

TIDYING UP

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So, this evening I'm talking about the concept of "Tidying Up." And I chose this title -- or borrowed it, if you will -- from a book by the same title, which is "Tidying Up." The full book title is "The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: the Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing."

So, to my understanding over nine million copies of this book have been sold. Currently Netflix has just begun a nine- or 10-week series on it. The author is Marie Kondo.

And it's a great book for us Americans, in particular, because we have a lot of stuff that we just kind of collect. And we use stuff to fill up our houses; with our garages full of stuff. And then we buy sheds from hardware stores to put more stuff in. And we go to Amazon to get prefab sheds to put more overflow stuff in. [Congregants laugh] And all of that doesn't work. We then go out and find and buy bigger houses and build bigger barns to put more stuff in. But that's another sermon for another time.

Today, I want to talk about something that is important to me and it's about tidying up the mind. The Buddha said, *"The mind is everything."* He said, *"What you think, you become. What you feel, you attract. What you imagine, you create."*

If we go to the Scriptures -- "The Good Book," as the old folks would call it -- in the Book of Romans, the 12th chapter, 2nd verse, it says:

"Do not be conformed to this world. Instead, be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."

Or, put another way: be ye transformed by changing -- or by tidying up or by straightening up -- your mind.

And in one of Charles Fillmore's "Talks on Truth," which I have a book full of, there's a subject titled "Obedience." And he talks about the concept of humbleness, which he defines as the shortcut into the kingdom of heaven. And in this little segment he said, and I quote:

"Humbleness is not a denial of oneself, such as like being a worm of the dust or being a sinner against God, or any of the other misconceptions that we hold about our relationship with the Infinite, or any of the other stuff that we've heard from preachers and pulpits."

"Instead," he said, "It is a letting go or a releasing, if you will, of our pride, of our ignorance, of our selfishness, of our ambitions, and the thousand and one other dense ideas that make the soul opaque."

In other words, it's an innate trust issue for us that we have to develop if we want to continue to spiritually evolve as a person, as a species, as a world. We have to be able to develop insight into ourselves: into our habits, into our feelings, and not allow those habits and feelings and thoughts to ever make us feel like we are "less than," or actually make us believe that there is a reality to the whole concept of being "less than."

So, in essence, it's about worthiness also. And that's probably based on hundreds of years -- if not thousands of years -- of Scripture.

He goes on to say that:

"Earnest prayer -- intense, honest prayer -- whether spoken, or whether felt, or whether deeply believed, comes from the soul. And the soul is that part of us -- of our consciousness -- that contains all of our hurts, all of our high moments, and all of our in-between moments."

In other words, the soul contains every bit of our essence; everything that we are is contained in our souls. Everything that's brought us to the present moment, the soul is at its core.

That's an amazing insight in my estimation. Because as I look back on 80-plus years on this planet and remember all the different experiences that I've had from childhood all the way up until now -- and that's a lot of deep stuff to carry around if I consciously thought about it all the time.

I remember one of my earliest childhood experiences was having a grade-school classmate of mine backed over by the school bus and killed. And as a six-year-old, that was impossible for me to conceive. The pain of just hearing that -- trying to understand that -- was immeasurable.

And then, moving on from childhood in the teenage years, and watching all of the stuff that goes on in our world -- and being reasonably intelligent enough to think that something is askew -- it continued on. And so, it was then that I realized at a fairly young age that the only way I would be capable of taking care of myself is to try to develop an understanding of things that -- to me at that particular point in my life -- didn't look like it was possible to understand.

And even today, there are things that happen that challenge my understanding.

But what Mr. Fillmore is suggesting here: that, if we consider these experiences for having value for us, then they can help us navigate the multiple changes and challenges that we have to navigate in our world.

Years ago, when I had a problem with alcohol and needed and decided at that point to do something constructive about it, I switched to eating jelly beans. [Congregants laugh] So, there's some kind of a twisted logic involved in this somewhere. At the time, I thought it was because of the high sugar content of the coatings on the jelly beans. They didn't generate the same kind of "buzz" that alcohol did. [Laughs with congregants] So, in order to compensate for that, I decided that maybe I needed to eat a lot more of them. [Congregants laugh] And then I developed a problem with jelly beans, and I had to do some earnest prayer to address that problem.

This was my realization. You may want to, if you have a pen, take it out and write this down. Jelly beans are better than bourbon, but honest prayer is better than bourbon or jelly beans. [Laughs and congregants applaud]

Seriously, though, the innate problem that I had to address was compulsiveness. I was always compulsive about everything. I didn't know what to do with that. There was no therapy in those days. And, even if it existed, it was very rare for people to be able to afford it.

And so, my therapeutic process was in reading and trying to understand. And I chose to read philosophy. I chose to read all kinds of informational books in order to try to get a handle on how to best live my life, and to do that without getting into a lot of trouble. I still managed to find a lot of trouble. [Congregants laugh]

And the innate problem that enabled me to find a lot of trouble was my insecurity. Insecurity or any number of other issues can lead us to a cluttered consciousness, a cluttered mind, and also a cluttered spirit.

And personally, as I've discovered then and now, I had stuff that I needed to overcome; that I needed to release. And realizing that then, I had to make decisions. I had to make decisions about discipline. I had to make decisions about my sense of self. I had to make decisions about sacrifice. And all of that requires diligence.

And practicing that diligence over the years is a part of my spirituality. I found that it's fairly easy to dump our stuff, but generating the will to *leave* the stuff at the dump: that's the whole other thing. And to not regurgitate or retrieve that stuff takes another kind of discipline. It takes an act of will to be strong, and to stand up, and to be counted.

And it's actually where and when the psychological and spiritual work truly begin. And it never ends; never ever ends.

And I kind of love that. I love it because it gives me reason to want to try to master life. I know that's an impossibility. I've seen people die from the time of childhood all the way through this experience. I don't know how many people I've funeralized; I couldn't even count them. So, I know it's not possible to master it. But I still have that desire -- that urge, if you will -- and I'm going to try to hold on to that for the rest of my days.

Fillmore also says that no one is ever truly healed until he or she has learned to make contact with the Healer: the Healer inside of us. And that's, again, another complicated issue. Because healing may not always show up in the way we like for it to show up. We have our own ideas about what healing means. And, in my humble opinion, that's all that is: is just opinion.

We have to practice it minute by minute. We have to be ready for any and every circumstance that we encounter. And hearing that may make you think that that means we're always ill at ease. That is not the case at all. If we practice the art of prayer and meditation faithfully, it becomes an automatic experience for us.

And one of the things I loved about working with the prayer chaplains is being able to see that experience take place in all of our lives and in the work that we do for, not just the congregation here, but for people who call into our organization for prayer. It requires a certain kind of letting go and sometimes trying to hold on.

And that isn't a contradiction of terms. We are letting go of our own thought process, but we are holding on to the presence and power of God that is within us all around us.

Let me share a modern-day Buddhist example. It's about a man and some of his buddies who decide to go to a Buddhist retreat. And they go to this Buddhist retreat. And the one man is a therapist and he's also a doctor. And the Buddhist retreat was called "A Therapeutic Intervention."

So, the man and his buddies go to this retreat, and the head monk at the retreat is there to greet them. And he tells them the minute they get there that no one is allowed to use cell phones, nor is anyone allowed to talk. So, in silence, they nod in agreement. And then he says to the gathering there, "*Follow me down the steps.*" And he leads them down a large series of steps in the temple.

And this one man can only think about how badly he wants his cell phone. And he's also thinking about being of his pet rabbit that he had rescued from an animal testing lab. And he thinks about his social media account: "*Wonder if anybody's paying any attention to that?*" He's wondering about how his sponsorship with Burger King is doing.

And the monk and the people following him down the steps have all been assigned specific tasks that they are to perform or to do. And these tasks must be performed perfectly, or they have to start the process all over again.

So, this particular man gets his specific task of banging the gong every 15 steps that they take down these long series of steps. So, he's carefully counting his steps. He thinks about how he's there doing this program -- which is half therapy and half punishment for him -- specifically to combat his lack of

attention, which had got him into trouble, because he had given a patient the wrong medication, and the patient died. So, he's got all of this stuff working in his mind.

And then he realized suddenly that they reached the bottom of the steps. And once the head monk comes up to them, and he says to them, *"It's time for lunch."* So, they all stop, sit down cross-legged, and they are served lunch.

And suddenly, they hear a loud thud. And the thud surprises all of them, and they turn around and ask, *"What is this?"*

So, the head monk said, *"Silence!"* So everybody goes quiet again. And then, later, the head monk tells them that one of the other monks had actually accidentally fallen down the stairs, so he needs to leave them for a few minutes.

So, while he was gone, the whole group breaks the vow of silence. And they start whispering amongst themselves and talking and complaining about a process that all of them had chosen to participate in and willingly agreed to be a part of. And they're whining and they're complaining.

And the man all of a sudden realizes what he's doing, and he takes control of his mind. And he's able to see the rest of the participants like he was himself: somebody who's capable of making mistakes; somebody who can do the wrong thing; somebody who has a past that is colorful. And he's not somebody who is being punished. He is actually somebody who is there to get better. So, he vows to himself that he's going to become a better person. He completes the program, commits to himself that he's going to do everything he can to avoid being distracted with his patients.

And so, after the program is over, the head monk gives him his telephone back. He gets on the bus with the other participants to leave. And he decides to make one last post online. Just one last post; another quick distraction. What harm could that do? After all, he'd just completed a successful meditation program. So, what harm could one last post do?

Probably nothing. But it wasn't about the post. It was about the commitment that he made to himself.

To survive as a spiritual being, we have to be committed to our growth; we have to be committed to our enfoldment; we have to be committed to life. We've got to be committed to being visionary. And what I mean by being visionary is to see beyond all of the everyday stuff that tends to capture our attention ... so much so that it makes us uncomfortable with life. And it keeps us wondering what's going to happen next.

There's a part in Eric Butterworth's "Infinite Flow," where he mentions four noble truths.

The first noble truth is this. There are two kinds of suffering: suffering that leads to more suffering and suffering that leads to the end of suffering. Which of those would you choose?

He also said, *"If we are not willing to face the end of suffering, we will surely continue to face more of it."*

The second noble truth is understanding that your suffering can bring about a radical change in your life. At the right time, in the right place, this change will enable you to live a more successful and a happier life.

The third noble truth is just understanding that your suffering can bring about a radical change in how you *experience* life, which is a whole different thing from life itself.

And the fourth one is called clearer comprehension: developing what is called *"Sampa Jama"*: see clearly what needs to be done, and then do it. And do it again, and again, and again, and again.

It's easy to say, but it's hard to do. The metaphysical life-changing magic of tidying up -- of decluttering the mind and of regenerating the spirit -- is something that we are called to do 24/7. Twenty-four/seven!

I'm going to leave you with this final story. There's 200 people; they're attending a seminar. And the seminar is based on mental and physical health.

So, at one point, the speaker informs the group that they are going to practice an activity. And this is usually the point -- if I were in that seminar -- where I would be exiting the room, because I hate those kinds of activities. [Congregants laugh]

But anyway, she gave each attendee a balloon. She told them to inflate the balloon, to tie it not at the bottom of the balloon, to write their name on it -- that's why I hate these things. [Congregants laugh] And then all the balloons were collected and moved into a smaller room.

And the participants were then instructed to go into that small room and to -- within two minutes -- find their own balloon.

And so, she released them, and it was utter chaos. People were searching frantically for their balloons. They were pushing each other; they were running into one another. And while they attempted to find their balloons, they grabbed balloons that looked like theirs and then would toss it away because they didn't have their name on it.

And at the end of the two minutes, no one in that whole group had found a balloon with their name on it. So, they all came back empty-handed.

And then the speaker told them to go back into the room and pick up one balloon at random, look at the name on it, and return it to the owner. And within minutes, everyone had been reunited with their own balloon.

And after that experience, the speaker told them the moral. She said, *"This is what it's like when people are frantically searching for their own happiness, and they forget about the collaborative aspect of living in community."*

The collaborative aspect of living in community: something we don't spend a lot of time thinking about. Because, generally, we are always thinking about, *"What's in this for me? How do I better my experience? I don't have time to think about the community experience."*

The Dalai Lama said if you want to be happy in life, you need to help others find theirs. And in 43 years almost now in this business, that's what I've spent my time doing. And I've loved every minute of it. Because it helps me to clean up the stuff in my own mind and to keep my mind fresh and open and receptive and willing. And that's a huge blessing!

Tidying up tidying up stuff is not just a physical phenomenon. It's the stuff of real life. And it's actually lived from within out. From within outward.

Don't believe me? Search the Scriptures. You'll find references throughout them that refer to going within; that refers to praying.

So, if you don't believe me, ask Mose Allison. You want to know who Moses Allison is? He's a musician from the South. He had some crazy types of music that are worth listening to, because he had a handle on what life truly means. That doesn't work? Sign up for Marie Kondo's series.

I don't know what else I can say about it. It's an amazing opportunity that we have been given with life. And if we can convince ourselves to spend every moment of remembering the value of it and forgetting about the challenges that we have to deal with, we'll be better people for it and we'll have a better world for it.

I know that's the truth because I've seen it happen over and over and over again. Over and over and over again, I've seen it happen. I've seen people at their depth of despair, and I've seen people at the epitome of happiness. And all of them require work from the individual. They require effort from the individual. They require willingness from the individual. They require believing it from the individual.

Tidying up the mind. It's an incredibly valuable process. Take it or leave it.

God bless.

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