

Sweeping as a Meditation on Letting Go

By Rhonda Ashurst

Swish, swish, swish--the broom slides over the concrete floor, sweeping the dirt forward. Clack, swish--the dust pan falls into place and the broom pushes the debris inside. These were the sounds and motions of my work in the last job of my career. It occurs to me now that it was a deep meditation on letting go. During the months I worked maintenance at a storage facility, I wasn't just sweeping dirt out of the units, I was sweeping ash out of my heart and dark memories out of my mind.

I found the job during a desperate time following a divorce, a whirlwind courtship, another marriage, another divorce, a 1,000-mile move back to my hometown to be closer to my aging parents, which meant the loss of a life I had loved and separation from dear friends. I was starting over in my mid-40's. I felt crushed by the events of the previous two years. When I looked in the mirror, I scarcely recognized the face I saw there. I needed income to survive, but I was so exhausted and beat down, I couldn't imagine working in my fields of expertise. I had a B.S. in business management and a M.S. in counseling. During my career I had worked as a computing consultant, psychotherapist, life coach, gym owner, partner in an apartment/storage unit complex, and a fix-and-flip real estate investor. I needed a job I could handle, and the truth was, I couldn't handle what I had once been able to do.

I signed up on Monster.com and started looking at the ads. I remember the ad for the storage facility job coming up and immediately piquing my interest. It was part-time and the pay was decent for a manual labor job with some administrative/office work. My first job had been with a contractor who owned storage units and I had done the bookkeeping for him when I was sixteen. Then, in my 30's, I had been a co-owner of storage units. I look back now and it amuses me that the one constant theme from beginning, to middle, to the end of my working career has been storage units. It strikes me as ironic, given my education and experience, and the fact that I've had a lifelong passion for getting rid of things and keeping very few possessions.

I hadn't worked for an employer in fourteen years and I recall wondering if anyone would hire me, particularly for the kind of low level job I felt capable of doing at the time. To my surprise, I heard back a mere twenty-four hours after responding to the ad. After two interviews, I was hired. I remember being uncertain about what exactly I would be doing. When I learned that most of my time would be spent cleaning and sweeping the units, I was relieved. Here was something I could manage.

Looking back now, I can see that the rhythm of the broom and the dust pan became a mirror of my interior experience. I had days when I was filled with rage and the broom was my implement of ultimate destruction. I stabbed viciously at the walls of the units, sending showers of dirt to the floor. SWISHHH!!! I slammed it down on the floor and pushed so hard that I was continually swallowed in a cloud of dust. I had long arguments in my head with my exes over our brutal endings. I swore I would never love

again. I raged at God over my situation. I raged at myself over my stupidity. I had days when I felt my heart was breaking and I couldn't hold back the tears. They streamed down my face, mixing with the grime and leaving dark trails on my cheeks. I learned to carry a rag and a water bottle so I could clean up before returning to the office. I had days when there was an eerie peace. Breathe in-swish, breathe out-swish. It will all be ok, just breathe and sweep and trust. And I had days when I experienced all these things.

I remember watching myself and wondering if I would ever be ok again. I reminded myself that I was grieving and recovering from emotional trauma and all of what I was experiencing was normal. But I didn't feel normal and that worried me. The sweeping became my meditation--my touchstone. It grounded and centered me, helped me let go of all the pain inside. In time the rage subsided and the tears slowed. The peace grew like a multi-colored ball in the center of my chest. The arguments in my head faded.

I slowly began to remember the good times in my old life and with my old loves. I caught myself occasionally smiling or even laughing. I started to send my exes blessings for their own healing--"I forgive you. I forgive myself. May we move on now in peace and happiness." Breathe in-swish, breathe out-swish.

Then, one day, an old friend and kindred spirit reconnected with me. I realized I'd never fully seen him before. I had always been married to someone else. I remember gazing into his blue eyes and feeling something new stir in my heart. I was afraid. What if he didn't feel the same? And I am clearly so bad at relationships, perhaps I should just cover myself and stay off love's threshing floor. He later shared his own hesitations: Will she want me? What if it doesn't work out and we lose a 25-year friendship? But something deep within both of us could not let it go. One day he reached over and kissed me, and I kissed him back.

My heart opened again, reaching for the rays of sun I saw reflecting in his eyes. I decided to try again, to step back onto the threshing floor and see what happened. I'm happy I made that choice. Now I think there was a Divine Hand in my return home--to him, to my parents, to old friends. Sometimes an old way of being must be shattered and swept away for us to find new life, new ways of being and relating.

I also realized that in my sweeping, I rediscovered my Self underneath the debris of false ideas and expectations I had gathered in the first half of my life. I found my core values of simplicity, humility, service, following my heart, forgiving, loving no matter what. I learned what is most important to me in relationships. And I remembered that even in my darkest moments, angels are there and light is around the corner.

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