

From the Kitchen

5 May 2010



I am in the middle of upgrading my computer, with a new hard drive and new operating system. I temporarily have no spell checker to catch those odd words that I mist when proofing.

I try so hard to get things write, that I sometimes miss the obvious, such as failing to see that what I've written makes no cents; I get bogged down in the detail and no longer see the bigger pitcher.

My whole life can be like that – letting the details obscure what is really important. It's also possible to let dust and clutter do the obscuring. Having come back from a week away on the side of a mountain with views to where the sky meets the sea, my little writing island (my desk in a corner of the lounge) was almost lost under the dust and clutter of months of neglect. The things I found in that clutter!

Thirty-eight years ago, when I started working for a solicitor, I asked him about piles of folders arranged neatly along the wall behind him. They were grouped under signs on the wall bearing the letters A, B and C. He explained that A was for the important, difficult files and B for the important and easier ones. He said that he would work on an A file for an hour or two and then reward himself with one or two Bs. Then he would tackle more from the A pile and relax with more Bs. I asked him, "What about the C files?" "Oh, they're not important." "What if they become important?" "If they become important, someone will phone me and let me know."

That is what I discovered to be the case with much of what I found buried on my desk. It was once important (or so I believed) but neglect had made it irrelevant to my life, my goals and my interests (and probably to other people's). It all belonged in the C pile. One of my fridge magnets reminds me that "There are two rules in life: 1. Don't sweat the small stuff. 2. It is all small stuff."

The same has applied when I have made archaeological forays into the garage or into the roof space. Most of what I have unearthed may be of interest if I were writing my memoirs, but had been unmissed and unneeded for some time. Maybe I could write an anthropological treatise on people's relationship to objects and their propensity to collect them and hold on to them when they have no utilitarian value and even no emotional value. In relation to most of the objects I have discovered in these digs, their disposal gave me a sense of relief and a feeling of being unburdened.

Something I experienced in New Zealand was space, both inside the buildings and outside. Four hours in an aeroplane and over an hour in the car put an end to that. And coming in through the front door brought it home to me how badly we use the little space we have. One aspect of Tai Ji is a sense of using the space around us and bringing that into our lives,

but that is difficult when even the lounge room hardly has the capacity for two of us to practise our routine comfortably.

Having visited houses where there seems to be an abundance of emptiness, I have felt that they looked hardly lived in, or too neat; even sterile. But I have come to realise that a space can be lived in and warm and comfortable without every surface being covered with something and with not much more than one metre separating any two pieces of furniture. Perhaps this creation of a sense of space and emptiness is even more important when living in a small house. The unused space in a house can have the same function as 'unused' green spaces in a suburb: allowing people to breathe.

I can extend this to clutter in time. I can easily fill every minute of a day with activity and I know how good I feel when I allow periods of doing nothing – not even reading, walking, listening to music or watching TV. Nothing. Just being. In our society (and historically) idleness is often frowned on and industriousness lauded. But just like a house has walls containing spaces, the activities in our lives can contain emptiness. The trick is to find a balance between the container and the contained; a rhythm, proportions, right relationship.

I sit at my uncluttered desk and feel expansive within myself. There is nothing crowding in on me or demanding my attention. I can let my thoughts wander, lean back in my chair and feel my lungs filling and emptying. My mind keeps working but I can close my eyes and ignore it for a while. When something else becomes important, someone will let me know.