

Composting Experience
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A few months ago, I looked around my house, and I realized there wasn't much room to turn around.

Every time I cleared a space, it would soon be filled up again.

In the office, it was books and papers.

In the cellar, it was nails and screws, broken things that might be fixed, someday.

In the kitchen, I couldn't take something out of the spice-cupboard without starting a small avalanche.

I was inspired to do something about the situation by this little book I came across – *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, by Marie Kondo.

The author has made it her life's work to show people how to "turn their cluttered homes into spaces of serenity".

This de-cluttering has a spiritual side, as well as a practical side.

To appreciate life we need empty spaces,
as much as we need activities and experiences to fill these spaces.

Marie Kondo would have us declutter the house in one fell swoop:

Get a lot of trash bags. Fill them up. Don't keep anything unless "it sparks joy" in you.

Don't procrastinate. Don't do it incrementally, or you'll likely get sidetracked.

Of course, when I tried to do this, with my overstuffed file cabinet,
I got sidetracked almost immediately.

So many moments of my life flowed directly through my hands, again:

Some mundane, some heart-wrenching, some bringing tears of recognition and joy;
moments I'd forgotten; moments I'd misconstrued.

Certainly, some of these “sparked joy”, and others did just the opposite. But they were all valuable in their own ways.

To declutter a house is one thing; there’s a lot to throw out, or give away. To declutter your soul is another matter. It doesn’t happen all at once. There’s a larger, organic process at work. And throwing stuff out is only a small part of it.

The Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa, has shed some light on this. Many years ago I came across this little book he wrote, titled *Meditation in Action*, and it’s followed me around for most of my adult life. There is one chapter that’s stuck in my mind – especially the title, “The Manure of Experience”.

Certainly the word *manure* has some connotations, especially in the realm of politics, and religion. I won’t dwell on this except to say that manure can be a very good thing, in the right place and the right time. It’s the fresh stuff that’s the problem.

As a Buddhist teacher, Chogyam Trungpa worked to bring about “the birth of Bodhi”, in himself and others. To help people come to know and embody the wise compassion which is our true nature.

As human beings we tend to sabotage this process.

We make a habit of separating the bad from the good;
the clean from the unclean; the worldly from the spiritual.

We locate that in some place we're not, such as heaven;
or someone or something we're not, such as God.

Even if we take the radical step of saying we're already there,
or already that, which may be true,
we've created a divide we don't know how to cross.

What will it take for us to become, in the words of Howard Thurman,
a benediction breathing peace"?

Or in UU terms, how shall we come to know and show forth
our inherent worth and dignity?

It certainly helps to practice living as if we believe this is true.

We can look for examples worth and dignity in ourselves and others:
virtuous qualities, honorable achievements, powerful stories and ideas.

But this is only half the story, to value what we consider good.

What about the experiences, qualities and ideas we don't want?

Shall we ignore them, disown them, try to stamp them out?

Here we are in this world, in these bodies, with these personalities,
living these lives: the sum total of our experiences, wanted and unwanted.

If we throw out the garbage, so to speak, we lose all the energy
and the raw materials that went into making it.

These are just the materials we need to grow.

Chogyam Trungpa writes:

*It is said ... that unskilled farmers
throw away their rubbish and buy manure from other farmers,
but those who are skilled go on collecting their own rubbish,
in spite of the bad smell and the unclean work,
and when it is ready to be used they spread it on their land,
and out of this they grow their crops.
That is the skilled way. (35)*

In this parable, of course, “rubbish” refers to much more than dead plants, animal waste, and garbage.

It refers to all the by-products of living, physical and cultural and psychological.

Some were useful in their time, or could have been.

Some we simply don’t want: the character traits we consider flaws;
the outcomes of work that we consider failures; the ideas we consider folly.

Trungpa would have us pay attention to all this rubbish.

He wouldn’t have us accumulate it, and keep it out of sight.

He wouldn’t have us just throw it away, if that were possible.

He would have us gather it up, sift through it, and see what’s actually there.

Because a lot went into the making of it, and a lot of it can be turned to good use.

I once thought it was my calling to become a computer professional.

Actually, that’s rubbish: The truth is that somewhere in my meandering education,
I found I had some skills in math and logic.

I tried working as a programmer for a couple of years and it seemed to fit.

So I got some more schooling, and went to work for Digital Equipment Corporation.

In my time at DEC I managed to create a few good things,
although most didn't get past the specification and prototype stage.
But Digital was a nice place for a young adult; a respectable place to work;
and it paid well.
So I stayed. And I stayed ... even as the experience started to go stale and lose its vitality.

This wasn't the company's fault. It had to do with my relationship to the job.
The company was shrinking, everything was changing,
and I wanted to keep things the way they were.

If I'd really wanted to work in computers, it would wise to move on then.
This wouldn't have meant throwing everything out and starting over.
I'd had some good moments and some successes:
things I wrote, deadlines I met, promotions I got.
They simply point to small questions I could answer back then.

The times I failed, the times I made foolish decisions, the growing dissatisfaction:
these are worth something too.
They point indirectly to something more,
what I did aspire to, and what I might be capable of.

In fact there were other dreams, powerful dreams, that I had once plowed under.
When I was finally laid off after 18 years it seemed like a failure,
but it was a blessing.
I was attached to DEC (which by then had been consumed and digested
by Compaq and then by HP).
But I came to realize I didn't love the work itself;
at least I didn't love it enough to continue.

The right thing for me was not to “learn from experience”
and get back into the same fray.

The solution was radically different, to recycle much of what I’d learned,
positive and negative, and use it in new ways.

Changes like this don’t happen immediately.

That’s why the “manure” metaphor is so potent.

You don’t keep accumulating a pile of rubbish and pretend it doesn’t exist.

You sort through it. Some of it you can’t use.

But much of it you can.

You rake through it, and turn it over, and keep doing that awhile
until it becomes what it’s meant to become.

Then it can grow things to nourish you, and other people.

There are seeds in the compost. You don’t plant them, they’re already there:

- Issues you struggled with.
- Questions that came to you as you were raking through the rubbish.
- Dreams once plowed under never acknowledged, or long forgotten.

That’s how wisdom and compassion germinate in you.

The process works with ideas and religions, as well as individual lives.

What’s good and nourishing at in one time and place may become stale or
unwholesome another.

When Trungpa starts to speak about this, you can tell he’s having fun with it,

So theory and concepts are very good, like wonderful manure.

*Through thousands and thousands of lives we have been collecting
so much rubbish that now we have a wonderful wealth of this manure.*

It has everything in it, so it would be just the right

thing to use, and it would be such a shame to throw it away. (38)

Trungpa wants us to appreciate this big pile of collective experience
which include ideas, cultural achievements, even his own holy scripture.

All helpful in their time.

And when they've gone past their useful shelf life they can be composted,
broken down, and reused.

Now you can just physically compost them.

Over the years I've accumulated quite a pile of books.

Once in a while, I go through them, and I take out a few I don't think I'll use again.

I could throw these into the recycling bin, and return them to the earth that way.

But instead, I like to take them over to Andover-Newton, where I went to school.

I follow the ancient custom of putting the books in the lobby,
and some student (who doesn't have many books, yet!)
will see them and say Oh, free books! And take them.

So the ideas can be reused. Some can be reused whole.

Others you need to break down first.

A given idea may seem wrongheaded or irrelevant now –
but there may be something in it we can use.

I wonder where we'd be, as Unitarian Universalists, if we hadn't been Puritans first.

There's not a whole lot we want to keep, from the Puritan belief system:
the basic depravity in human nature, for example.

But there's also this concept of a free church, run by the people inside it,
who agree to walk together in the ways of love.

Consider the Calvinists who said,
you have no say as to whether you'll be saved or damned;
it's already decided.

Now consider the Universalists among us who replied,
you're absolutely right! We have no choice.

Everyone is meant to be saved.

Nobody and nothing can finally cut you off
from the Love in which we live, and move, and have our being.

We fail in our best-laid plans.

We act in ways we regret.

Even our holy scriptures are shot through with folly.

Most of the time we can't even see this from where we are,
in the in the middle of the pile.

Trungpa suggests, that's fine.

Because we must start somewhere.

Our mistakes and our flaws serve as a vehicle
to bring us closer to the truth of our nature as human beings,
includes all wisdom and compassion.

So may it be.