

Self-Mapping : Old routes and New paths

Written by Lynn Cornberg

We make ourselves each step, each choice, each breath and each death along our living, loving way. We create ourselves following old recognized routes handed down through our genes, our ancestor's home country, our mom's recipes, our dad's advice, our brother's model and our sister's voice. Traveling familiar roads and well-trodden trails prepare us to innovate new directions as long as we don't flatten our capacity for originality under layers and layers of dirt, gravel and asphalt. Routine ways and imaginative new steps are important and magical.

We always have help along the way when for some reason we shift our awareness and attention and discover the beauty of crunching underfoot through a new layer of snow on the same old sidewalk, a new flower growing out of the old concrete crack or iron drain. Looking in a new way along an old route is sometimes what we call the best of both worlds-the everyday and the extra-ordinary. Doing something different makes a difference. Simple stuff always there to be done may be the very stuff needed to blow new wind into our sails. The stuffing and the breathing become a miraculous dancing away of a bad feeling, a dark mood or even a diagnosable disorder or medical condition. Stuff is no longer just stuff and we notice we are stuff and breath-a good creative combination of tap shoe and oxygen flow. For some reason, the dancing happens and we move beyond being a lump of stuck stuff.

Franklin Jones, later famously know as Da Free John or Master Da, went to see a kundalini teacher in New York City in the 1960s. After several sessions Franklin became frustrated with lack of progress and decided to approach Rudy his teacher directly. And Rudy told him just one thing: "Take out the trash." I love this guru story because of the truth of what is important and can make a small difference in our lives when we are doing that difference...a big difference if you've been putting off the stinkin' trash.

I experienced many ups and downs through my adjustments to life in Taipei after leaving my home in Alaska. In the first six months, I remember the ups were way up and always seemed coupled with long lows. At some point in the lows, depressed and missing family and friends and seeing no way out of my

mood-funk-rut, I would discover all over again the miracle of sweeping, mopping and dusting. As I cleaned our apartment, I became more aware of the floor tiles, the stereo dials, the red marble egg and my little ceramic blue bird of happiness. These simple things I had forgotten and passed over since my last therapeutic dusting touch of them. Breathing in the newly refreshed living space and feeling like I was in mild, comfortable trance, I'd keep going with the rhythm to find I had even more energy to shop and cook.

Out the door I'd fly on my broom/mop stick to the Welcome grocery store or to my wet market friends-the fish couple, the chicken man and woman, the pig people or the sell-veggie folks. Back home, standing over the sink washing dirt off fresh vegetables or slime off fish, my face would take on a curious position I only notice when I'm in the kitchen cooking. It's a half smile of some sort. Muscles in my face pull into position when I am there. I know now this face is peculiar to this situation and releases different kinds of thoughts/neurotransmitters than when my face is in a different situation. This face is good and happens like softening butter. It's a subtle look and no one but a face expert would name the muscles in use. I can't make it intentionally and I just enjoy the moment I become aware that my face is doing it. I feel that it is my face of flourishing, like that of a green plant's face when it is growing well.

Sometimes I unexpectedly discover this face while peeling a carrot or stirring the chopped onions.

As a counseling psychologist I am learning again at a conscious level what a helpful difference simple cleaning and cooking makes in client's life. For example, I have asked clients, who worry about their lifelessness, the following kind of question: "When you're not lifeless, what are you doing?" I assume that when a client complains or describes a problem that there are times in their life when the problem is not happening. I want to know and want to talk about the times when the something else is happening. What I have discovered from client is a response akin to teacher Rudy's reply to Franklin Jones. Clients tell me that when they are not lifeless they are chasing dustballs like cats, cleaning their kitchen and not minding the rat hole they found under the kitchen sink, shopping for fruit, and taking out the trash to the happy tune of Gertrude and Elizabeth. Coming out of the house and being with others who are throwing out their trash is one of those free-better-than-paid-for counseling session! I am thankful for the clients who remind me of the simple ways of doing something

that makes a real difference.

The loss of routine—whether a 4-day weekend, the ending of a quarter or session, a typhoon closure or a long winter holiday—may exacerbate stress levels, create confusion and increase anxiety beyond our expectations. When we moved to Taiwan, my husband worked all day long most days and I chose to stay at home with our daughter and to be the primary house spouse. Sometimes a weekend having my husband in the house was a major transition—enough to erupt at times into confusing complaints and conflicts.

Many of us discover that when routines are broken or ignored, we become more reactive to others. Our flow of order changes and things feel shaken not well stirred. I have always admired how spouses of spouses who travel routinely for weeks at a time learn to cope, remain flexible, and shift roles to be with each other again.

The other side of flowing along the healthy edge of routine activity is the dulling of our senses, the cutting off of fun energy we get from following our whims, giving into our impulses, or chasing a wild hair. The lively energizing dance of routine and spontaneous activity is possible moving to the tune of both/and thinking and doing rather than either/or moves. That is, when we are doing both the routine and the spontaneous, our gut, mind and imagination empower us to flourish, to grow well.

The tricky part of living both routine and wild hair involves doing something a little different if routine situations are something or wild hairs become unmanageable. Letting the dustballs be and going for a hair wash/blow dry may make the surprising difference at the right time. Likewise, blowing off the manicure to tackle the ironing may warm and smooth your troubles.

Old routes in the mapping of self help soothe and moves us in familiarity with an ease of way. New paths peak our interest, attention and awareness and we find surprising challenges and new ways of becoming. We find comfort in one and stimulation in the other. Either/or thinking lacks the empowerment found in both/and becoming. We need BOTH the comfort and contentment of familiar routes, relationships, skills and habits AND we need new bushwhacking, trailblazing and fronting ways.