



## Housework

Having cancer makes most people sick. Having terminal cancer drives some of us crazy. Suddenly everyone and everything look different. Or perhaps everything looks the same but, with the exit timer set on sooner rather than later, we start looking differently at who we are and how we spend our final days.

Take housework, for example. A few years ago before starting a first night of class, I asked 45 female students how many of them had gone ahead and read some or all of the course's required books. These were, to my way of thinking, irresistible reads — *So Long a Letter* from West Africa, *Women in Apple Trees* from Sweden, *Fasting, Feasting* from India, and *The Good Women of China*. An older woman in the back row spoke up, saying college students were too busy to do any extra reading and challenged me to explain where I would find the time for such indulgence. "I don't vacuum," I replied. My quick response had the desired effect. A collective release of student anxiety brought air back into the classroom and laughter filled the space between lectern and chairs.

But I've often wished I'd given those students the correct answer. It is not because I don't vacuum that I have time to read. It is because of my conscious decision to live without television, mall shopping and other avoidable distractions of modern day society that I have had 40 years of one of the greatest gifts of all: time to read and read again and then to read some more.

And that over these past 40 years I have also found time to vacuum.

When my two young sons were chasing lost Legos around the living room and shedding soccer socks on their way to the shower, I kept the carpets clean. While countless expected and unexpected house guests dragged their suitcases up and down the front staircase, I managed to wipe away household dust. Some days, in fact, there was nothing better than a freshly swept floor or polished Queen Anne table to reassure me that I could accomplish just about anything I'd put my mind to.

It is only now that I have stage IV lung cancer that I'm questioning the value of even the most basic housework. With death settling in on the back porch, I ask myself, "Is cleaning the kitchen a good use of my time? If today was the last day of my life, how would I feel knowing I'd spent it with a mop and dust rag?" And this is when the crazies get a foot in the door.

Since being diagnosed several months ago, I have done what I suspect many people in my circumstances would do. Every morning I wake up resolved to make the most of the day. I remind myself to make note of how the day's light changes on the melting snow outside the window. I open my arms ready to catch unexpected moments of joy. I repeat over and over again the Tao maxim to "Taste Every Grain of Rice" hoping I'll dazzle some whirling dervishes with the blaze of my heightened consciousness.

And every day without fail, my resolve gets hijacked. Some days I don't make it out of bed before lower levels of consciousness take over.

Several weeks ago, while still under the bedcovers, I caught sight of two cumbrous dust bunnies scurrying off across the bedroom floor. These dust balls had the look of fattened hyenas fleeing an ancient walled city in the morning light after a night of gorging themselves on cat hair, blanket lint, and other morsels of human neglect. As I headed out to brush my teeth, I realized what the cunning hyenas and dust bunnies have in common. They are both experts at finding their way through even the best laid plans for walling out the unwanted.

In fact, there isn't much inside this house that doesn't infiltrate my ambitions to spend every dying day in a state of elevated aliveness. One

minute I'm caught up in the coloring of a cardinal in the side yard, and ten minutes later I'm down in the basement cleaning out the cat's litter box. I enter the kitchen for a cup of lemon ginger tea, and the dirty dishes grab hold of me like avenging relatives. A diagnosis of terminal illness doesn't stop the broccoli at the back of the refrigerator from going bad, fix a broken pipe, or keep the city's recycling truck from coming every other Thursday. The most basic elements of daily life remain unaltered, even when a person's daily circumstances get radically rearranged.

Yesterday I climbed up on the utility ladder to replace the battery in the kitchen clock. But before I took the clock down off the wall, I caught myself wondering if maybe the clock might be the exception. What about the off chance that it wasn't sluggish alkaline but time itself making new allowances for my diagnosis? What if inside my house time, recognizing how little of it I had left, was actually out of sympathy slowing itself down more and more with each passing day?

"Chop wood, carry water" the early mystics advised their followers in their search for enlightenment. St. Francis of Assisi, when asked what he would do if he were told it was his last day on earth, looked down at the shovel in his hand and responded, "I'd continue to tend my garden." There is a part of us all that wants to believe that what ever we happen to do in a day is plenty good, even for our last day. That it is in the ordinary we can also find the extraordinary.

But there is also a part in many of us that can't let go of the search for a more exciting brand of extraordinary. Some of us are bred and raised for the quest of something extra, something that takes us far from home and farther yet out of our own daily routines. What, if not some distinctive measure of career or achievement or adventure, gives any of us the certainty that our lives have been well lived? And, once the late 1960s erased the breadbox message that housework is the key to every woman's fulfillment, when has doing housework made for good dinner table conversation?

Over the years I have gone far from home and had what some people

might call extraordinary adventures. I've ridden a low-slung makoro through the Okavango Delta, eaten rice and dhal in Gandhiji's get-away ashram in central India, shimmied down the Co-Chi tunnels outside Hanoi, ridden around Havana on a bicycle, seen Erro's art in Helsinki, and last August sat in Johannesburg's new Constitutional Court with others celebrating South Africa's National Women's Day. I've walked the medinas in Morocco and Tunisia, visited village weavers in Cambodia, entered religious sites of ancient Anatolia, and floated up the Mekong River between Laos and China waving to people panning for gold. And while some of my experiences might make a travel brochure, just as many would not. I've been bitten by a dogfish in Senegal, seen young boys shot at in Gaza City, and kept close track of the refugee leader's feet while walking from Malawi into Mozambique on a road turned into Swiss cheese by exploded land mines.

"Are you planning on doing any more traveling?" people often ask when hearing that I am sick. At least once a year since 1990 with few exceptions I have packed my Eagle Creek Traveler and headed thousands of miles and multiple time zones away from the ordinariness of dish soap, dust rags, and recycling bins. And no doubt more than a few have been surprised by my answer. "No," I say, "I'm planning to stay home and dust the piano."

Today, in fact, I dusted the piano as I have never dusted it before. As I slowly rubbed down its rich reddish brown curved mahogany cabinet, I remembered what a mess this odd sized baby grand had been when the piano movers brought it into the house six years ago. The outside had endured years of abuse, and the innards were nothing short of a disaster: keys stuck, felts worn down to the wood, hammers and knuckles leaning into one another like upended planks on a battered ship. But a local piano repair man needing quick cash to pay his January heating bill, and my persistence that he return again and again until he finished the job he started, salvaged the instrument. And the 1920s piano was better than salvaged. Over time it remembered how to sing in just the right voice and grew forgiving of my fumbled Scarlatti, McDowell, and Debussy.

Going on to clean the rest of the house, I grew more and more aware of just how the ordinary can become extraordinary. After years of use the Queen Anne table has become an altar where meals get offered to family and friends. Wingback chairs are thrones from which my sons and I pass along ancient and newly found stories. The desks and drawing table serve as lightning rods for ideas and images pulled down from mystical spaces. The wrap-around floor-to-ceiling oak bookshelves are polished passageways leading to tomes of old and new wisdom, compassion, and revelation. Dusting history, literature, memoir, and art stitched and glued to spines reminded me of how I can never get enough of the written word while living, and how dreadfully much I will miss it when I am gone.

I am finding that I don't need to go anywhere beyond these walls to live my remaining days well. Pictures of grandchildren, boxed up letters, my sons' favorite childhood books, Zambian baskets, and my grandmother's old Irish tea pot are all here still needing to be dusted. Each and every day within these walls I grow more satisfied in the search for life's balance between extraordinary moments and diving into the ordinariness of everyday living. Like the robin arriving back in my yard, I can get a good view of the garden by opening my wings and flying to the top of the nearby maple tree. But as soon as I start thinking about worms, I can hurry back down to dig my claws deep into the dirt between the snow crocuses and daffodils.

There could be worse things to be doing with one's last days than housework. In fact, dusting and mopping might just be among the saner activities I've done since learning I have cancer. And, it is even possible that having the Martha Washington sewing cabinet and the old pine pie chest well dusted will provide some extraordinary comfort in the days ahead.