

Spring Cleaning Grind
by Rick Kimball

I knew weeks ago that last Sunday I would feel left out of our culture, and I was right. I feel the same way every Easter, because I'm not very big on resurrection., and I look odd in an Easter bonnet.

So I tried out the idea of spring cleaning as a Unitarian Universalist substitute for Easter. After all, I reasoned, the promise of new hope, maybe even salvation, lies at the end of spring cleaning. That too proved to be correct, but in an unexpected way. And the process of getting to the end proved difficult. Less scary than crucifixion, to be sure, but still challenging.

So challenging, in fact, that I almost flunked my spring cleaning, as I have often done with previous attempts. It took a lucky discovery to get me through, a discovery much appreciated in these tough times. In fact, the tough times started my story. Sitting and watching the news a month or so ago, I tired of hearing that the times are tough. I decided to stop listening and start spring cleaning instead.

Tirrell was not home, so I began in the kitchen as a special surprise for her. I climbed up on a stool and opened the top cupboard, on the theory that any mess I made would fall below, where I could clean it up later. There was a red device on the shelf, a bright red thing with a crank. I did not recognize it. "Probably a wedding present," I thought, "but who can remember?" I hauled it out for a better look. "It's a grinder," I decided. "And it has a nifty little suction cup on the base to hold it in place. I'll bet it will make short work of a peppercorn."

Half an hour later, after a long but successful search for peppercorns, I put my theory to a test. Which is when Tirrell returned. "What are you doing?" she asked. "Grinding peppercorns," I replied. "Why?" she asked. "Because I can," I told her. "I'm spring cleaning." I did not mention Easter. "You are making a mess on the counter," she said. "It's okay," I replied. "I'm working my way down."

She looked down, at my ground pepper. "Maybe you should work your way down to the basement and clean your own part of the house," she said. So off I went to my office, where I chose the top shelf again. There I found a bunch of photographs and negatives. The first negatives I examined were of me, and they troubled me. They gave me negative thoughts. I was light where I am usually dark, and dark where I am really light, negative where I should have been positive, strangely off color. The reversals made me feel inside out, and that reminded me of the Tess Baumberger poem that begins with the line, "Wouldn't it be great if you could take a picture of your soul?"

I stopped cleaning the shelf and thought instead about photographing my soul. I would need to cleanse it first, I thought. What would a spring cleaning of my soul

feel like? I imagined a fire hose spraying my insides with ice water, and sensed a stomach ache coming on. Maybe I should return to the news.

I sat down for a moment to look at the negatives again, and to think more about reversals. What would life be like if I reversed the whole world? I stood to gaze out the window looking for answers. Or I tried to gaze out the window, but dirt was in the way. When images of sponges and ammonia and squeegees came to mind, I sent them away and took an easier approach. I opened the window.

And spring came in. The day had warmed without my knowing it, and spring blew in with the breath of a gentle breeze. Spring came in to touch and brighten my soul. Spring came in to clean the remnants of a difficult year away.

Suddenly I understood spring cleaning. Spring is meant to be the active cleaning agent, and I the not so very passive recipient. Spring cleaning is like my photographic negative – a reversal of what I had always thought.

I repeated the process again last Sunday, in the warmth of Easter afternoon. It worked again. It felt just as good, just as right. I was not cleaning for spring. Spring was cleaning me.

That discovery saved me. My office might still be a mess, but I did not flunk spring cleaning this year. I passed it with great pleasure and glory. Maybe I even passed Easter. I'll have to think about that. But I already know that next year I will celebrate spring cleaning, and I hope you will join me.

Cleaning Down

3-4-09

When I was ten, my bedroom floor was almost always covered with toys, books, an untidy mix of clean and dirty clothes, and enough stuffed animals to fill Noah's Ark. I like to pretend that it was done to obscure the linoleum flooring, a rather hideous '70's diamond pattern in black, puce, and an anemic orange. But the truth was that cleaning was anathema to me, an activity performed only under duress so that my parents would let my friends sleep over.

And so I remember being utterly baffled by a certain passage in Jane Eyre, which one of my aunts had given me for my tenth birthday. It was when Jane found out that the people sheltering her were, in fact, her cousins, and she planned a celebration in honor of that relationship. As she said to St. John, "My first aim will be to *clean down* (do you comprehend the full force of the expression?) – to *clean down* Moor House from chamber to cellar; my next to rub it up with beeswax, oil, and an indefinite number of cloths, till it glitters again; my third, to arrange every chair, table, bed, carpet, with mathematical precision...."

She made good on her claim, and she did it joyfully. "Happy at Moor House I was, and hard I worked; and so did Hannah; she was charmed to see how jovial I could be amidst the bustle of a house turned topsy-turvy – how I could brush, and dust, and clean, and cook. And really, after a day or two of confusion worse confounded, it was delightful by degrees to invoke order from the chaos ourselves had made." (pp. 372-374)

Although I neaten up a bit in high school, I still didn't quite understand how cleaning could be done so cheerfully. It wasn't until my sophomore year of college that I began to truly appreciate cleanliness, and the act of cleaning. That year I lived with a woman who would leave her dirty dishes out until they started growing things – and it wasn't due to scientific curiosity about what she might breed. I had roommates who left the bathroom in such a state that I always entered it with trepidation, and common areas an embarrassment to show to others. I still remember how excited I was that summer when, through some miraculous housing glitch, for three wonderful months I had the apartment to myself. And for the first time, of my own volition, I did "clean down," striving to clear out stale cigarette smoke and luxuriating in the clutter-free surfaces, floors that didn't stick to my feet, and a shower empty of beer cans.

I started thinking about all of this last Christmas when I was on vacation. Although it's not spring, it's often the only time I have to tackle cleaning projects. I hadn't been planning on anything in particular, but one day I felt moved to go through my kitchen cupboards. If you had told my 10-year-old self that I would one day do such a thing on a whim, and enjoy it, I would have wondered what parallel dimension you had come from.

Yet the truth is that I *did* enjoy it. Once I recognized that, I tried to determine why. What had changed? It was partly price of ownership, though truthfully, not many people will see the insides of my cupboards. Part of the reason, too, was that it felt a bit like an archeological expedition. I discovered things that had not seen the light of compact fluorescent bulb, let alone day, for who knew how long. A jar of maple syrup, happily still quite usable; stale Cheerios to feed birds; more tea options than I knew I had; a potato so dried and shriveled that it was the size of a prune and recognizable only by its questing eyes.

But my enjoyment stemmed from more than the sheer curiosity and amusement of what I might find. I realized that when the space around me gets too cluttered, I feel constricted. Physically I don't have room to put items on tables or shelves, and must be careful where I step, but this restriction is also psychological. I am confined in my enjoyment and ability to do other activities when I am surrounded by disorder. In many areas of my life I can do very little about such chaos; cleaning my home therefore gives me a sometimes necessary feeling of control. I also find that having a physical activity provides my mind has equal time to sort and reorganize and rid itself of excess clutter.

This is not to say that I have become a cleaning fanatic – far from it. Most of the time, given a choice between something like writing or going for a walk on a beautiful day or visiting friends or cleaning, cleaning loses. But those times when I do clean, I now find it cathartic. It allows me to see things more clearly, enjoy the freedom of being in a place – physical and mental – that has room for me. In that space, I can envision new possibilities sprouting up all around me, beautiful as the new buds of spring, ready to open to the wonder of the world.

Clean Up Your Room; Clean Up Your Life
by Lenora Trussell

I had a room mate once who said those words to me when I was feeling stuck. I felt like movement was not anything I could do. I felt stagnant. I found that when I was able to focus on something and change it, I experienced that movement inside. Sometimes even my room was too much to tackle and I tried my nightstand drawer or just taking a shower and brushing my teeth. When I felt stuck these words came back to me as a kind of mantra or even a suggestion from the universe in my roommates voice.

So I began thinking about how taking a small organizing step leads me on a path that starts the opportunity of finding doors that may be opened. Once I got started, I found that the inertia of my initiation of just starting in a direction motivated me to keep going. There is so little control any of us have in our lives, but that little bit of control can make a huge difference by just starting a process in even the smallest thing we can do.

Sometimes I expand this miniscule initiation of movement to the Universe itself. I take great interest in the theory that a gigundo explosion initiated our very existence. At the basis of any explosion, there always seems to be a tiny spark, like with a blasting cap or a match that lights a fuse, or a switch that starts a nuclear power plant into the chain reaction that creates enough energy to light the world. The Big Bang Theory suggests that we are all hurling through space, energized by the force of an explosion of Biblical proportions that created not only us but opportunities of potential teeming life forms that hopefully exist somewhere within range of this vast explosion.

One of the inhabitants of the universe is what is referred to as a black hole. A black hole is a hungry critter that sucks everything in its path down its gullet. I learned that scientists have theorized that within close proximity of the black hole---maybe even in the millions of light years away--- is what they refer to as a white hole. Apparently the white hole spews out new matter. From the time I started learning about science one of the ideas that has always stuck with me is that matter cannot be created nor destroyed. So I figure these two universal holes are connected by some kind of recycle mechanism that merely changes the matter that comes in one hole and goes out the other. If mother nature is consistent at all then what is true on the micro level is probably true on the macro level. I figure when it is my time to be sucked up by the black hole then I'm kind of hoping that when I get spewed out the white hole, I will have fewer wrinkles, less pounds and a better memory than when I went in.

Taking charge of what is in your control can indeed have an astronomical effect on the universe. If indeed fluttering butterflies can have an effect on climactic conditions on the other side of the world, then what you do in your heart, your home, your yard, or your workplace should be able to have global if not universal effects. Time's a wastin'. Clean up your room, clean up your life.

Spiritual Spring Cleaning

When the Worship Committee chose Spring Cleaning for the focus of this service, I felt moved to speak about “spiritual house cleaning”, and how it has affected my life.

I went on-line for a quote and some information to inspire me. First I googled “quotes about spring cleaning” and was happy to have a bunch of sites come up. Then I looked closer and realized I had not accessed any famous quotes, but instead a lot of information about what it would cost to hire someone to do cleaning. Now, I suppose you could try to hire someone to do your spiritual spring cleaning, but I don’t think it would work out very well!

Then I tried googling “spiritual spring cleaning” and got this: “How to Spring Clean Your Spirit”. That sounded a bit more promising. It said: “While you're cleaning out closets and sweeping under the furniture, think about this: Spring cleaning, while worth the effort, will only last for a season, but spiritual cleansing could have an eternal influence.” ----- now the word ‘eternal’ gave me pause ---- but I read on. “So don't just dust behind those book shelves” it continued, “dust off that favorite Bible and get ready for a spiritual spring cleaning.” Well ---- this didn’t fit either, since several years ago I had dusted off the several bibles I owned -- and handed them into to the respectful care of the nuns at Ave Maria Book store.

I decided I was on my own.

The Spiritual house cleaning I have done has to do with tossing out attitudes and beliefs which no longer fit, were no longer useful, or were worn out. Sometimes that was easy, but sometimes it was as difficult as it was for me to discard that torn piece of clothing I might mend some time, or the broken dish I recently threw out [after 9 years] which had belonged to my Mom.

Now it’s true you can’t have anyone do the cleaning for you, but you can have help. Friends, ministers and counselors supported me as I let go of out-worn attitudes and beliefs. I read books, attended workshops and committed myself to a two year program of spiritual discernment. But the greatest support came from my yet unknown evolving self. And often the way it made itself known was through my nighttime dreams of houses --- a house being built -- a house which had exciting undiscovered rooms, or scary dark cellars, or dusty attics with discarded items -- a house holding against a storm, or surrounded by a garden in bloom -- and, yes, a house which needed to be cleaned --- and I mean really cleaned!

All this cleaning led me from Roman Catholicism to Unitarian-Universalism -- by way of five other denominations. I think 7 may be my lucky number!

The first belief which no longer fit in my life was the church's stand on birth-control. Discarding this was made easy by having had the four beautiful children I wanted by the time I was twenty- seven. Shocking now, but not to a Catholic in the 1960's.

I was not much older when I realized that the church's stance concerning persons with different sexual orientations was extremely misguided and unloving. Growing out of this attitude enriched my life immeasurably. I now have deep, honest and loving relationships which would not have been possible in those unenlightened days – most importantly, with my own dear wonderful brother. Much later I realized that a once comfortable belief in a Divine Being outside of creation -- who "held me in the palm of his hand" -- was worn out for me. That was difficult to let go, yet doing so has brought me to where I am now upheld by the belief that everything is part of a magnificent ongoing creative process in which we are an integral part --- and in the words of UU minister Kendyl Gibbons, I experience "unbidden, overwhelming awe at the wonder, magnificence, danger, demand, and delight of being alive." As a child I experienced this joy – I have never discarded it -- and as an adult I can say with Darwin "There is a grandeur in this view of life".

And I still believe in our god-like power to make a difference in the world. If you are sitting here today, it's my guess you have done some of this kind of cleaning yourself. I can't tell you how grateful I am to be in a church which does not require that I hold onto my worn out beliefs – and which supports me as I find ones which fit better. How delighted I am to have joined a community of friends, who in the service of love and compassion, are not afraid of a little spiritual spring cleaning.

Blessed Be

Closing Words

"Dust if you must, but bear in mind, old age will come, and it's not kind! And when you go – and go you must – you, yourself, will make more dust." – Anonymous