Off mic with Phil Smith: ordem e progresso

Have you tried decluttering? It's very therapeutic. Most of you go for well-ordered neatness in the booth. The water glass and pens are in perfect alignment and all documents labelled and tidy. I’m sure you’re all smiling in happy recognition of our work environment.

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Well, chez Smith things have been allowed to slide. Usually off piles of paper. When did the rot set in? Or begin to slide, for that matter? I like to think of myself as a basically neat and tidy person but have recently been forced to the sad conclusion that I’m a slob. Not a slob in the layabout, ne’er-do-well meaning, but certainly someone whose sense of order has been knocked off its axis. The revelation comes as a shock to my sensitive and overwrought system.

Now of course I have to find someone or something to blame, which as many of you know is part of the male psyche, like worshipping cars and an inability to put the milk back in the fridge. But think about it and you’ll realise I’m onto something. You are a busy, important and generally harassed cog in the wheels of international relations; you arrive home wilting from the conference on either the financial crisis or climate change and go through your routine: unpack into the washing machine, empty your pockets of coins, tickets, notes, diaries, and sort through your briefcase to remove conference documents and intercontinental moisturizers. I’m told the women have a similar routine.

Most of us arrive home with lists of new words and another 200 baffling acronyms, and it all has to be written up on the computer. In a nutshell, the arrival - the homecoming - of the busy interpreter is a delicate docking operation that has become tiresome since we all stopped having servants or mothers to clear up after us. But time’s wingèd limo is not on our side. When at home you have to devote yourself to shopping, cleaning, ironing and seeing friends. It might also be an idea to spend some time with the children to keep the sarcasm within internationally acceptable limits. And of course you are leaving again on Sunday so simply don’t have time to sort through the documents and mementoes you brought home on Friday. And just think of how many Fridays and Sundays there are in the year and how close together they are. Can you see a pattern emerging?

Our house always seems to contain a lot of children, some of them probably mine, and the little treasures produce clutter. Without any serious archaeological training you can find prams and pushchairs, clothes and toys, and even now they are grown up the residue simply shifts to another room. All homes have a place where stuff is dumped, and I fought a losing battle for years to stop it being my office. Well, okay office is a bit overblown for what it really is, but for all its faults the room served as the nerve centre of the global Smith operation for several years. Later much of the detritus was placed in the attic, a large room we filled with rubbish and forgot about. But things come back to haunt you, or more accurately to daunt you. The attic had to be cleared but its Stygian gloom revealed black plastic bags full of clothes, boxes full of books, old suitcases, a moth-eaten...
Christmas tree and rolls of carpet. And possibly a long lost maiden aunt.

Why do we have all this stuff? It’s all part of the “it might come in handy one day” philosophy, an inherited trait. My father has a private stash of radio valves, bamboo sticks and old hacksaw blades and resists my mother’s futile attempts to throw anything away. So the DNA’s to blame too.

The attic is floored in chip board and has a good strong ladder. In my youth I’d swing up there with all the insouciance of a Russian gymnast, but now I check I’m wearing the right shoes and regulation protective headgear before heading into the roof space. The room itself is a kind of palimpsest of our lives, although the analogy only works in part because nothing is erased. There are baby clothes covered by children’s clothes, and they are in turn covered by a sledge and old school uniforms. As I mentioned, most of the stuff is in black plastic bags which adds to the mystery but slows the operation because you have to open every one, and so begins a trip into the past, memories are triggered and you go off into a kind of day dream, until one of the children says, “You’re supposed to be helping”, and you try to explain this is the dress you were wearing the first day you ate ice cream. This old stuff exerts a pull, awakening buried memories of days out in the park, grazed knees and long-forgotten holidays. And there you sit, surrounded by your past, eyes damp and gritty.

You can’t throw away books, can you? Old newsreels of mobs burning them come to mind, so they go to a new, caring home or the local charity shop. Books in foreign languages are not easy to give away in my stolidly monolingual homeland, but local schools and universities are often happy to get them, so long as they haven’t closed all the language departments.

I’ve recently moved to Geneva so decluttering has taken on greater urgency. Where do you start? My policy until recently has been prevarication, but it doesn’t help because there is that little voice drilling into some synapse telling me to get on with it. And a hulking 6-foot son saying the same in more colourful language and a deeper voice.

So here is the plan: don’t plan. Just get on with it.

Of course you have to work up to such a job, like a top athlete preparing for a sporting event, or an assiduous English booth interpreter preparing for a meeting on work-induced exhaustion. The practice run was my small flat (well bedsit) in Munich. Taking a long hard look at the place I realised it was a complete tip so decided to act. The haul included old cold remedies that were past their shelf life in the late 1980s, faxes (remember them), dial phones, a conked out microwave and a vacuum cleaner from the Weimar Republic. There were newspapers carrying dreadful news about the Titanic. And lots of little bottles that have led me to conclude that I am a vain hypochondriac. But please, it’s our little secret. So I had a pile of stuff to chuck out but this was Germany where you have to do things by the book. The people at the Recycling Centre could pick stuff up but it would take 6 weeks, so I simply hopped into a taxi with all the rubbish and ten minutes later it was all gone.

I felt lighter. The dry run was a success.

The acid test was always going to be the family home back in the old country, our stately pile in Warwickshire. Well, a two-up two-down in Birmingham really but I have to keep up appearances.

But by now I had the bit between my teeth and in two days cleared the attic, gave away five boxes of books to a good home, sorted out my kitchen, cleared a bedroom and filled two big skips with rubbish. It is wonderful, I feel as if I could float away with the ineffable unclutteredness of being.

So next time we work together and I am sloppy with the documents or stray into your half of the booth or leave an empty coffee cup on a lay line, just remind me of my own words, or place a copy of this confession under my nose. Decluttering is good for the soul.
Phil Smith is a freelance interpreter who recently moved – unencumbered – to Geneva.

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