious bad behavior of the other.

We are not troubled by things, but by the opinions which we have of things. -Epictetus

But the best example, I believe, can be seen with our family relationships. We are usually taught to love our family members unconditionally. What that tends to involve is our acceptance of what they choose for themselves, whether we like it or not. We have opinions on just about everything they do, but our opinion (as the sardonic Twain once noted) is none of their business—we are best to keep it to ourselves, knowing full well (or we ought to) that this sentiment goes both ways. Anyway, we fully support one another, knowing that "blood is thicker than water" and all that good stuff and we honor the parents who raised us to behave in a mutually supportive manner.

Unfortunately, that is not how it always goes. In most families, disagreements about behavior and decisions invariably get in the way of that ideal—or at least expected—notion of unconditional love and support. In other words, it gets conditional somewhere along the way, creating attitudes of judgment, bitterness, and resentment. Words get said and things get done that erode the trust and feelings of joy, love, and support. And those hurts become grudges that last months, years, even lifetimes where family members do not even speak.

Hoarding one's hurts hurts only the hoarder:

-Malcolm Forbes

The problem is that old stuff is in the way. There is junk in our heads, causing us to feel a certain way and then choose badly. The words we say and the things we do are supposedly in reaction to one situation, but actually they come from a wounded place from long ago—and we don't stop to think about it, analyze it in the conscious mind, and possibly modify our behavior.

We need to conduct some serious clean up of the deeper kind to help us with our bad choices.

We know that the human mind can not hold two opposing beliefs at the same time, so what causes one individual to not take something like bad service personally, or to be impervious to a bad driver, or to act in a way that maintains positive relationships with loved ones for example, and another individual to react and incite chaos in all three examples depends on what was in their head to start with.

All non-productive behavior comes from bad attitudes that can be traced back to their original cause by taking a look at what is in the head and how it got there. The attitudes we have, even about life in general, are based on our belief systems, which were formulated way back when our development was in full force, taking shape and creating our world. Those beliefs include what we think about ourselves, our self-concept, and how we feel about ourselves, our self-esteem. And all of it originated with thoughts.

Each thought helped to create a composite picture, this creating a context for our attitudes to set, which then dictated our behaviors. And as that was set in place, all thoughts that were consistent with this original system were retained and those that conflicted were essentially thrown out, hence the concept of cognitive dissonance, that two opposing thoughts cannot be held at the same time. That is why we can have such negative buildup over time that inevitably comes with a price.

Your mind will be like its habitual thoughts: for the soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts.

-Marcus Aurelius

But the good news is that we can change all that because we have choice. We are fully capable of getting rid of our reactive behavior and choosing productive and positive behavior instead. How do we do that? By changing our mind, literally. By removing the old negative stuff that has not served us, and replacing it with the positive that will. Since your perception is your reality, change your perception to recreate a new, neat, clean reality. It is totally within your control. Every step of the way, you get to redesign and remake yourself and your life into anything you want it to be.

Fear less, hope more, eat less, chew more, whine less, breathe more, talk less, say more, love more, and all good things will be yours.

-Swedish Proverb

Consider this: Don't hold on to garbage, it makes you stink. Release yourself from the build-up of resentments that created all the bitterness that led to your unhappiness and made itself manifest in your unproductive behavior.

Feel cleaner, better, less encumbered, and embrace the new you. This will repel the pesky bugs of destructiveness and other negative consequences.

Remember that civility in relationships with others, whether it is in providing or receiving service, in driving, or within the family, demonstrates that you come from a place of respect for self and others. That will help maintain a peaceful, less distracted place for you to live.

Your entire life will be filled with choices on how to look at things. You can choose to be right or you may choose to be happy. Either way, you will live in the environment you create.

Replace bad thoughts-especially "attack" thoughts directed at others with good thoughts. "Be steadfast in your abstention of thoughts of harm directed at others," as Wayne Dyer puts it, because what you give out, you will get back. And if you can manage to accept only those thoughts which serve you and others, you will avoid nasty buildup-and the necessity for manic clean-up projects in the future.

One ought every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words.

-Goethe

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