

Chaos in Everyday Life About Cleaning and Caring

Linda Thomas

When it comes to housekeeping, the concepts of disorder and chaos often get confused. In our households order is often related to a certain regularity and clarity. I call a room orderly when everything is in its place, and I can easily orient myself, finding my way around without fuss. However, as soon as I start working in the room, or the children start playing around 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. I have to consciously intervene in order to re-establish the lost order.

In the Kabbala, the story of Creation tells us that God withdrew Himself, thus producing a void. The chaos that arose within this void formed the substance from which the world was then created.

In our homes, we very often face chaos. The mere fact that we have countless ways and means in which we can structure our daily lives, puts us face to face with chaos. We have the opportunity of purposefully re-establishing order and structure where formlessness and haphazardness have taken over. When I clean, I do not simply want to remove dirt. I consciously try to create space for something new. Removing dust and dirt results in a void. This void I put at the disposal of helping spiritual beings who are linked to the place I am cleaning, that something new and positive may come about.

About fourteen years ago, I started an ecological cleaning company, in order to be able to finance the Waldorf school tuition for my children. In the very beginning, I was not only the "boss," I was the only employee as well as the apprentice. I had so much to learn, not only about the right equipment and cleaning agents, but how to conserve my strength, how to protect myself, and most of all, how to respect the space of other people.

The attitude that we have regarding the work we do is of the utmost importance. If we are

unable to lead the meditative, spiritual life we wish to lead, we can try to find a spiritual attitude towards everything we do in our daily lives. In other words, if you are not able to do what you love, you should try to love what you do. Things that repeat themselves constantly either turn into routine, which can have a very dulling effect, or you can try to make an exercise of awareness out of the most menial task, and already you are starting on your spiritual path.

I found an anecdote that I had heard a long time ago was very helpful in this regard. In a monastery, there lived a monk who was quite simple and all the menial tasks were given to him, such as washing the dishes, sweeping and scrubbing the floors, and so on. He did not mind this and he did all his chores lovingly, all the while pronouncing little prayers: "Dear God, as I wash this dish, please send one of Your angels to wash my heart and make it pure," or "Dear God, as I clean this floor, please send one of Your angels to help me, that every person who walks on this floor 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. The legend says that one morning as he woke up, he was enlightened, and people came from very far to listen to his wisdom.

Many memories of things my father and mother once said have come back to me. One of my brothers often came to the breakfast table in a very bad mood. My dad used to ask, "Did you get out of bed with your left foot again?" Many years later, I turned this remark into an exercise. When I wake up in the morning, I try to put myself in the upright position straight away and then very consciously, I try to always put my right foot forward when I get out of bed, thus doing something positive to start my day.

I started doing things in this way, 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. At the Goetheanum, you have barely cleaned the hallway, and already someone walks over it, leaving footprints everywhere. The same goes for parents with young children. For this very reason, many people consider cleaning a frustrating and unrewarding activity, a troublesome necessity.

Yet, we should try to do this task with our full awareness, with all our love. Once we learn to consciously penetrate each little corner with our fingertips, then cleaning takes on a nurturing aspect and becomes caring. What is so wonderful about it is that the result of caring lasts considerably longer than the result of removing dirt! When we have taken special care of a room, the little bit of fresh dirt that is brought in is barely disturbing—one can live with it. The glow is totally different from areas where layers of dirt and grime have built up. Lately, a new cleaning culture, which we should really try to prevent, is trying to establish itself. There is supposedly a spray for everything—you spray and you wipe away—not much water is needed! One does indeed remove a small quantity of dirt, but instead of caring for a surface, you leave a chemical layer behind, containing quantities of dissolved dirt.

While caring for a room, we do not only come into contact with the physical world. The whole atmosphere changes, the room is filled with light. Especially children react strongly to this transformation, and they also seem to perceive the change directly. We once gave a local house a very thorough spring cleaning. Returning from school, the ten-year-old boy immediately wanted to know whether the walls had been painted, as the house seemed so bright and shiny.

Only we can decide how seriously we take this occupation. For me, caring for a space is very fundamental. Every living organism thrives on caring, be it a child, a plant, an organism like the Goetheanum, a school, our personal household, and, very important, our relationships. After a workshop, 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 gotten into 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 our course than her husband also started finishing things around the house. Later, he told her that, as soon as she started caring for the home again, he not only felt respected but also felt that she was aware of him again.

Consciously caring for the home enhances our sense of perception, and this is what enables us to release the elemental beings, thus creating space for something new. We are constantly surrounded by and in contact with elementals, as well as countless other invisible beings. We release the elemental beings by consciously perceiving that which surrounds us—when we remove dirt, wash our hair, air the room or light a candle. A totally different atmosphere is created when we leave the burned porridge pot overnight on the stove, or when we choose to ignore the specks of cream that remain on the wall after whipping it. We release other elemental beings through diligence and gaiety, through contentment and composure.

All elemental beings cannot be treated in the same way. In a school where we cleaned, there was one room with a particularly bad smell. I tried everything to get rid of the smell. With my ecological cleaning agents, chemical agents, and my steam-cleaner, I tried to clear even the smallest crevice. Nothing helped, and the smell remained. I then assumed that I was not kind enough to the room. With loving care, I again went through the whole procedure, even singing whilst cleaning. As there was still no improvement, I accepted that I would have to learn to live with it. A few weeks later, I arrived at the school feeling hot and tired, and as I opened the door to the room, the odor was so intense and seemed so aggressive that I became furious. I ripped the window open, stamped my foot on the floor, shouting: “I have enough of you! I AM HERE, and there is not enough room for all of us—get out!!” Like a fury, I went through the room, angrily cleaning it from top to bottom. The odor was gone! A few months later a colleague took over the job, and, after I explained the attitude to have toward these beings, she also managed to keep them away.

The opposite of caring is neglect. I perceive neglect as something creeping. It starts in all those

little corners we do not penetrate. It comes creeping from behind the cupboards, from under the bed, and behind the curtains where we find so many cobwebs. Then most houses have certain drawers that hold a jumble of things. There is the oven, the vent above the stove, the window sills where we have our collections of stones and plants. By and by, it seems to take over until we can no longer stand it. Then, like a flash we speed through the house in an attempt to put everything back in order.

Many mothers and fathers 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 tried to reconstruct the day, and this is what it looked like: she intended cleaning the parent's bathroom upstairs. Just as she wanted 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 collection 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, which has 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. A dentist appointment and music lessons followed. That evening, when she finally stood in the bathroom to brush her teeth, she remembered that the cleaning agent was still in the laundry.

Often it is not the work we have done which tires us. It is the mere thought of all the things that still need to be done that really exhausts us. I know that it is not always possible to plan things in advance, because there are always those unforeseen things that happen. Yet it can be a great help, once we have decided to do something specific, to

prepare everything we 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 over it. The household should not be a compulsion. Men and women should be masters of their households and not the other way round. Yet it is important that we do not try to fool ourselves. It is the way a task is fulfilled that distinguishes the maid from the princess.

The image of the equilateral triangle helps me a lot when it comes to balance. There is thinking, feeling, willing; you, partner, children; time for work, family and yourself. The only person that 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 for ourselves. Another reason for being overwhelmed is that we do not have enough faith in all those invisible helpers who surround us. There are angels, elemental beings, the spirits of our homes. When we get up in the morning and greet the day, nothing prevents us from asking the angels to help us to at least spend part of our day in harmony. (Perhaps until 8 a.m., just to ensure success!) When I was in Sunday school, the pastor told us that the angels up in heaven are totally bored because they do not have enough to do. So many requests are addressed to them that they are not allowed to answer. Then, all of a sudden, there is a child, or in our case, an adult who stands by the window requesting help to create harmony in the home. Finally! "We have something to do," they say, and rush in to help us!

Before I started being the housemother of the Goetheanum, I used to regularly stand in for the person who was responsible for cleaning the toilets. I used to start at 6:00 in the morning, cleaning sixty-four toilets every day, often singing to make the job easier. For cleaning the toilets, I have my own method. There is the daily care, and then the thorough cleaning once, or when necessary, twice a week. At this time, the toilet gets cleaned from top to bottom. This, of course, requires a little more time. As the bending, cleaning, turning, and bending again made me

quite dizzy, I decided to clean the toilets kneeling down. Once you kneel down in front of a toilet, something changes. It is quite subtle: there is a change in attitude, the way one perceives it, the way you do the work, the encounter with the elemental beings. Once the job is done, I have to get up again. I tried to also change this into a conscious exercise of putting myself in the upright position. This experience was so rich and fulfilling, that even today, if I have the choice, I would rather clean twenty toilets than vacuum a carpet. I love this work also because I always consider it a special gift when I am able to use a toilet that is clean and well cared for.

Last year, I was in Norway to give cleaning workshops. The first afternoon a woman came to me and asked me if she could still participate, as she had not signed up for the course. She mentioned that she really considered it quite a joke that someone had to come from Dornach to tell them how to clean. However, her husband had taken the course before and when he came home, he announced that she had to wait to serve the dinner as he first wanted to clean the toilet. So she simply had to come and see who been the cause of such a miracle. Her husband had never cleaned a toilet before.

Once I start talking about cleaning, I can continue for hours. It is truly a never-ending subject. How do we clean? With what do we clean? How can we learn to 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 end? 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 into a heap in the basin, still covered with butter and bread crumbs.

This reminds me of another anecdote. A few years ago, I was asked to give a lecture about my work here in the Goetheanum. The day before the lecture, an elderly gentleman phoned me to tell me how happy he was to hear that I was going to talk about something as practical as cleaning. He personally knew Hanny Geck (who helped Rudolf Steiner with the carving of the *Representative of Man*), and she had told him this story. Whenever

Steiner was called away from his work on the statue, he would always sweep up all the wood-carvings and chips lying on the floor and place them in the garbage can. Although she had often offered to do this, he insisted on doing it himself. One day she asked him why he took the trouble to sweep up everything even if he had to leave for only a few minutes. His answer was something like this, "While I am working, everything I work with is part of my working material, and I am master of the situation. As soon as I stop working and leave the studio, everything that lies on the floor is garbage and therefore belongs in the garbage can, because the beings who feel at home in garbage are not the kind of beings we want around when working artistically."

Finally, I would like to tell you about an experience which 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 because they were planning an open door 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 that," was the response. I then wanted to know if there was an area that was cleaned by the educators, and he showed me the quarters for the people in charge of the nightshift. Of course, this was no better, and I told him so. It 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 of 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 Fr. 3000 if I came with my employees, and Fr. 600 if I came on my own. The offer was accepted, but then I had yet another condition. Because I have never worked with youths, and I am not a teacher, I believed that I

would need the support of their guardian angels. Therefore, I wanted to meet the youths and learn their names before working with them. I was invited to have breakfast with them.

There were ten young boys, aged thirteen to eighteen, living in this house, and as five of them spent weekends with their families at a time, the work was planned for two weekends. The house had three stories, and the whole stairwell was painted with the most horrific, demonic pictures in black and very bright colors. Our job was to clean windows, heaters, doors, floors, showers, and toilets. Yet, once they had started, they wanted to clean everything. They started 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 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 liked 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 asked permission to take Monday off, and with their own money they 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 complete surface was covered with naïve, childlike pictures—houses with green doors, pink curtains and smoking chimneys and trees covered with red apples and cherries. There were daffodils, 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 and creating a space through their own efforts.

Linda Thomas was born in South Africa. She founded her own ecological cleaning firm in Switzerland in 1988 and has managed the cleaning services at the Goetheanum since 1993. This work, and her love for the profession of the housewife, led her to discover a path of inner training through everyday work. She shares her thoughts and experiences in this field through lectures and courses. Linda Thomas will be the keynote speaker at the WECAN East Coast Conference, Feb 6-8, 2004 in Spring Valley, NY.