



turning potential into performance

Garbage and Composting: Lessons in Living ©

Chris L. Johnson, PsyD.

I live on an alley. Every Thursday at 5:30 a.m. a grimy garbage truck, louder than any dump truck I've heard, sits outside my bedroom window, waking me as its driver goes through the motions of picking up waste from the condos next door. Typically, I awaken to this racket with a bit of rancor; I had been having pleasant dreams, you see. However, one morning I stayed with my annoyance at being awakened so early, and as I did so I thought about the trash. I remembered a child's song I had learned years ago entitled, "I love trash." As the words circled their way around my memory, I became curious about trash. Really, what makes trash, trash, anyway?

Entropy describes the process of breakdown, of increasing disorder and dissipation of energy. All things it seems--our bodies, our organizations, our stuff -- wear out. Things change. My thoughts lingered on 'dust to- dust.' A visual image of my compost heap came into view along with notions of the 'heat' it creates, the nourishment it then provides to the garden.

Remains, residue, refuse, rotten, ragged, rusty--all these words came rushing to my mind followed by dirty, dingy, dusty, and damp. These words juxtaposed curiously with 'dumpster diving stories' from college, when co-eds thrashed around looking for treasure in the big brown bins. Today's trash was likely useable or beautiful or practical yesterday.

I remembered an article about the terrific job Germany is doing in developing sustainability initiatives; one includes responsibly following one's trash around. For example, take a toaster. The manufacturing company creating it must follow it through its life-cycle. As it breaks down, the company must repair or recycle it, not merely 'trash' it. This initiative serves the greater good of this land-locked country, a move that will allow sustenance into the future. It requires, however, looking straight away at the trash, naming it, thinking differently about the 'life' of a toaster, re-creating something new. Physicists call this 'negentropy', or the movement toward choices of greater complexity. As humans we are blessed with the capacity to choose; these choices can also lead to growth. The fallback option, of course, is entropy. So, what's the choice?

In terms of learning and living, well, don't we all have a little trash in our lives? Each new stage of learning includes bits of trash--old habits, rigid ideas, ways of being that promote stasis. These bits require a de-cluttering before something new can emerge. What is the trash in your life? What sustainability initiative would be beneficial in your life, the life of your family or company? Akin to Jung's shadow, can you embrace your trash? Or, does that idea repulse you? What does trash have to teach you? In a culture obsessed with having the new, the super-clean, the best, the idea of meditating on trash may not appeal, yet not to do so ensures that we actually trash ourselves and possibly our planet.