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TINY HOUSES • ESSENTIALISM • BUY NOTHING • ORDER AS A CREATIVE ACT





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# Creating Order

LINDA THOMAS

## disorder is not chaos

For well over twenty years I have been giving lectures and workshops on the subject of cleaning and caring. One of the things that became clear is that the cleaning is not the as much of a problem as the constant disorder that many people find. Without clearing up first you cannot even start to clean.

So what is order? It is something desperately longed for by many people, and yet it seems to be very elusive.

At the very first cleaning conference I organized in 2004 at the Goetheanum, one of the lecturers said, "Making order is a profoundly creative act, and can be put on the same level as creating works of art; perhaps it is actually be considered the archetypal artistic gesture."<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to housekeeping, the concepts of disorder and chaos often get confused. In a household, order is often related to a certain regularity and clarity. We call a room orderly when everything is in its place and we can easily orient ourselves and find our way around. However, as soon as I start working in the room, or children start playing in it, the order very soon turns into disorder. Order seems to have this special quality of effortlessly merging into disorder; yet the opposite never occurs. I have to consciously intervene to re-establish the lost order. So disorder is simply a quality that arises whenever we do anything in an ordered space; but order can be reinstated relatively easily be.

The story of creation in the *kabbala* tells us that God withdrew, thus producing a void. Chaos arose within this void, and later formed the substance from which the world was then created. Chaos is a state in which things have just been left to themselves without any conscious intervention (divine or human).

## disorder and order

Difficulty in making decisions is also a form of disorder, when one realizes how difficult it is to decide whether we are still going to use something or not. Should we actually start sorting out things, putting them where they belong, or should we leave it a bit? Some people have no difficulty in creating order; others experience great difficulty with it. they feel overwhelmed, exhausted; some even feel quite close to despair.

Working with people with difficulties in creating order, I have come to realize that they often suffer a feeling of extreme loneliness: such an extreme loneliness that they try to disguise it by being very busy with all kinds of things, and accumulating things around them as if to cover up their loneliness.

Disorder usually comes about when there is too much around. Being overwhelmed is much the same thing: it is a question of too much to do. So being overwhelmed is actually a form of disorder. Disorder happens where things appear in places or situations where they do not belong. We leave

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“Difficulty in making decisions is also a form of disorder...”

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something lying about; we don't finish things we started, putting them off again and again. Other things we gather, hoard, and are unable to let go. Most things we leave will turn to chaos. If we ignore and leave all the things that overwhelm us, it can lead to discontent and frustration. In some cases this situation can even destroy family relationships.

If we are overwhelmed, we have a tendency to overwhelm others around us, for instance by saying, "I must do this and I must do that, which absolutely needs to be done." Says who? You say it and I say it. We are the ones who overtax ourselves with excessive expectations and the demands we set for ourselves. We are the sole reason for our lack of strength if we find ourselves once again doing something that we really didn't want to do. And we are surprised if we break things, hurt ourselves, or even have accidents when we rush from one place to another, taking on one task after another, and never refusing to do anything asked of us.

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Holding contradictory thoughts and wishes creates an inner disorder, and we should not be surprised if in these circumstances we lose our bearings. Some people complain that they don't know where they are, and feel totally lost. Why? Because they said yes to too many different things; they gave in to too many whims; collected too many different things; and now they are up to their necks in complications.

The first step away from being overwhelmed can be to begin to create order around us. It can be tremendously rewarding to start picking up things and begin to make the house tidy. Ordering can have a therapeutic effect. We become active and thereby support our own healing process, as in any therapy. If we cannot face starting with the whole house or a room, it may help to start just by emptying out our handbag, throwing away all the little things that don't really belong there. Or we can start our therapy by clearing out our wardrobe, sorting and dealing with all the unpaid bills, or something similar.

**temptation**

Being overwhelmed can also be caused by a form of temptation. It may, for instance, be a hidden form of pride in believing that we are able to do more than we are actually capable of, or a feeling of being infallible or irreplaceable.

We often believe that we have unlimited capacity, unlimited time and strength. However, when the work was done, even God took a rest. On the seventh day he took a step back, and looked back on what had been done (Gen.2:2).

Without taking the time to step back and reflect on what we have done, we are in danger of rushing on to the next task, perhaps out of this hidden feeling of pride. In an extreme form this can lead to a feeling of invincible superiority. However, the other extreme is a feeling of utter helplessness and despair; a feeling that "others" or "the system" will take care of things. The human being continually strives to maintain a balance between these two opposing forces.

Each extreme is a temptation. Rudolf Steiner called one tempter Lucifer, who leads us away from all earthly forms, trying to make us forget responsibilities, and giving us the illusion that we are capable of anything. Too much disorder can make us want to escape from matter; it weakens our will. We lose ourselves and play right into the hands of Lucifer. Losing our conscious connection to the world around us leaves a void in which chaos grows.

The other tempter, Ahriman, tries to force us into set forms, into a kind of rigidity, tying us down to all that is material. An obsessive attention to all around us leads to sterile order.

In each case we have lost our balance and each can eventually lead to loneliness and social isolation. Finding a happy medium is difficult to achieve, but is something we must continually strive for.

Only I know whether I am equal to my task, whether I do my work well or not. We must learn to ask ourselves why we do some things and leave others. Is it because we do not have the time just now and consciously decide to do it tomorrow, or do we just rush through the motions or even leave a task completely undone, hoping nobody will notice?

Simply despairing, saying, "That's the way it is," is only half the truth. The other half of this truth is what we do out of our own initiative. Ahriman tries to hinder us from doing anything from personal freedom or initiative. Lucifer tempts us to take ever more initiatives, to start new things without finishing what has been started, and to act without consideration for the environment or social surroundings.

We need to learn to recognize these temptations, to discern which forces are leading us to do certain things, and to be aware of what we decide consciously, and what is simply left undone.

**the difficulty of maintaining order****THE SUMMER DRESS**

*With heaps of ironing surrounding me In a hidden corner, I suddenly see My missing summer dress with bows. Alas! Outside just now it snows.*

*"Ah well," says I, and put it where Once summer comes, I'll find it there. Yet as the summer came my way I searched for it the whole damn day. I'll search until again it snows And then I'll find my dress with bows.<sup>2</sup>*

Despite the enormous choice of books and media offerings about tidying and maintaining order, acquiring clutter is becoming one of the biggest epidemics of our time. Most books are usually quite effective for people who are temporarily overwhelmed, and for those who are quite active anyway, who usually have a little chaos around them simply because they are so creative. These people don't usually have any difficulty doing a big bout of clearing from time to time. But if there is a basic weakness that either is not recognized or is denied, then these books will not be of much use; or at best, will give temporary relief.

Sometimes people feel threatened by a sudden clean-up. A worried husband once phoned me, saying, "Mrs. Thomas, you recommended a book to my wife last weekend about clearing. Since then she hasn't stopped clearing and throwing out things. I'm beginning to fear that I might be next on her list."



Another thing familiar to most of us is that, although we make a sincere effort, we often feel very alone with our feelings of inadequacy and failure. We all have certain difficulties, even though (or perhaps because) we strive so hard to overcome this problem or weakness. Personally, I am good at cleaning, and am creative in finding solutions to all sorts of problems; but when it comes to paperwork, I must admit I am hopeless. Often because I did not manage to finish my correspondence promptly, I was surrounded by paper and had to spend a lot of time looking for things I needed. This sometimes led to despair, because I really wanted to keep my paperwork tidy. In the end I found a solution by employing someone to come to my house for a few hours every week. She not only helps with my correspondence, but also does the filing, organizes and books all my trips, agrees on terms with my clients, writes the invoices, and so on. Once I recognized my weakness, I was able to delegate it to a capable person. This solution brought relief, not only to me, but to the whole family, by greatly reducing my stress. But it was not an easy decision for someone convinced of her own efficiency and ability to do everything just right. Yet I have not regretted it for a moment, and have decided to tackle that particular personal weakness later.

Then there are some people who always seem to have perfect order, but have the tendency to overwhelm those around them with very high standards and demands. Nobody feels at ease if the table is wiped, the cloth smoothed, the furniture adjusted after every use. Order should serve, not rule, our lives.

It helps if we consider a home to be like an organism. Something as self-evident and natural as the process of eating, digesting, and eliminating needs to be considered in a household. Obviously the digestive process in a house takes a little longer than in a human being; but if nothing is ever eliminated from a house, not only the house, but also the members of the household risk suffering severe indigestion or constipation.

Caring and creating order has an emanation that radiates beyond the immediate area. This caring can be an antidote to disorder and decay. Have you ever tried to create such an antidote by picking up rubbish from some public area?

We once stopped at a busy highway rest area. The trash bins were running over, and garbage was lying on the ground around them. We cleared up everything around the bin closest to us, and observed what happened next. Where there were still things lying on the ground, people did not hesitate to drop rubbish; yet our area remained orderly, and people carefully deposited the rubbish in the bin. As an experiment, we put

one piece of paper on the ground next to our bin, and within moments it had company.

We can observe a similar tendency in our own home. When my children were quite young, we had installed hooks for their satchels in our hallway. Every day they would dutifully hang up their satchels on the hooks before taking off their coats. Once, just as I came into the house with my shopping, the telephone rang. I left the two shopping bags in the hallway and rushed to answer the phone. At that moment my children came home, and their satchels landed on the floor next to the shopping bags.

We can see from these examples that simple, small steps can have a wider effect. We can choose some corner of our house—a

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“...acquiring clutter is becoming one of the biggest epidemics of our time.”

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little table or even a windowsill—and concentrate on always keeping this area orderly, well cared for, and beautiful. The light and strength from this area will radiate into the whole home.

In an interview, Erich Fromm, German-American psychologist said, “Vitality itself is the result of vision. If there is no longer a vision of something great, beautiful, or important, then our vitality and stamina diminish.”<sup>3</sup>

### **where does disorder start?**

Disorder always starts with a decision, however trivial. Do I put the newspaper I have just read in the recycling bin, or do I leave it where it is? Do I close the door or the drawers in the kitchen cabinet after having fetched something, or do they remain open, sometimes just a little bit? Do I put things back into their right place when I pick them up, or do I just leave them where I've used them? Disorder is often a direct consequence of hurry or impatience, and not taking the time for that extra step.

Some people have such high standards for certain tasks that they obsessively repeat them again and again, and never get

**Creating Order** *[continued from page 11]*

on with the next thing. The bathroom might be spotless and shining like a new penny while other things are in desperate need of attention. Or people can lose themselves in unnoticed details while the rest of the room still looks chaotic. Other people are sentimental, and feel they have to keep every single drawing of each of their children, or every little pine cone or pebble they brought in from playing outside. Most of us, of course, are somewhere between these two extremes.

It is important to recognize the real reason behind our problem, but we also have to recognize its outer manifestation. What should we try to resolve first: the inner or the outer problem? Personally, I believe we should tackle both at the same time. Deal with the outer disorder in small, careful steps,

**where do i start?**

Before we start it is important to set a goal, something that we can aim at. One such goal could be, of course, to have a perfectly ordered house. But that is a tall order, and not every single corner has to be done at the same time. In order not to be overwhelmed, we need to focus on the essentials, and set priorities.

Before we start cleaning, decide which room needs our attention most. Once we have decided on what we are going to do first, it helps to prepare everything we need for the task the evening before. (Our will is activated quite differently if, having decided on something, we then sleep on it.) When we are ready to start, we should pause for a moment in the doorway of that room and ask, "What is the first thing I should do?" It

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“We are the ones who overtax ourselves with excessive expectations and the demands we set for ourselves.”

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and at the same time make a conscious inner decision to make a regular effort to overcome our habits.

It helps to set small manageable daily targets, rather than trying to turn the whole house upside down in one go. It can simply be clearing out one drawer every day. Perseverance is important, because breaking off and leaving things for some days weakens our resolve. Making it regular counts, because taking too many breaks could weaken the will to such an extent that it will only become more and more difficult to start again. We have to learn to observe ourselves carefully during this process, to recognize the signs before we fall back into old habits. Most importantly, we must realize that we ourselves are the only ones who can make the decision to do this. No matter how good the advice or suggestions we receive, what we finally do will depend solely on ourselves and our own efforts. It is a decision that has to arise out of our own free will without any coercion or outside pressure. In that way we retain or even enhance our dignity. Once we have taken this step it may help us to distinguish the essential from the inessential, to set priorities, and, most importantly, to regain confidence in our own ability.

is most probably the thing that we have avoided doing for a long time. Once we have made up our mind, we should start with doing just that, and not get sidetracked into half a dozen inessential tasks.

Once the first task is completed, return to the threshold and look at the room again. Did it make a difference? What should be next on the list? Be persistent and keep setting priorities, each time asking what is essential. If you start feeling muddled, sit down and think, "What next?" Practice economy of actions, and try not to handle anything more than once (for instance, try not to move something to a temporary place before finally sorting it out).

Once you get started, overcoming the initial "blockage," you will probably feel a surge of energy and confidence, and will simply want to continue. Many people have told me that once this hurdle was crossed, they could feel their strength returning. So it is important not to get lost in details at this stage, but to continue taking small steps toward the goal. If we decide to do at least twenty things on the first day, there is a far greater likelihood that the day will end with a feeling of discontent, frustration, and failure.

*[continued on page 14]*



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### developing willpower

If we plan to do too many things, it becomes impossible to commit to them all. We will be trying to think of everything at the same time. While ironing we are already thinking about the shopping list. At some point we may become so restless that we may leave the ironing to go shopping. While shopping, we're busy thinking about the seedlings we want to plant when we get home. Then while we're in the garden we remember that we wanted to bake a cake, and then going inside we see that we left the iron on ...

Nothing ever gets properly finished, because we are continually chasing the next task that pops into our head, leaving a trail of uncompleted actions. We are unable to savor the present moment and enjoy the task at hand. It can sap our energy if we are confronted with unfinished business at every turn. The cause of all these unfinished things is a strange form of greed. We want to do more than we need to or can manage. The resulting frustration and stress may even lead to burnout or a breakdown.

To have a strong will does not mean that we have to constantly be active, rushing around doing a hundred and ten things. Strong willpower shows itself more clearly if we assume responsibility for everything we take on. That includes the things we actually manage to do, as well as those we leave undone. Taking on this responsibility develops self-confidence, strengthens us, and gives us the energy for our next task.

It is not the work we have done that tires us, as much as the mountain of things still to do. The chaos of all the things we intend to do robs us of our strength, and even of our dignity. However, each action we have done, however small and insignificant, gives us strength and fills us with a sense of

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achievement and self-esteem. Every conscious deed frees us and helps to harmonize our environment.

### self-help and getting help

Becoming aware of our habits is the first step to deciding to change them. I once helped an elderly lady clear her kitchen. In one of the cupboards there were hundreds of empty sugar bags that she had been collecting for years. When I asked her what they were for, she answered, "They're perfect for the children's sandwiches." I gently pointed out that by now her children were probably making sandwiches for their own children. For a moment she looked at me quite dumbfounded and then she burst out laughing.

Sometimes people manage to clear up the disorder themselves, simply because they discover a very good reason to start doing it. I was once asked to help two people during

because we give them the feeling that whatever they do, it is not good enough. A mother once told me that she had a very strong need for order, and her children were allowed to play only with one thing at a time, and no new game was to be brought out unless the old playthings had been tidied away. One day, her four-year-old boy was sitting on the stairs rather morosely, instead of playing. When she asked him why he was not playing, he replied, "Oh, after I play I always have to tidy up everything." She realized then that her standards had spoiled her son's joy in playing.

Another danger is if our desire for order is greater than what we actually manage in practice. Our demands of others seem even more unjustified, because we appear to be hypocritical. It is even worse if we are unaware of the fact that we have not yet acquired the qualities to which we aspire. Then we lose all credibility. Through our own actions we have to set a good

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“We often believe that we have unlimited capacity, unlimited time and strength. However, when the work was done, even God took a rest.”

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their mother's stay in hospital. Ever since her daughter and son left home, she had begun to hoard things, filling up one room after another. Before then she had always been a tidy person. The son and daughter had resolved to use their mother's absence and at least free the bathroom from the newspapers that filled it to the top. When their mother returned she was so shocked that she threatened suicide if her children would ever do such a thing again. Her daughter had two young girls who loved their grandmother dearly. She would often visit her daughter and granddaughters, but they were unable to visit her because there was no room in the house.

I suggested that the siblings should find a good reason to "need" to bring the girls to their grandmother. The daughter planned a trip with her husband, and invited friends to stay in her house while they were away, making it impossible for the grandmother to take care of the girls in the family home. This then led to the grandmother out of herself asking her children to help clear her cluttered house.

If our standards are too high, we may frighten people off,

example, and if we request something it must not become a demand.

Marshall Rosenberg told the story of a mother asking a friend (who was also a family therapist) for advice because her three young sons would not help with household chores.<sup>4</sup> She was of the opinion that everyone should do something, even if they did not like doing it. After all, she did things she hated doing. When asked what she did not like doing, she replied, "I hate cooking, but have to prepare meals several times a day." The therapist suggested that the boys should take over the cooking, while the mother should take care of the rest of the household. A few weeks later, the therapist met one of the sons and asked how things were going at home. He replied, "Since we took on the cooking, we've been having happy mealtimes without discord. It was never like that before."

Khalil Gibran said the following in *The Prophet*:

*And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste,  
it is better that you should leave your work and sit at  
the gate of the temple and take alms from those who*

### Creating Order [continued from page 15]

*work with joy. For if you bake bread with indifference,  
you bake bitter bread that feeds but half man's hunger.  
And if you grudge the crushing of the grapes, your  
grudge distills a poison in the wine.*

Real, living order, affects people in a positive way.

A farmer who quite often wrote articles told me during a seminar that he now understood why it was often so hard for him to write. He did not allow anyone else to tidy up his office, and would always do it himself, but unfortunately not often enough. He had noticed that after he had cleaned up his office he could always write well, but he had never really thought about the connection. Now he would try to tidy and clean his office regularly, saving a lot of time, as he would be able to sit down and write without having to clean up first.

When we look at the effect of order, we can see that we are rewarded a hundredfold. The inner strength we invest to create order connects us to a higher, cosmic order that lights up our souls, giving us a wonderful feeling of harmony.

### dust and neglect

"Charity begins at home." Often people look for activities outside the home, even charitable work, just to be able to escape their own four walls. Young mothers who attend my workshops often list all the many things they do as volunteers—wonderful, selfless activities. With that they justify their inability to do the necessary tasks at home. One mother even told me, "I buy beautiful bouquets of flowers every week so that my children notice only the flowers and not the mess." I asked her why she did not get a cleaner to help. She immediately answered that it would be far too expensive. When we calculated the cost of the flowers, we found that she could afford help for at least three hours a week.

In order to clean anything, we must first tidy up and restore order. The more things we have, the harder it is to establish and maintain order. Once the clutter gets completely out of hand, the home becomes neglected or even squalid. While order and care have a radiant quality, neglect is something insidious. It begins in the corners and places that we disregard; it creeps from windowsills that have become a veritable graveyard of dead insects among the pine cones, crystals, and plants; it invades the curtains where the spiders have taken up residence, and marches under the beds where dust balls chase each other between the many items stuffed there.

A small table, decorated according to the season, can beautify our home, but as soon as dust or even dead flies collect there, our children lose interest. As soon as we clear the tablecloth and add fresh flowers, they take pleasure in it again.


If we do not manage to cultivate and care for our surroundings, it will begin to affect us. Internal or external care declines, often both. We may look well groomed, but may not be sleeping as well, or we may be plagued by anxiety.

If we observe life we can see that there is always growth and decay, but nothing remains unchanged. Something must wither and die for a fresh start to be possible. Development is not possible without change. The old passes away, allowing something new to arise. Although many people experience change as a misfortune, it is *not necessarily* so. Sometimes it is not until many years later that we realize the benefit certain changes brought us.

People who think they do not need to change stagnate. Some people are terrified of the empty space that a change such as retirement or separation may bring. They live in fear and uncertainty of a mindless void, for they have not learned to be content in their own company. It is useless to try to fill such a spiritual, emotional void with material things. Unless we have really experienced this void, we cannot create a new life, find new content, and thus embark on a process of transformation.

It is important to strive to live in the way we really wish to live. If we feel, "I cannot stand this for another three years," we should immediately seek to reorganize and transform our life. If we are simply resigned to an attitude of "what will be, will be," we are at risk of being overwhelmed. However, if we resolve to change something and then actually do it, we are taking a step in the right direction.

Clearing out strengthens the ability to let go, and the trust that we will have what we need. It may be helpful to look at the things that surround us, and form a picture of which things disturb us, or perhaps even discover which things are lacking.

There are also non-material "things." Things we remember, things we have to do, things that trouble us or give us joy. Many enrich our lives; others exhaust us, draining our strength and energy. We are connected with all these things. It can be a new and exciting challenge to find a new relationship to such things; and it may even help us create order and allow something new in our lives. 

1 Berti, Daniel, *Tagungshandbuch zur Putzfachtagung*.

2 Anonymous verse, found by Charlotte Koch.

3 Interview with Heinrich Jaenecke, *Der Stern*, No. 14, 1980, pp. 306-9.

4 Rosenberg, Marshall B. *Nonviolent Communication*.

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