

Spring Cleaning

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

First Church in Boston

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What a beautiful sight greets us here in Back Bay this morning! A team of volunteers descended on our outdoor shrubbery this week yesterday, and they have made it sparkle! Doesn't it look great? Let's have a round of appreciation for all who made this happen, particularly for Pam Steel, who organized it. And we shouldn't forget our hard-working sextons, who do so much indoors and outdoors to make this place attractive.

Why does spring bring out this urge to clean up, to reorganize, to weed out? And why are some of us, like me, so reluctant to get started on this cleanup?

Maybe for some of you it is routine, but for me it's a challenge. I have not made a place for everything, nor is everything in its place. About my house and my office, things tend to live wherever I plopped them down, and this is not usually where they are supposed to be if I am to be able to find them later.

Once upon a time, I was a lawyer; one of the first lessons I learned was the vital importance of keeping your case files in order. Every paper related to a particular case had to be in that case file or you wouldn't be representing the client well. You might think this would mean that every file was kept in its drawer and my desk would always be clean. Nope, the desk was always awash in papers that had come out of files or were soon about to make it into files.

I remember vividly a time I consider the low point of my law practice. A person came to see me in my office after she had just gotten divorce papers from her husband, who lived in California. She had only twenty days to respond to them. I told her I would look into it, but I couldn't get around to it for a couple of days. A couple of days later, with the deadline looming for response to the suit, the paper she had brought me had disappeared. I had no way of knowing the county in which the case had been filed or the name of the opposing counsel. Suddenly the specter of malpractice loomed. I had to find that paper. After turning over my office, I went behind the building and retrieved the large garbage cans that served the whole building. I brought them up to an open space in the dead files room and dumped them out on the floor. And there, under some coffee grounds, I found the missing papers. Disaster averted, but I will always remember that paper chase.

When computers came along, they were a godsend, because you could create your own filing system on the computer and if you didn't remember how you had filed something you could always find any bit of information by doing a search for a word in the entire hard drive of the computer. Later you could do this on the internet.

So now we keep our information digitally, that means there aren't any books or papers on our desks, right? Wrong. Through all the technological revolutions of my life, my basic messiness level hasn't changed much. I will go through a spasm of cleaning, maybe in the spring, and then lapse back into my comfortable squalor.

I am sure this is not most of you. I'm sure that most of you are better housekeepers than I. But then things are relative. I remember sometime in the mid 1980s when I

lived in downtown Charleston. There had been a family of four next door to us for the first five or six years we lived in our house, and then they sold to a gay male couple. My first wife Lee and I socialized with both sets of neighbors, and that house was always pin-neat when we went there. A few months after the transfer, one of my new neighbors was discussing the condition of the house when they moved in and said “well it appears that Ann never cleaned under the refrigerator.” We all nodded as if in agreement that this was indeed horrendous, but what Lee and I were thinking was “clean under the refrigerator? You’re gonna move the refrigerator to clean the floor under it?” So it’s all relative to one’s standards for neatness.

And I know I’m resistant to cleaning and organizing in part because I’m lazy, but there is another, deeper component. Amidst all the clutter I fear that I’ll find a reminder of some piece of business I should have taken care of months ago.

For spring cleaning has a strong spiritual aspect. Some of us dread it. Others of us genuinely enjoy, really get into, the tasks and still others of us will try to trick ourselves into enjoying it. One technique is to envision the beautiful house you want to end up with. If you can keep that vision in your mind, it might motivate you in your task.

Remember Herakles from Greek mythology (Hercules in Latin). He had a series of impossible tasks, and 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.

The problems of what to do with our stuff is as old as the ages. Dante, in his epic poem the “Inferno” pictured the fourth circle of Hell as containing two types of people, the Hoarders and the Wasters. Both types of people carried large stones on their heads which made it impossible to look straight ahead, so they were always bumping into other people, and would complain loudly, “why do you hoard,” and “why do you waste?”

If I believed in Hell, I would be scared of getting assigned to that fourth circle. People like me who have trouble actually picking up the mop and getting started will dream of a nice global solution like Herakles found. I will warn you though that, while it might work for the waste of immortal cattle, river water is probably not good for your electronic equipment or your stashes of unread magazines.

A line comes back to me from the devotions of my childhood: “open wide the windows of my soul.” This, it seems to me, is the best expression of the spiritual component of spring cleaning. What we want to be about is opening our eyes, seeing things in a new light. Spring has given us a whole new world out there. And there’s a whole world in here, in our hearts.

We 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 there is something deeper, both in the cleaning and in our resistance to it. So many of the things lying about our houses and apartments represent unfinished projects. An article, a video or audio tape we expect to listen to, the template for something we can make with our hands and hang on the wall.

One of the rewards of spring cleaning is that you sometimes retrieve valuable things, things you had forgotten you had.. In all that clutter there is sometimes some history that gives you some perspective on life today. I remember poking around in the basement of a previous church I served and finding a mimeograph machine, and all of a sudden I was awash in memories of how central those things used to be in churches and schools. Who can forget the smell of the liquid they used? And there came a time when the Xerox machine just moved in and within a year or two everyone who had used mimeograph machines switched over to copiers, and most people threw out their mimeos. Except for the churches; churches don't throw things away because we all understand that what is one person's trash is another person's treasure.

One spring, in one of my previous churches, a volunteer and I were cleaning out the little room in our Religious Education wing where we wanted to set up a loom. We had a collection of boxes from an old photo exhibit. The exhibit of course was part of our history, and the people who assembled it were still there and so we didn't feel we could or should throw it out, but we found another place to store it. That was a pretty easy decision, but then in the same room there was a storage area under a window bench which had a

lot of old wires and old magazines and looked as if it hadn't been touched in a decade or more. We elected to toss, but we understood that the decision ran the risk of having someone come in later and say they were saving those old wires and magazines for some project.

We have had the same problem here and when we decided to throw out some of the stuff that had accumulated in the Auditorium, we discovered we had thrown out some stuff we should have kept.

At one of my previous churches, we got a gift from the Episcopal Church in town: a set of gothic-arch windows which had been installed in that building back when it was a Universalist church. Organizationally, it was not the ancestor of the UU church of today, but the Episcopalians thought we might want to have them for sentimental reasons, because we were the spiritual successor, in a sense, to the old Universalists, offered them to us. We debated for months what to do with them, and at annual meeting the vote against displaying them won out narrowly. But there was kind of a bad feeling that the people who wanted to display them didn't get their way, so one member, trying to be helpful, proposed another motion that we keep them in storage, and that passed by a large margin. But that just kicked the problem down the road, and after years of them sitting in a loft year after year, we finally were able to overrule that ill-considered motion.

Trash and treasure are judgments of our minds and different people will reach different conclusions. Once I discovered in that same church some old boards which had been around from the period when it was a Christian Science church. These were Bible quotations and quotations from Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science.

They matched some lettering which could still be seen on the walls of the church 20 years after our congregation had moved into it. The salmon-colored paint that our young UU forefathers and mothers applied to the walls almost twenty years ago was not opaque enough to completely cover the gold-leaf lettering, and at the right angle of the sun and your eye, you could still see this lettering in the spaces above the side doors.

Well, you can delight in this type of discovery, or you can just say, “that’s interesting” and move on. What we are seriously about in spring cleaning in the church is making our place here bright and welcoming for us all and for anyone who may visit. It improves our state of mind and shows that we care about our physical surroundings.

Have you ever done mindfulness meditation? Mindfulness meditation can give you a good idea of how your mind works. The mind is not a well-oiled computer processing input and turning it into output in a linear fashion. No, when you meditate, you become aware that the mind is a bubbling cauldron, a stew-pot of ideas, words, feelings and memories. The mind is messy, and the messiness within the mind mirrors the messiness we see outside in the world.

And that is one of the great satisfactions in spring cleaning. You can tame a bit of the messiness in your mind by meditation and other mindfulness techniques, but basically you learn to live with it. But you *can* do something about the messiness in the world you inhabit. You can take arms against the sea of disorder, roll up your sleeves and attack.

This of course requires doing. Meditation is a form of non-doing, of doing nothing. That is one mode, and if we do nothing about cleaning the world around us, we know that

clutter, dust and mold will simply accumulate. As our great Unitarian poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, reminds us
Let us then be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate
Still achieving, still pursuing
Learn to labor and to wait.

There is a time for laboring and a time for waiting. A time for doing and a time for non-doing. The world around you in your house and church is cleanable in a way that your mind is not.

As most of you know, I am addicted to crosswords, and part of the reason is that crosswords are questions with a right answer. So many of the questions we deal with in life, have more than one right answer. Or, the answer we give today will be different from the answer we gave twenty years ago. The crossword puzzle is the product of one mind and that mind has moved from constructing a grid of words and then constructing a series of clues to these words, in order to delight the solver with the cleverness of the solution.

The solutions to the larger problems of life, poverty, war, racism are not nearly so clear-cut. If there is one mind which created these problems it is one that is subtle and not at all consistent. In fact, sometimes the solutions proposed actually create new problems of their own. I've always been drawn to the scheme proposed by the philosopher George Friedrich Hegel, back in the nineteenth century for the evolution of ideas. An idea pops up and people start talking about it. Some people adopt it; others say, "that's not right," and develop the opposite idea. So the original idea is called a thesis, and the contrary idea becomes an antithesis, an anti-thesis. Thesis and antithesis contend with each other until they resolve in a third idea, which is called a synthesis. The

synthesis then generates its own opposite, its own antithesis and the process repeats itself. Hegel was talking about the realm of ideas, but in the next generation, Marx used this scheme to talk about the forces of history.

The ideas of who we are and what kind of church we want evolve so that solutions which fit the church twenty or fifty years ago might not fit it now.

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. Thank you to all who have helped brighten and tidy the church in recent days, and may we all find the courage, patience and time to tackle a little in the other places we inhabit. A few 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 recycling,
Our town Transfer Station will be my last stop.
Amen.

Readings Spring cleaning

Opening 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.

Sermon – Dante's Inferno , Canto VII.

In that way we descended into the fourth circle, taking in a
greater width of the dismal bank, that encloses every evil of
the universe.

O Divine Justice! Who can tell the many new pains and
troubles, that I saw, and why our guilt so destroys us? As the

wave, over Charybdis, strikes against the wave it counters, so the people here are made to dance. I found more people here than elsewhere, on the one side and on the other, rolling weights by pushing with their chests, with loud howling. They struck against each other, and then each wheeled around where they were, rolling the reverse way, shouting: 'Why do you hold?' and 'Why do you throw away.'

So they returned along the gloomy circle, from either side to the opposite point, shouting again their measure of reproach. Then each one, when he had reached it, wheeled through his half circle onto the other track. And I, who felt as if my heart were pierced, said: 'My Master, show me now who these people are: and whether all those, with tonsures, on our left were churchmen.'

Inferno Canto VII:40-66 The avaricious and prodigal churchmen

And he to me: 'They were so twisted in mind in their first life, that they made no balanced expenditure. Their voices bark this out most clearly when they come to the two ends of the circle, where opposing sins divide them.'

These were priests, that are without hair on their heads, and Popes and Cardinals, in whom avarice does its worst. And I: 'Master, surely, amongst this crowd, I ought to recognise some of those tainted with these evils.' And he to me: 'You link idle thoughts: the life without knowledge, that made them ignoble, now makes them incapable of being known. They will go butting each other to eternity: and these will

rise from their graves with grasping fists, and those with shorn hair.

Useless giving, and useless keeping, has robbed them of the bright world, and set them to this struggle: what struggle it is, I do not amplify. But you, my son, can see now the vain mockery of the wealth controlled by Fortune, for which the human race fight with each other, since all the gold under the moon, that ever was, could not give peace to one of these weary souls.'