When it Rains Maggots

This week, a virus infected my computer and something fell down our chimney and started to rot in the summer heat. On the first floor of our home, maggots began to rain on our hearth and clink on the fireplace grate. Meanwhile, in my office cupola up on the top of our house, a virus called “identity stealer” worked its way through my computer, sending “screen shots” of whatever I might be viewing (including my passwords) back to its author in some foreign land. As the smell of road kill infused our first floor living room and the virus ravaged my computer files on the top of our home, I found myself getting pretty testy, as a bizarre kind of top-down and bottom-up home invasion worked its way through my life.

It seemed like a good time to consider moving beyond where I usually stop.

My initial way of dealing with this confluence of nasties was to withdraw. I shut off my infected computer and switched to a healthy laptop. I reasoned that the smell in our home must be a dead mouse Simon the cat left in the bushes under a window, which I would find while doing yard-work. In that moment, the logic seemed sound... deal with priorities first and virus and odor later.

As the smell of road-kill began to permeate our kitchen, each reboot of my computer flashed new messages from my antivirus software suggesting that my motherboard was starting to rot as well. I set up shop at maximum range of the cordless phone, out in the bushes adjacent to our property line. From this vantage point, I could finally see the victim I had become.

Victims cling to events from the past such that they are paralyzed in the present. Even those of us who haven’t been victimized by serious trauma can still cling to a righteous sense that something wrong has been done to us. Investment in this perspective limits freedom and closes-down our lives. That’s why it’s so important to know when we are gravitating toward victim status... our vitality depends on it!

As a victim, I had completely surrendered my power. I noticed that I had totally stopped... the maggots were still falling and more and more of my passwords were being transmitted. It looked like I had lots of power as I worked around my problems, but my apparent resourcefulness was nothing more than a covert operation to avoid focusing on what really needed to be done. Being stopped can look very active indeed.

Excessively busy behavior is perhaps the best marker of a stuck human. It’s much easier to stay in motion than to deal with the smell. For some of us, we’ve been in perpetual motion for so long that we’ve forgotten what got us on the treadmill in the first place. Only by being still can we get in touch with what initially caused us to react. Sometimes “moving beyond” first requires stopping, and only from the lawn chair could I see the familiar pattern I was practicing. I had learned resourcefulness
at an early age to compensate for whatever I thought I wasn’t getting as a child. And now on autopilot, I was using my resourcefulness to actually avoid what I needed to do.

Armed with this insight, I went after what really mattered and I attacked my computer mouse with a vengeance. A few minutes with Google revealed an easy way to delete the root file that was infecting and spreading my virus. I deleted the file that the virus designer had ensured my anti-virus software would not remove. Focused action on my part had resolved one of my challenges. Now I was ready to tackle the reindeer that had fallen down my chimney.

Rather than rolling up my sleeves and heading to the dark fireplace, I’ll admit that I first made a few calls to chimney sweeps, to see if they would fix this for me. At first, I was not completely forthcoming:

“How much to sweep a chimney?”

“$150.”

“Does that include sweeping out a dead animal?”

I liked the first guy, who said there was no price difference but he wasn’t available for a few days. I couldn’t wait. The next vendor listed in the yellow pages charged $375 and spoke of hazmat suits and autoclave sterilized tools. It sounded like he thought a bear had fallen down the chimney and I’d have to pay to sanitize everything including the helicopter required to pull it out.

Many specialists are not overly forthcoming about their craft. For example, most lawyers will not describe on the phone how to create your own last will, and few car mechanics will tell you how to change your timing belt. But I was fascinated to learn that chimney sweeps will gladly tell you how to remove a dead animal from your fireplace flue, because they would much rather have YOU do it.

Throughout the process of calling chimney service providers, I also found it remarkable to watch how easy it was to be seduced (once again) into imagining the biggest and the worst was hiding beyond where I could see. No one had any idea what was actually in my chimney. But most of the sweeps did an artful job of making me very, very concerned. Managing the chimney was starting to seem easy. This victim thing was looking like it could be quite a challenge.

What do you do when things go awry? I had a $20,000 contract fall-through recently. I was really upset about this loss. To process, first, I went for a bike ride. Then I launched a full scale raid on the snack cabinet and began two-fisting chili-lime cashews. Before I finished the entire 3000 calorie bag, I realized that once again, I could feel like the victim or instead focus my actions in accordance with my bigger
commitments. So I returned to the phone and computer to work on two new $20,000 ventures. It’s not easy to put down the food. But in the realization of our own victim status, we at least have a fighting chance to get into meaningful action once again. A slow deep breath is a tool we always carry to help us get present to the truth.

Things WILL go awry. We all need some time to process the feelings that arise when stuff happens. How many cashews do you eat before you get back into appropriate action?

And back in our stinky living room, action is exactly what I got back into. I called my beloved Leslie, and sheepishly explained to her that since she had birthed babies, she was uniquely qualified to don the rubber gloves and do the deed. I would stand by... and hold the trouble light.

When she hung up on me, I put on my orange chain saw helmet and removed the fireplace flue plate, which allowed a small former squirrel to fall into a (plastic-lined) bucket I had at the ready in the fireplace. I vacuumed-up the maggots. End of incident.

Next time a squirrel, friend, co-worker or family member “does something to you,” notice if you are using the experience to build evidence in the courtroom of your mind. If, for example, you find yourself thinking “this always happens to me,” then chances are good the victim is being nourished and your power is fading. A healthy goal is to respond to each relationship challenge with clear communication and/or action before festering issues accumulate and justify any predisposition to adopt victim status. Everyday relationships are a wonderful practice ground for us would-be victims. Just remember, it’s always best to take appropriate action when you first notice a smell.

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