“SPRING CLEANING”

A sermon delivered by Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister of The Community Church of NY Unitarian Universalist, Sunday, March 20, 2011

Reading

There is a story from England reportedly told by the late Gregory Bateson, the English anthropologist and systems theorist. It's about New College at Oxford University.

It was probably founded around the late 16th century [200 years after the founding of the University itself, hence the name.] It has, like other colleges, a great dining hall with huge oak beams, heavily carved across the ceiling.

These must be eighteen inches square and more than twenty feet long. Magnificent things they are! Some five to ten years ago, so I am told, there was a maintenance survey done on the college buildings. An entomologist went up into the roof and poked around at the great beams and found they were full of beetles. This infestation of carpenter beetles had brought the beams to the point of serious weakness. The news was carried to the College Council, who discussed the problem with dismay. Where could they possibly get beams of that caliber in the 20th century?

Well. One of the Junior Fellows stuck his neck out and suggested that there might be on college land some oak, for these colleges were endowed with pieces of land scattered around the countryside.

So they called the College Forester from his work in the country and asked him about the oak. He pulled off his cap and scratched his head and said, “Well, sirs, we were wondering when you'd be asking.” Upon further inquiry it was discovered that when the college was founded, a grove of oaks had been planted to replace the beams in the great halls of the college when they became beetly, because oak beams always get beetly in the end. This contingency plan has been passed on from Chief Forester to Chief Forester, generation to generation, for over four hundred years. The word was, “You don't touch them oaks – they're for the college halls.”

Bateson concludes, "That's the way to run a culture. That's the way we must approach the future."
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This morning I begin with a retelling of part of the story of two eccentric New Yorkers, Homer and Langley Collyer.

One a Columbia trained lawyer, the other a concert pianist, the brothers were found dead in their townhouse at 128th Street and Fifth Avenue in March of 1947. Having lived in virtual seclusion for decades, with gas and electricity turned off for non-payment, their house appeared empty, but within were what turned out to be 130 tons of stuff.

It seems that the brothers were collectors. They collected everything – especially junk. Their house was crammed full of broken machinery, auto parts, boxes, appliances, folding chairs, musical instruments, rags, [2 organs, fourteen pianos] assorted odds and ends, and bundles of old newspapers. Virtually all of it was worthless. An enormous mountain of debris blocked the front door; investigators were forced to continue using the upstairs window for weeks while excavators worked to clear a path to the door….

Langley Collyer's body, not found for 3 weeks, was buried beneath a pile of rubbish some six feet away from where Homer had died. Langley had been crushed to death in a crude booby trap he had built to protect his precious collection from intruders….

No one ever learned why the brothers were stockpiling their… treasure, except an old friend of the family recalled that Langley once said he was saving newspapers so Homer [who was blind] could catch up on his reading if he ever regained his sight. ("Preaching," John MacArthur 11–12/91)

And that strikes me as a very loving thought.

The Collyer brothers' story has recently been on my mind. I don't know what your home looks like, and mine, I assure you, has something less than 130 tons of stuff, yet the Collyers suggest to me this theme of spring cleaning. It's an honorable custom – to pause at the vernal equinox: to hang out one's rugs and beat the dust out of them – at least vacuum or wash them; to do some extra dusting; maybe even polish the furniture; scrub the stove inside and out; throw open the windows [country-dwellers at least] to let the spring breezes air-out the whole place that's been battened down because of winter weather.

Put away the winter things and bring out the spring clothes.
Knock down a few cobwebs off the ceiling and maybe even a few cobwebs in your own head. Breathe deeply, again and again.

It is a time of awakening earth, and spring cleaning for our souls might be a lively time for us as we recover from magnificent snowstorms, yea even a blizzard, which was both charming and frightening.

Spring cleaning might mean washing the windows, seeing the world a little more clearly.

So the theme, part of it, is clear enough: our choices. To reflect upon our choices with heart and soul, and to welcome the growing season that can stir deep within.

Spring cleaning is an ancient and honorable custom, and I offer it as metaphor for helping to grow a soul, especially if during winter you may have become a little harder or colder of heart, or just hibernating rather than pouring yourself into the grace of creation.

One of the theories that I want to explore this morning is that you and I, that we are not really very different from Homer and Langley Collyer. Well maybe they were a little crazy in their hoarding, and you and I aren’t quite crazy, but things and the pursuit of things and even more things is one of the seductive credos of our society, with the paradox of not only consuming but wasting so much too.

(And to those who have embraced voluntary simplicity with a group here a few years ago, or elsewhere, I applaud you mindfulness… and action.)

This story about the Collyer brothers, the habits of our human nature, and the newly arrived season demarcated by the calendar, along with my own proclivity to sift, sort, save and sometimes throw away, and your habits of hoarding or giving away your treasures – all of these things I know, or I suspect, and they too lead me to this topic of spring cleaning.

I suppose that you could say this sermon is about treasures and trash.

As a text for today’s sermon, I have found a traditional one that nags at me, one that I tried to avoid that kept coming back to me. It comes from Christian scripture, and specifically it comes from those sayings attributed to Jesus that we know as the Sermon on the Mount. "Wherever your treasure is, there will be your heart also." (Matthew 6:21)

I tried to avoid the text because it so utterly revealing.

It is behavioral. It is descriptive.
Do you want to know what is important to you? Look at yourself. Look at your life. Look at the stuff that you have accumulated and that you treasure, and then you shall know something about yourself, your soul, your heart. It’s a revealing exercise.

I look around my home and see books and magazines, the written word, ideas, history, imagination. I look at my checkbook and see organizations that I support like this church, the NAACP, Democratic Socialists, and the list goes on. I look at my time, and I see family, church and causes.

The Collyer brothers!? I know that some of us have very little either by circumstance and personal history. Or perhaps because of intentional discipline and effort, you try to simplify your life. Yet, human nature being what it is, and the affluence of this country being what it is, and the privileges we share as citizens of this wealthy and affluent country, many of us have quite a bit of stuff.

I use that word "stuff" and think of an old routine by the comedian George Carlin who spoke about human acquisitiveness in a consumer culture that encourages us to keep buying more and more stuff. And, if you are like me, few of them are honest-to-goodness treasures.

The Collyer brothers made their choices for stuff rather than human relationships. They were collectors, hoarders, and were protective. And one of them died in his own trap when papers crushed him.

The story of excess of the Collyer brothers leads me back to a recently ended story that was a part of our lives here in New York City every day of the week. Over on Staten Island, Fresh Kills landfill has been identified as possibly one of “the largest archaeological site(s) in the world.”

The Fresh Kills Landfill, according to William Rathje, an archaeologist and student of garbage, is a "treasure trove... of artifacts from the most advanced civilization the planet has ever seen." (RUBBISH, p. 1)

Fresh Kills was closed in 2001, used for awhile for debris from The World Trade Center Towers, and since 2009 subject to a 30 year reclamation plan. As part of their studies across the country, Dr. Rathje and his team of garbologists years ago examined the site taking 44 samples from differing spots and at differing depths.

Some of their conclusions about garbage here and elsewhere are esoteric and sobering. A year’s subscription to the New York Times is the equivalent by volume of 18,660 crushed aluminum cans.
If you bought the chemicals contained in nail polish in fifty-five gallon drums instead of half-ounce bottles, you would be legally required to dump them in a hazardous waste disposal site, yet in Tucson alone over a thousand gallons of nail polish a year are thrown out.

And in a typical community, homes throw out as much hazardous waste as the commercial establishments.

Archaeologists study the remnants of civilizations and societies, and rubbish and garbage for them are symbols of a way of life. And our way of life is consumer-oriented with great waste and pollution. From the archaeologist's perspective, our society, however, is not so unlike many others in what is called the "Classic" phase of production and consumption.

One of the more fascinating conclusions to me from the Garbage Project had to do with a simple reminder about how we think and perceive for the most part. "Our private worlds consist essentially of two realities – mental reality, which encompasses beliefs, attitudes, [emotions], and ideas, and material reality, which is the picture embodied in the physical record. The study of garbage reminds us that it is a rare person in whom mental and material realities coincide. Indeed, for the most part, the pair exist in a state of tension, if not open conflict." (pp. 12-13)

For example, studies have shown that what you and I report that we have eaten and drunk in a given week is inevitably wide of the mark. We underreport how much candy, chocolate, potato chips, and regular soda we consume; we over report how much diet soda, fruit and high fiber cereal we eat. We under report by 40 to 60% how much alcohol we drink.

How do they know? By comparing people's garbage with their reports. And equally interesting to me is the fact that while we fudge our reports about ourselves, we are extremely accurate in reporting food habits of a family member or even a neighbor. But the image of ourselves that we like to carry – that's another thing.

Well there's a lot more to say about rubbish – for example that our cities are built upon it, that the street level here in Manhattan is typically six to fifteen and sometimes thirty feet higher than in the days of Peter Minuet.

And our modern habits are not necessarily atypical in terms of throwing away perfectly good items. One archaeologist concluded from studies of Mayan artifacts that "These people would have traded in a Cadillac when the ashtray was full." Conspicuous consumption and waste seem to be "one of the more inexplicable things, like ignoring history that human beings have always done." (p. 38)
In looking at stuff and social attitudes and public policy, I offer one more example about our life with excess, our choices, our stuff, our materialism that illuminates for me the utter perversity and cruelty of much of our economic system. "According to the Philadelphia Inquirer, [some years ago] just before Christmas, in Cheraw, South Carolina, a garbage man named Raymond Sandsberry, Jr., the father of seven children, was arrested for removing from a landfill nine pairs of shoes, forty items of clothing, and a woman's handbag."

Yet, corporate salvaging – "the retrieval and marketing of what are known as 'secondary materials' (scrap metal for instance: everything from junk cars and trucks to 'white goods' such as used refrigerators and stoves) – remains a big business" with great profits. (p. 44)

What our society treasures and where its heart is are often painful indeed, just as it can be in our own personal lives.

Leaving that larger issue of our collective public policy with its absurdities and inequities, I want to come back again to the notion of spring cleaning as a spiritual exercise, as well as physical work.

Those images of the Collyer brothers who saved their stuff, and the Fresh Kills Landfill, a repository of so many people's stuff – those images are metaphors for the clutter which may surround us in our lives.

I know a little about the clutter; I just have to look at my desk. And we were ahead of our usual schedule when in late January we took down our Christmas tree, and still a few weeks later we finally put away all our holiday decorations. But in our defense, we really do enjoy the Christmas tree lights and have left them on our tree as late as Valentine’s Day some years.

The art of mindfulness, the art of growing our souls, the art of discernment, followed by action, these arts are among our most precious accomplishments.

A pause for Spring cleaning of the mind, the heart, the soul, pausing to look at what surrounds us and to decide if the stuff is helping us or hurting us, is a worthy risk to take.

And as you know, I'm not referring simply to the newspapers, magazines, and accumulations of grit, soot, dust, and dirty windows.

What needs cleaning up within ourselves? Within you?

Maybe we have some anger that we carry with us that needs dusting off and examined in the spring-time morning. Is it time for a new beginning with all
the courage of forgiveness and work of reconciliation that such effort requires? Spring cleaning does not mean just discarding; it may mean a real cleansing.

Regrets? Not helpful…. Let go….

Maybe there is pain or disappointment toward another person – something we must let go of, either by mutual consent or on your own – and Spring beckons with a new season of living, growing.

Maybe the disappointment or frustration is within, with oneself… that’s where the cleansing must be done, or the discarding if it is old destructive patterns, ruts and routines that distract us from feeling the aliveness of Life, in all its glory.

So the spring cleaning might be part of an inner journey as well as an examination of your physical stuff.

Robert Frost offered the metaphor of weather:

Tree at my window, window tree,
My sash is lowered when night comes on;
But let there never be curtain drawn
Between you and me….

tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
And if you have seen me when I slept,
you have seen me when I was taken and swept
And all but lost.

That day she put our heads together
Fate had her imagination about her,
Your head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner, weather.

How goes the inner weather for you?

Mindfulness, weighing, sorting, throwing away, choosing to save; it’s a constant thing, and a new season of growing beckons to us to grow our souls.

There’s a story I told awhile back about a young boy who I guess had spring cleaning in his mind, and he wanted to give his dog a bath, a good washing. He went to the store and asked the clerk for a box of Duz laundry detergent, now no longer made.
The clerk asked, "What do you need that for?" and the boy answered, "To wash my dog." "That's pretty strong stuff for washing a dog," warned the clerk, but the boy insisted on that particular brand.

So the clerk sold it to him reminding him, "Be careful when you wash your dog. That detergent is strong and could kill him."

A week later the boy was in the store again, and the clerk asked him, "How's your dog?" The boy explained that the dog had survived but just barely.

The clerk said, "I'm sorry to hear about the dog's struggle, but I warned you that it was too strong."

The little boy shook his head and replied, "I don't think it was the detergent that did it. I think it was the rinse cycle that got him."

Which is to say, we make mistakes sometimes even in trying to be mindful about cleaning, sorting, sifting, deciding, and mistakes are OK because we are human.

The suggestion also is that good intentions are not always enough. There are consequences to what we do, which is all the more reason to be wakeful, alert, and mindful.

All of this brings me back to my text: Wherever our treasures are, there also will be our hearts.

Where are your treasures? What do you treasure, really treasure? What's really important?

And, soon in this season, you will soon be asked to answer that in connection with our Church and to make your annual, financial pledge commitment. For me and my family, we treasure this Church for all that it embraces and celebrates—the free spirit, rational spirituality, the activism, the fellowship, the community, the education, the service, the diversity, the challenge to grow our souls and contribute to a more just society. So, we give and give gladly with a generosity of spirit.

In closing, a different image comes to mind but it speaks about mindfulness, cleansing the soul of distractions.

I carry with me an image from our Sunday school when I was looking at some artwork by seven year olds some years ago. The young students were responding in pictures and words to the question: "What three things would you take with you if you had to immigrate to another country?"
One child had written with her accompanying pictures:

1) A photograph book of family and friends to remember them by.
2) My favorite stuffed bear for company.
3) Courage so that I will be brave.

In your spring cleaning, remember Homer and Langley Collyer, their stuff and your own stuff.

Think again about the excesses of our society, and remember your treasures.

Treasure your companions, honor them, and be courageous, be brave, and know we make mistakes, but springtime gives us the chance to begin again.

Each new day gives us the chance to begin again.