
Cleaning and Caring

by Linda Thomas

With spring in the air our thoughts might well be turning to the traditional annual springclean of our homes. Linda Thomas, who has run a cleaning business for 20 years, shares her insights into the art of cleaning and caring for the spaces we occupy.

In 1988 I started an ecological cleaning company, as a way of financing my children's Waldorf education. In the beginning I was not only the boss, I was also the only employee, the apprentice, the bookkeeper, everything. I had so much to learn, not only about the right equipment and cleaning agents to use, but also how to conserve my strength, how to protect myself from injury and most of all, how to respect the space of other people. Cleaning can be a very lonely activity. There were times when I cleaned in the early hours of the morning while my family were at home sleeping. I had the experience, cleaning in a big school all by myself in the middle of the night, where everything is so quiet, that I could almost hear the school speak to me. I found myself asking: Is this really what I want to do for the next 19 years (the length of time I would have to finance my children's schooling) – clean away other people's dirt and put up with their indifference as I try to render a service? People who do this kind of job usually have no direct relationship with their employers or the institution they work for. And who, generally, takes an interest in the people who do the cleaning? But I found that it was during these hours of service that I had time to think thoughts that went beyond my deeds and actions and I remembered things I had heard and learned before which now took on a completely new meaning. I recalled an anecdote about a monk who was rather simple and was given all the menial tasks to do such as the cleaning, washing up and scrubbing of floors. He did this happily, always saying a little prayer: "Dear Father, as I wash this plate, send me an angel to wash my heart and make it pure", or "Dear God, as I wash this floor, send me an angel to accompany me, that every person who walks here may be touched by his presence". For every chore he had a prayer and he continued working in this way for a great many years, until, one morning, so the story goes, he woke up 'enlightened' and then people came from far away to listen to his wisdom. Now that's inspiring!

The attitude we have to the work we do is of the utmost importance. If we are unable to find the time to lead a more meditative spiritual life, we can at least try to find a spiritual attitude towards everything we do in our normal daily lives. In other words, if you are not able to do what you love, you should try to love

what you do. Tasks that repeat themselves constantly can either become just a routine, which can have a very dulling effect on us, or you can try to make an exercise of awareness out of the most menial task, imbuing it with spiritual content, as the monk did – and already your spiritual path is opening up.

I started doing things with this in mind and after a certain time I made a very important discovery: There exists a great difference between cleaning and caring. When we clean, we remove dirt and the result of cleaning sometimes does not even last five minutes. You have barely finished cleaning the hallway when already someone walks over it leaving footprints everywhere. For this very reason, many people consider cleaning a frustrating and unrewarding activity. Yet, if we try to do this task with our full awareness, with all our love, then cleaning takes on a nurturing aspect and becomes caring. And what is so wonderful about it is that the result of caring lasts considerably longer than the result of just cleaning! When we have taken special care of a room, the little bit of fresh dirt that is brought in is barely noticed and one can live with it, however, the disturbing 'radiation' that comes from areas where layers of dirt and grime have built up over a long time is totally different.

I began to think: What kind of effect does the state of a room have on the people who live, sleep, work, or learn there and what changes am I able to bring about in this regard through my own activity of caring for the space? Every word spoken in a room, every thought, every feeling, every moment of passion, every smoked cigarette leaves traces in a room. Some of what lives in a room we might wish to conserve; some is better disposed of and transformed. When I clean, I do not simply remove dirt, I consciously try to create space for something new. Removing dust and dirt results in a void and this void I put at the disposal of the helping spiritual beings who are linked to the place I am cleaning, that something new and positive may come about.

For me, caring for a space is very fundamental. Every living organism thrives on caring, be it a child, a plant, a school, our personal household and, very important, our relationships. A while ago, following a workshop on cleaning I had given, one of the participants told me about her experience of the healing influence conscious caring for a household can have. She had been married for fifteen years and somewhere along the line the relationship had got stuck in a rut. Their barely five-year-old house was already neglected, even though it was not even quite finished. No sooner had she started

applying what she had learned in my course, than her husband also started finishing jobs around the house. Later, he told her it was when she started caring for the home again that he not only felt respected, but he also felt that she was aware of him again.

What is so wonderful about cleaning is that it does not only touch the physical plane; it can change the atmosphere of a room making it seem brighter and bigger. A totally different atmosphere is created if we leave the burned porridge pan overnight on the stove, or when we choose to ignore the specks of cream that remain on the wall after whipping it. One mother of a twelve-year-old boy, who was born blind, told me that after she attended a cleaning workshop she went home to make a special effort with the caring of his room. When he came in, he immediately exclaimed: "Oh Mommy, what did you do to my room, it feels so high in here." And on giving another house a very thorough springclean once, the ten year old boy who lived there, on returning from school immediately wanted to know whether the walls had been painted, as the room seemed so bright and shiny.

Consciously caring for the home enhances our sense of perception and this is what enables us to 'release' the elemental beings attached to things that surround us, thus creating space for something new. We release them by consciously perceiving that which surrounds us, whether we are removing dirt, washing our hair, airing the room, or lighting a candle.

Through cleaning and caring we are involved in an activity – there is movement, penetration, transformation – and wherever there is activity one will find the spiritual beings, especially from the elemental world, not far away. We can therefore invite them to participate in our work and we can bless and thank them for their help. For a long time this was common knowledge and these beings feature in many fairy tales and folk legends – Irish folk tales especially mention them a lot. We take hold of the world of matter in order to transform it and it is essentially the attitude with which we do things which determines the quality of the beings we attract. You can nourish your inner life by being conscious of the beings around you.

Through our work we can also make a conscious connection with the four elements: Earth is heavy, has a form and takes up a space for itself. The solidity of the earth supports and enables humans to be upright beings. The world of matter has a strong relationship to our will-nature. Related to this element are the floors, walls, furniture, cloths, cleaning brushes and machines, as well as the dust and dirt. Water springs from the earth and wherever it is found, there is life. Water takes on every shape it is poured into, though always maintaining its horizontal level. It also shapes and forms. It is with this most important of cleaning agents that we wash everything, loosening, dissolving and transporting the dirt away. Air is something you cannot see, touch, or grasp, and can only generally be perceived when either

it is in motion, or we are and can then feel its resistance. Think of the air filling the room, or the air being sucked into your vacuum cleaner. (Be aware of the perfumes that may be in the products you use, as they enter the nose and pass into the body where they might remain and cause allergies). Fire, or warmth, reaches outwards, always bringing warmth to other elements and when warmth withdraws, substances tend to solidify; the warm water in your bucket, the iron, your cooking and candles bring this element to mind.

Many parents feel overwhelmed and under pressure to keep the house tidy and clean. A young mother once told me: "I have been working hard the whole day and by the time I finally had the kitchen cleared after supper, nothing seems to have been done at all. We reconstructed her day and this is what it looked like: She intended cleaning the parents' bathroom upstairs. Just as she was about to start cleaning, she remembered that she used the cleaning agent to clean the basin in the laundry in the cellar three days ago. So down she went to the cellar, only to discover a very smelly cat-litter box right next to the washing machine. Of course that had to be cleaned and refilled immediately. She closed the soiled litter in a bag that was taken into the garage. There she discovered piles of old newspapers and other paper that needed to be bundled for the paper recycling being collected the following day. After looking for the string for a while, she remembered that her son and his friends used to it build a cable car in the attic. Up the stairs she went and fortunately, as a bonus, she found a pullover that had been missing for several days next to the string. By the time she had finally bundled all the paper, it was time to start preparing lunch. Then followed a dentist appointment and music lessons. That evening, when she finally stood in the bathroom to brush her teeth, she remembered that the cleaning agent was still in the laundry!

To establish some order, you have to make a conscious effort to do so. And the more things we have, the more difficult it becomes to create and maintain order. When disorder gets the upper hand neglect sets in, it seems to creep in on us, starting in all those unpenetrated corners, such as behind the curtains where all those cobwebs hide. I consider neglect a passive form of vandalism, especially in schools and other public areas. Everywhere dirt gathers, elemental beings are held fast and being surrounded by clutter drains your energy and weakens your will that can also lead one into depression. Often it is not the work we have done which tires us, but the mere thought of all the things that still need doing. But you cannot clean unless you tidy up first. Neglect starts in all the areas we do not penetrate with our awareness: Where do I drop my bag, keys, shopping, coat? Do I clear up before going to bed?

We all have certain drawers – or perhaps it's the top of the cupboard or under the bed – where everything we want to 'look at later' disappears into. In the kitchen it is

usually the oven or the air vent where dirt accumulates and there are all those sills or shelves where we have our small exhibitions of all kinds of things. There may be piles of newspapers around, magazines, catalogues and unwanted gifts, or heaps of clothes nobody wears anymore. In general, we can all agree on this, but as an individual it is not so easy to bring about order and especially not to clear all that clutter. Disorder usually starts with a decision, mostly unconscious: do I put something away, or will I let it lie there a bit longer?

It is helpful, before you start cleaning, to decide which room in the house needs your attention the most. Then, once the decision has been taken to do something specific, prepare everything you will need for the task the evening before. The will is activated in a totally different way once we have made up our minds to do something – and then sleep on it. Next, stand in the door of that room and ask yourself ‘what is the first thing I should do in it?’ Once it comes into your mind start with exactly this, because that is most probably what you have avoided doing for a long time. Be persistent. Set priorities. Try to distinguish between essential and non-essential. Do not put off doing something essential by doing ten non-essential things. If you start feeling muddled, sit down and think: ‘What next?’ Start to practise the economy of gestures and try not to handle anything more than once (i.e. moving something to one place temporarily before finally sorting it out). Do not fight dirt – transform it, using rhythmic movements when cleaning.

The housework should not be a compulsion. We should be master of our households and not the other way round. I find the image of the equilateral triangle helps me a lot when it comes to trying to balance the various demands on time: you, partner, children; time for work, family and yourself, etc. – and the only person who knows what that triangle looks like is you. We so often say, “I must do this, I must do that, that absolutely needs to be done.” Says who? You say it and I say it. We are the ones who overtax ourselves with those high expectations and demands we set ourselves. Another reason for being overwhelmed is that we do not have enough faith in all those invisible helpers who surround us – the angels, elemental beings, the spirits of our homes.

Once I start talking about cleaning, I can continue for hours. How do we clean and where do we start? With what do we clean? How can we discover the deeper meaning of cleaning and learn to love it? How can we educate our children (and sometimes our partner!) to pay attention to the small things and to carry an action through to its completion. For instance, how do we teach them that, after wiping the table clean, the cloth needs to be rinsed, wrung and hung out to dry, rather than just dropping it in a heap in the basin covered with butter and bread crumbs?

I would like to share with you an experience that showed me that we should never underestimate the

importance of lovingly caring for our surroundings and the opportunity it can give us to create space for something new. These are the precious moments that enable us to constructively contribute towards peace and renewal.

I was requested to do a thorough cleaning of a home for juvenile delinquents as they were planning an Open Day. I was shocked by the state of extreme neglect and filth the house was in and I wanted to know who was responsible for the upkeep of the place. ‘The youths’, replied the educator. ‘But who teaches them how to do it?’ I asked. ‘The educators do’ he said. I then wanted to know if there was an area that was cleaned by the educators and he showed me the rest quarters for the people in charge of the nightshift. This was no better and I told him so. This annoyed him slightly and he wanted to know whether I wanted the job or not. I said that I was very eager to do it, but not with my own employees. My offer to come with all my equipment and material, but to clean with the youths and educators came as a bit of a surprise. As this had never been done, he had to consult with the board first. I incidentally mentioned that the charge would be 3000 swiss francs if I came with my own employees and 600 if I came on my own. This was accepted, but then I made yet another condition. Because I had never worked with youths and I am neither a pedagogue, nor an educator, I believed that I would need the support of their guardian angels and therefore I wanted to meet the youths and learn their names before working with them. So, a breakfast was arranged. There were ten young boys aged 13 to 18 living in this house and as five of them spent weekends with their family at a time, the work was planned for two weekends. The house had three storeys and the whole of the stairwell was painted with the most horrific, demonic pictures in black and very bright colours.

Our job was to clean windows, heaters, doors, floors, showers and toilets, yet once they started, they wanted to clean everything. They began removing posters and stickers from their walls and wardrobes. One boy even took his whole bed apart and in the process found a whole pile of missing clothes. Another wanted me to show him how he could clean his hi-fi set ‘ecologically’. Of course, they could not work without music – and some music it was! To me it sounded like a mixture of an express train and a machine gun. The boy who chose the music actually told me it filled him with energy, although I could not see a trace of it. He wanted to know what I liked listening to and I told him that I still enjoyed some of the old sixties music that I listened to when I was his age. All of a sudden I heard Cat Stevens’ *Morning has Broken* and it sounded like a symphony in comparison to the earlier ‘noise’. I was even able to convince him that it was easier to clean a window to the rhythm of *Morning has Broken* than to the ‘tu-dum, tu-dum, tu-dum’ we heard before. There was a wonderful

working atmosphere and we managed to get a lot done.

Upon my return the following Saturday, the most wonderful surprise awaited me. The five boys who had cleaned with me had asked permission to take Monday off and with their own money had bought paint and repainted the stairwell from top to bottom, thoroughly covering the walls with white paint. But they did not leave it at that. The whole surface was covered with naïve, childlike pictures: houses with green doors, pink curtains and smoking chimneys; Trees covered with red apples and cherries, daffodils and tulips and children flying kites under a beaming sun. There were even birds, butterflies and tiny little snails crawling in the grass. These ‘tough’, severely socially damaged young people felt the need to create a world of beauty and harmony on those walls, filling a void, the space created though their own efforts.

In our homes, we very often face chaos. The mere fact that we have countless ways in which we can structure our daily lives, puts us face to face with chaos. When it comes to households, the concepts of disorder and chaos often get confused. Order is often related to a certain regularity and clarity. I consider a room orderly when everything is in its place and I can easily orientate myself and find my way around without fuss. As soon as I start working in that room, or the children start playing in it, the order very soon turns into disorder. Order seems to have this special quality of merging into disorder without much effort, yet the opposite never occurs, so we must purposefully re-establish order and structure. Sometimes

it is said to me that a little bit of chaos is more agreeable than total order, which can have a sterile, cold effect on us. This is, of course, a matter for the individual and the needs of every person are different. Too much disorder can make us want to escape from matter and weakens our will; too much order, on the other hand, binds us to matter and makes us compulsive cleaners. Everything can become either totally chaotic, or sterile order – both show a lack of balance and eventually lead to loneliness and social isolation. A healthy balance is often difficult to attain but worth striving for. Order should serve – it should not rule our lives.

Family homes especially are where a new society is formed, for it is in them where children will grow up to build a new generation. It is here that we should offer them the opportunity to not only grow up physically, but to learn to think in a healthy way and develop all the social competence they will need for their future tasks. Surely there can be no greater asset in the world than to offer a healthy home for the future of humanity and if we do not take time to do this, we and other generations might spend a lot of time regretting it. Through the nurturing aspect of cleaning with care, a good social foundation can be built. We no longer have to exhaust ourselves fighting dirt and disorder, but instead we can learn to transform our handling of it and create space for something new and positive to manifest.

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