

THE HINDU

Online edition of India's National Newspaper
Friday, March 02, 2001

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Open Life: Uncluttering our lives

NED HAMSON,

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We all had the same type of "stress" high tech IT jobs, but in a world of chaos, Roger lived and breathed calm. He was a pale signature on a white chalk painting on the white wall. Minimalism at its best.

While most of us choose or accept a life full of super highway metaphors, Roger seemed to live like a brook winding its way through a high mountain meadow. We all worked within the super highway mainstream, but he always appeared as if it were an easy drive on a backcountry road.

One day, he invited us to tea at his place. At last, we thought we would learn his secret. I knew his living quarters would be a reflection of him, for above all, he valued consistency. But, Janice was not prepared for the level of simplicity that greeted her - an open room of bare wooden floors buffed to a soft gleam. Well, that's about all I noticed either - the emptiness and the white walls. While small in size, the room felt spacious. A small wooden chest draped with a simple blue cloth next to a square pillow served as table for both dining and working. It held fresh flowers in a small vase. A Japanese calligraphy brightened one wall. He offered each of us some tea. Compared to the life outside on the street, Roger's third floor loft was like stepping into a classic silent film. After we reluctantly left to return to the speedway world, the stillness of those rooms stayed with us most of the day.



Later I called Janice and asked her what she was thinking about after visiting Roger and his simple life. Janice said: "For the first time in my life, I knew that what I wanted more of was nothing. It was time to purge. I have all the telltale signs. Bulging closets, junk drawers that kept multiplying, half finished projects, lost items. No space.

When I had lived like Roger it was by accident, not by choice. When I moved overseas, my "precious" belongings toured the Pacific Ocean for months while I waited and waited for their arrival. At first, I couldn't imagine how I would do without them. Especially my clothes. But I found over time that fewer choices of what to wear in the morning actually felt freer and better. When my things finally arrived I was once again overwhelmed by their demands. Once again, things controlled me: repair me, file me, insure me, replace my battery, take me to the cleaners. Arrrrgh!

Gale Blanke, author of "In My Wildest Dreams - Living the Life You Long - For," says it is the old stuff you hold on to that keeps you from new possibilities or opportunities. She calls these your incompletions. She recommends to start making your life simpler by throwing out 50 items in one day! No, not 50 old magazines or 50 plastic food containers. Well, I did that this evening."

"How did it go," I asked.

"I learned getting rid of "stuff" is not easy to do; I can justify keeping anything. But, the more I tossed, the freer I felt. I am attached to ideas, so it is hard to give up old books; as if by holding onto them, I will somehow possess all their knowledge they contain. I tossed a closet full of half-finished projects. Moved on and released the distractions. But I did keep a few things that just would not let me give or throw them away."

"Well, Janice, I did pretty much the same thing, but found it too hard to get rid of all the books and even some papers I wrote in college. But I do feel less cluttered."

Back at work fresh from this weekend of purging, we greeted Roger and proudly told him how each of us had uncluttered our lives with his good example. Roger smiled one of his slow smiles and said: "I know what you mean," he said. "I've been feeling that I need to unclutter myself too." I was glad he couldn't see Janice's jaw dropping in disbelief that Roger had anything to get uncluttered about. She looked at me and behind her hand silently said: "What clutter could he possibly have to release?"

Roger paused. "Yes, I've been holding on to some old hurts, resentments and far too many regrets." "Oh?" Janice said. As we walked back to our respective cubicles I distinctly think I could smell the faint but sweet aroma of freshly brewed tea in air. Janice was saying: "Hmmm, clutter... simplicity... opinions and thoughts, not just things?"

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