

From the Kitchen

22 December 2010



Instead of sitting at my usual table at the local café this afternoon, I was lying back in a dentist's chair, with my mouth agape and full of fingers and implements. The annual cleaning of the ivories.

This year, as every year, it took bits of tartar breaking off my teeth when brushing them to remind me that I needed maintenance. When I am tuned in I can usually tell when something is amiss and I need to give it attention – give myself attention. It is so easy to ignore the signs and just 'soldier on'. After all, there are more important things that must be done, urgently. That ache in my knee is probably nothing to worry about and I will just put some teatree oil on that flaking skin between my toes and I will definitely phone the doctor next week and make an appointment in a month or so. Maybe the pain in my knee will be gone by then anyway and my foot will be all cleared up.

I find I do the same with the house and the machines around me. On a day when it's not raining and not too hot, I will get up into the roof and find out where the rain is getting through the tiles and dripping onto the ceiling. No, I suppose I'd better wait for the next heavy rain. The seedlings and grass definitely need to be cleared out of the gutters – a job for a mild, dry day. Then there are the blackberries to clear and the fence to mend before the dog gets out; although at the moment the blackberries make it impossible for the dog to get through the gap in the fence. I could leave it that way for a while longer.

My car was playing up for some weeks but I decided to wait until the next scheduled service to have it looked at. Maybe a timely check-up would have obviated the need for new pistons, piston rings and bearings and I could have used the money to have a nice weekend away.

How do people without servants manage to keep everything clean, clear and working well and themselves in tip-top condition and still have time to relax, go to the movies and travel? How do they do all that and still write weekly columns and short stories, compose sonnets and Haiku and complete their novel?

There is a philosophy espoused by some: that we never, ever get 'it' done, that all we can do is move *toward* getting 'it' done and that it is the striving that moves as along and keeps us alive and motivated. According to this approach, you write a list of everything that you need and want to do and cross off items as they are completed or no longer of interest and keep adding to the bottom of the list. Such a list can grow exponentially for a while, as you think of ever more things that need to be done or that you want to do.

You could order such a list according to the importance or urgency of the items on it. A solicitor I once worked for had such a ranking system for his client files. He had three piles on the floor along the back of his office: *A*, *B* and *C*. The *As* were substantial, complicated, important and often difficult matters. The *Bs* were important but less substantial and probably not as complicated. The files designated as *C* were often insubstantial, probably easy to deal with but not urgent or important. My boss avoided the tendency most of us would have: work on all the easy files and put off the difficult ones until forced to attend to them. He would spend several hours on an *A* file and then reward himself by dealing with a few *Bs*. He would

then grab another *A* and go back to some *Bs* after sweating the hard stuff. I asked him about the *Cs* and why he did nothing about them. “They’re not important or urgent,” he told me. “But what if they become important or urgent?” I asked, feeling a little anxious about a possible negligence suit. “If any of those becomes important or urgent, someone will phone and let me know.”

Maybe the whole of life is like that. Maybe we avoid the difficult and important by keeping ourselves busy with the inconsequential and easy. The other thing I learned from my boss is that the substantial, even daunting, tasks can be made less so by breaking them up into bite-sized chunks, as we do with a substantial meal. We often ‘snack’ on the trivial and fail to face the hearty dinner, which will ultimately nourish us more.

Please don’t disturb me for the next few days. I am going to find myself a shack in the forest and make the definitive list for the rest of my life. I will rank it into *A*, *B* and *C* and then rank each of these so that I will know where to start. After that, if I am asked to do something or feel like doing something, I can check on my list and I will know whether to do it or not. I will stop procrastinating, at least until tomorrow.