



PHILOSOPHY

## Corporate Clutter

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Eighteen boxes, seven piles, and 167 assorted objects found their way from our home to the curbside last weekend. In addition, books from three four-foot shelves were removed and taken to the University Book Give-Away Center. I selected most of the items, some of which dated back to college days, then loaded the stuff into boxes. The purge continued as our family listed three bulky, unused pieces of furniture and four computer games on Craig's List. My husband hauled away the books and furniture. The computer-game cleanse was a way to enlist my teen-age son in the exercise. I was convinced that we would only be successful if we were all involved.

Later, I overheard my son talking to a friend on his cell phone. "Mom's like the wind blowing through our house. I suppose she wants change. Anyway, it's all good. I made \$80." I was reminded that *feng shui* is literally translated as "wind-water."

With the whole family involved, the results were completely uplifting. My son got his money. My husband and I got space. We breathed sighs of relief, as if freed from a persistent unnamed burden. Those unnecessary things carried energy that had been stuck in our home for a long time, and had unknowingly weighed us down.

After the purge, I enjoyed reorganizing the rooms and shelves that now had some breathing space. Having examined everything in two rooms, I appreciated more what I had chosen to keep. Oddly, an exercise in elimination transformed into an exercise in selection. It felt good to be intentional about what to keep, as well as what to give up.

Some items were easy to release. They had been acquired without thought, and never really had been used. Now they just took up space. Decisions about these took no effort. I call these EEs or Easy Elimination items.

Then there were items that signaled memories of times past, whose only real function was to bring a remembrance to present light. These items were harder to eliminate, as if purging them would erase good times from my mind. I'll call them SMs or Save Memory items. When considering a suit made for me in Thailand, I argued with myself but purged it, deciding that I could never forget the impact of that culture and didn't need the suit to remind me of it. Less SM is better, I assured myself.

The third category was the hardest: well-used items that once provided real value, but were now useless. I treated them like old friends (OFs) who live in other places. They come to your mind sometimes, but they are no longer in day-to-day contact. Surely, you can't let them go. Without them you lose the context in which you define yourself.

My psychology and philosophy library was an old friend. As I looked at well worn books, I remembered when I studied human perception in college. I learned that truth is entirely subjective; one person's reality is another's lie. That there is a social construction of reality. These insights later led me to understand how corporate culture, or any human endeavor for that matter, is made up and interpreted by the people involved. My later study in Chinese medicine helped me to understand, by contrast, how energy is a universal variable, not vulnerable to social interpretation. I believed energy to be a universal, not cultural, phenomenon and thus more reliable. Fighting the urge to keep these books, I told myself, "You want the freedom now; give up the books; they are the symbol of freedom, not the real thing. Make real space. Don't hold onto the period of time when you had space."

This epiphany led to more cleansing as I realized old friends lived within me rather than on shelves. Eliminate and be free to be who you are. I remembered the line from the *Nei Ching* congratulating the Large Intestine Official, our own Great Eliminator, for being the agent of "Evolution and Change." What is evolution, after all, but going through a transformation and finding yourself, stripped of the trappings of illusion. Naked, as bare as you were when you were born, inviting instant adoration from your parents. We know it's easier to love someone who isn't covered in baggage.

I then considered how my clients often suffer when they have to let go. The leaders in my case load agonize about reductions in their organizations, and almost always have stress symptoms when asked to make cuts. I write this while our economy is trying to recover. Organizations are learning to live with less, yet usually do not engage in elimination as a transformative exercise. Instead, I hear about budget cuts, layoffs, corporate reorganizations, and I see the casualties. Shell-shocked people given a day to clear their desks and leave. Survivors working at a frenzied pace as they absorb the work of their departed co-workers. Occupational illness and injury on the rise. Sharp spikes in demand for counseling, antidepressants, and anti-anxiety medications. The use of medical leave to get away from work.

What if, by contrast, leaders applied the principles of *feng shui* to their companies? They might start by noticing stagnation; areas in their organization that just didn't get the attention to be cleaned up. Then, they might pick EEs, and wipe away surface-level dust and grime, while later considering the deeper blocks (SMs and OFs) .

Recently, I talked about these ideas to my friend Susie who was a senior leader in a health care organization. We agreed about the increase in casualties caused by recent organizational reductions. We care deeply about the state of the people in the health care industry; they are our colleagues and friends, and have become family. They are increasingly unwell in a country vowing to transform their industry.

I told her about a recent intervention I made on the energy of a large organization. Testing the EE idea, I asked a Vice-President, "Could you identify practices or processes that don't produce any value, which would liberate energy if you just stopped doing them? Activities that could simply be eliminated by executive decision without going through elaborate decision processes?"

Pensively, he looked at me, "What a good question!" Less than a minute later, he said, "I'd simplify the FTE review process."

FTE is an acronym for "Full Time Employee." This man's organization employs about 7,500 people, of which 7,000 are designated as FTEs, more than 90 percent of whom are renewed year after year. However, each one is individually evaluated on an annual basis, wasting countless people's time.

"Why don't we review the 10 percent that are discretionary, rather than all the positions? We'd save an enormous amount of staff time." The idea made him a bit giddy. Easy change without a lot of effort; how unique.

"Great idea," I said. "What stops you from making that change?"

"I don't know. Being busy, I suspect. We don't think of simple solutions that aren't already organizational practices. We just do what we are accustomed to doing. Now that you ask, we could dramatically simplify how we report to our board. We spend months compiling reports when all they really want to know is how are we doing and what is coming up that is innovative. "

I could feel the influence of those books about perception coming through his face. His corporate culture had no place for Simplicity. Did my ease with elimination help him move with less effort?

"Of course," answered Susie. "You demonstrated that you could simply let go and not turn reduction into a huge production. This is a lesson that organizations need. I wish I had known you when I was a senior Vice-President. I would have introduced you to our President before we started downsizing. We probably did much more that we needed to by never thinking of making simple changes. The busier we got, the more complex the work seemed to become."

Can we pause as a culture, and slow down long enough to ask the questions: "What can we stop doing? Is the need to do, so compelling that has become mindless?"

People in organizations wear their busy-ness as badges of honor, as if constant activity actually produces better results. Yet we know that intentional action is more potent. Can Elimination, and its aura of loss, be replaced by Selection, with a feeling of gain? Can we choose to do things differently?

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