Sorting things out

We interpreters tend to keep a lot of papers and jottings, just in case, but sometimes it feels good to sort and throw things out.

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I’ve decided to devote every morning to sorting through stuff that I’ve collected over the years. Just threw out three large bagfuls of papers, brochures, and various documents which I had thought might be useful someday.

However, I just can’t bring myself to throw away the very old handwritten glossaries from the pre-laptop days when I didn't bother to type them - simply didn't have time with small children to care for or they dealt with one-off subjects so varied in nature that I can’t classify them in any way other than ‘miscellaneous’. Who knows, I might just get a second meeting on cork trees, water filters or cross-stitching! It seems to me that if I were offered such a meeting I would remember that I have a glossary somewhere - in that big loose-leaf binder called ‘miscellaneous’.

My first computerized glossary was entitled NUKE (mid-80s) and I have kept the somewhat faded paper version which astonished many a colleague at the time. All the recurrent, recent subjects have been duly typed into the computer BUT I still like paper glossaries, so I print them and file them in a small binder by organization or company along with other useful information, my 'fact sheets', often shared with newcomer colleagues. Periodically I update the glossaries, but if I don't have time all the bits of paper are in the binder so all I have to do is find the right one and off I go.

I came across those cute little books with the European Declaration of Human Rights (several copies for some reason), which I disposed of - it’s all on the Internet these days anyway. But I couldn't quite part with the UN Charter in both English and French, those small printed versions. Of course since they are stored away in the cupboard they wouldn't be at hand when I needed them, but those little books are like the Bible - doesn't seem right to toss them in the garbage.

One of these mornings, after going through the other cupboard which I haven't touched since my move in 2003 (extreme heat at the time and I just stuffed things up on high and thought I would get to them some other time when the weather was more favorable - well here we are!), I will take a serious look at the bookshelves with dictionaries, most of which I haven't touched in years. They are testimony to another era when interpreters lugged heavy specialized dictionaries to conferences instead of PCs or tablets and often arranged with colleagues who would bring which one due to limited space in the booth and excessive weight. But I’ve done this before and each time I start leafing through this dictionary or that glossary, I say to myself, “Who knows, I might just need it in the near future”. Besides, they also call to mind subject areas, conferences, colleagues that I enjoyed or others I suffered with (the subjects, I mean...)!

I’ve concluded that it is far more difficult to separate oneself from glossaries and dictionaries than it
is to divorce. All these bits of knowledge collected over the years have contributed to who I am - far more than any man in my life! You can always sing that wonderful song 'I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair' from South Pacific, or better yet, 'Non rien de rien... non, je ne regrette rien' (the handwritten lyrics of which I found in my cupboard...), but there is no song that can make me want to forget all those words and ideas extracted from so many hours of conference interpreting.

By the way I also came upon 3 pages of handwritten notes on the Bertrand Blier film 'Merci la vie'. I actually whispered the translation of the dialogue to an American distributor at a private showing. I dare not give you a sample of the type of vocabulary because if I do this article is bound to be censored! I was given the script in the taxi on the way, and as I skimmed through it, I jotted down all the dirty words I could think of referring to body parts and sexual contact... I think it is time to type that one up - if only for fun! (Some of those words came up in a recent translation of instant messaging conversations.) Luckily for me the distributor was a woman, which made my whispering in the darkened movie theatre less intimidating. I remember the meeting afterwards with Blier as if it were yesterday. Pleased that the distributor enjoyed the showing, he said to me: “You’re somewhat of an actress perhaps”, and I said, “No, I’m an interpreter”. Of course the French word ‘interprète’ refers both to our profession and to all kinds of performing artists!

Enough milling over the past - must finish my sorting before the nice weather returns.

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