The bin-man cometh

Pointers towards a spirituality of rubbish

Dermot Preston

A FAIRLY GOOD WAY OF TRYING TO CATCH a glimpse of the things that shape and give dynamism to a person's life could be to browse through their bookshelf. It can act as a little window into the soul. For example, 'Oh, I never knew you could read Karl Marx in German!' or 'Gosh – you have *so* many books on mid-life crisis /Asterix the Gaul / Afghan cooking . . .' or even, 'I found this copy of *Playboy* stuffed behind the encyclopaedia – should I put it back . . .?' If a person's bookshelf is so revealing, rooting through their *dustbin* could highlight a different truth. Perhaps it could give us a more important insight?

It was 24 December 1977. I was driving for a bakery in my home town of Burnley during my winter vacation from university. Christmas Eve was always the busiest day of the year and both factory and drivers were working flat-out to supply the shops. We had worked hard all night, but my last delivery was too late in the day and the shop refused to accept the load, so I had to take it back to the bakery – which was now empty, except for the unpredictable manager who was waiting to lock up. He didn't want the bread and cakes to stand and fester over the Christmas break, so in a move of rare cavalier generosity (spurred no doubt by the impatience of a man who wanted to go home to put his feet up), he grandly instructed me to go out around the town and 'give the stuff away to worthy causes'.

This, I found, was easier said than done. Despite the fact that the goods I carried were quality stuff, you wouldn't believe how difficult it was. I remember, for example, the helpers at one old-age home where I called, becoming really choosy about a particular loaf – 'Oh, they would *never* eat that!' – and all I wanted to do was to give them whole trays of cakes and move on. '*Take it, just take it!! Give it to your family and friends! Enjoy!!!*' But no: I'm afraid it was par for the course that day. In theory this was winning the lottery, but in practice there was an inertia, a suspicion and a remarkable lack of interest all round. As the darkness fell at the end of a long and frustrating afternoon, my mother and her freezer eventually stepped in. The Preston clan of Burnley were eating teacakes and mince pies till Easter.

It was probably the first time that I had so vividly been made aware of waste on such a scale. For once I had been given a certain god-like power – these things were momentarily *my* responsibility to waste or save. What horrified me was the nonchalance with which nearly everybody reacted: because of their own concerns, they didn't really give a damn. Such giftedness ignored! There was I, giving the stuff away. What was interesting also was the fact that the words 'thank you' seldom cast a shadow over the lips of the potential recipients. All the time and effort, all the energy and the creativity that had gone into the making of this truck-full of cakes and bread was on the verge of being junked. Waste became for me more than just an ecological statistic – it was personal.

In the words of a song by Gilbert O'Sullivan:

> When I'm drinking my Bonaparte brandy,
> eating more than enough apple pies,
> and I glance at my screen and see real human beings
> starve to death right in front of my eyes.

Waste is an issue that has implications for life and death, so it is a fitting topic for spirituality. So, let us reflect a little about rubbish.

The value of waste

What things do we discard? At first it may seem obvious. If we were to examine the house dustbin, the empty cans and packets would certainly indicate quite a bit about our practised lifestyle and our eating habits. But it is not just bins that are part of the process of life. The sewerage system carries away our waste also; so does the open door to let in fresh air and to let out the stench of burnt toast. The exit roads are many! As human beings we live at the confluence of flow and the movement of many of the world's resources; through our various orifices and organs we absorb the things we require: they flow into us (food, air, water – even sights and sounds), we process them and absorb them. Those things we don't like or think we don't require, we try to wash, breathe, ignore or throw away.

Value and waste are intimately bound together. They tell us what we really treasure and what we really disdain. The ways we assign and treat our junk can point to some of our more hidden, sub-conscious values. This can concern values on a personal level – do I always eat everything that is put in front of me? Do I install double glazing and lag the

roof to cut down heat loss in my house? Do I throw away perfectly good clothes because I wore them once and someone happened to be wearing the same design? Do I trade in the Rolls-Royce because the ashtrays are full? All these attitudes place us at different points in a wide spectrum of responses and manifest different attitudes to waste. Away from the strictly personal, wider society also has values (conscious and unconscious), and it expresses its values through its attitudes to waste. So how, for example, does a community treat (a) its junk plastic? (b) its rain water? (c) its old-and-infirm? and (d) its aborted foetuses?

But can 'waste' be so easily defined?

Rubbish resources

In the Philippines there are entire communities that have made their homes in the rubbish tips of Manila. In recent years, high unemployment and low wages in Argentina mean that a lot of poor people also have a lucrative trade sifting discarded possessions of the wealthy which adorn the tips of Buenos Aires. In their fight to survive, poor people have realized that in the rubbish of the wealthy, there *is* life – unsafe, unhealthy and uncertain though it may be – the scraps from the table of Dives provide just enough to survive. The old northern English adage of 'Where there's muck, there's brass!' points out a deep (if sanitized) truth.

Such resourcefulness is not limited to the developing world. As waste is public property, and as the chances of achieving any conviction for invasion of privacy in this area are minimal, so the scrutiny of rubbish can be a highly lucrative subject in business in the First World. Early in 2000, Larry Ellison, Chief Executive Officer of the American hi-tech company Oracle, paid investigators to probe pro-Microsoft companies to see if they were being secretly funded by the big computer leviathan. This was revealed when investigators attempted to sift the garbage of the companies concerned. Inevitably 'Dumpstergate' led to a big public row. From another direction, at one point in the Microsoft anti-trust trial, Bill Gates had his own discarded e-mail used against him. Junk can be *very* valuable in another person's hands.

We all have our blinkers and blind spots and contradictions with regard to the value of waste: at the beginning of the year, one of my community impressed upon me how he (as an African man brought up in good rural traditions) had been taught to recycle, re-use and generally value material goods and did not waste anything, as possibly I – I felt the accusing stare – as a profligate, urban Englishman, was more

wont to do. Needless to say, in many ways he was quite correct, but I do seem to have spent rather a lot of the intervening months going around, switching off lights, and turning down electric heaters to which he has given the thankless task of warming up the southern hemisphere through our open windows. I suppose we all glimpse a part of the whole! Our horizons of experience are always different and limited. We never see the complete picture.

It is probably the case that I never really become conscious of the universal value of creation unless I have an ability to see where things fit into *the greater dynamic whole*. Biological life, for instance, is built on huge cycles (such as the water cycle or the nitrogen cycle), which we have only relatively recently become conscious of; but it is perhaps this glimpse which will sensitize us as to our place in the greater scheme of things, and how we affect our milieu for good or evil. Only then will we have a healthy attitude towards our rubbish, because it will no longer be merely 'rubbish'. The definition of a 'weed' is *a rose in a cabbage patch.* I weed out particular plants from a garden because they do not fit my plan for that garden. If I am growing cabbages, then the rose is unwanted: it is a waste of good cabbage space and to be discarded. So the rose is a weed – but should it be *trashed*? Surely everything has value?

Casting it aside

But it would be the fool's counsel to say that nothing must be thrown away. It would be stupid not to empty the bins, flush the toilets or throw out the broken glass. There will probably always be things we need to discard. All the examples given above are of things that demonstrate more the senseless wasting of resources by squandering or discarding things unnecessarily. But if there is always rubbish, we still stumble easily into other faults, in the way we continue to value our waste wrongly by disposing of it inappropriately. For instance, is it right to bury something? Or re-cycle it? Or incinerate it? All are options – but which is the *best* way forward in the greater scheme of things? Or is my strategy to go for the cheapest short-term option? Recently in the UK there have gone on stream a number of imaginative and economically viable power-stations which have been using waste as fuel. There is also one station that is going to 'cook' rubber tyres (always a big headache in disposal terms) and use the gases generated as a power-supply for 30,000 people. There is another big power generator that is using chicken-droppings. And there are yet other plans for a power

station that uses effluent from a brewery. All of these are good and creative ways of dealing with waste.

All this is well and good, but there is a very human characteristic that rests deep within my heart and often hinders my dealing seriously and effectively with waste.

Turning up the nose

It was one of those semi-formal occasions where family and friends were gathered together in my brother's front room talking politely and drinking tea. Then quietly, but heard by all, was the distinctive sound of someone farting. My mother shifted gear and started to talk more loudly. Nobody acknowledged the sound. But there it was again: louder and more trumpet-like. And again . . . this time more persistent and squeaky. On it went until eventually my brother cracked and revealed that the sound was a tape on the stereo system of the room. My mother was not impressed.

Society is careful about the subjects it talks about openly. Certain things are taboo: sexuality is often a case in point. But it is interesting that waste and rubbish are also unsettling subjects for discussion, and at least in western culture, are frowned upon in polite circles. Things to do with waste are often left unsaid, or merely hinted at. We use euphemisms to describe very natural processes.

Take the simple matter of asking to go to the toilet in a house you may be visiting. It is often carefully skirted around: you go to 'the loo' or (more indirectly) to 'the bathroom' (. . . for a bath?). Rolls of toilet paper get their own tasteful woolly holders. People don't fart, they 'break wind'. ('*No dear, not "sweat"! Horses* sweat, *men* perspire . . . *but ladies merely* glow . . .') Dustbins are kept apologetically at the back of a house, never triumphantly at the front. A gift of champagne may be ceremoniously delivered at the front door, but the bin men are tolerated only at the back, and even then there must be no lingering ('what you must do, do quickly').

A rubbish tip provides the Bible with its most graphic image of hell. Since the time of Isaiah, 'Gehenna' became the byword for all that is dark and unsafe and a place where the fires never go out. It was modelled on Ge Hinnom, the valley of Hinnom, which was beyond the southern walls of Jerusalem. Some say it was a place once made infamous because of human sacrifice and then subsequently, and disdainfully, turned into the city dump.

Varying forms of waste trigger different reactions in people. Heavy sweating, picking of a nose, etc. will always cause a variety of reactions, from discomfort to disgust. In most cultures contact with bodily fluids – blood, semen, urine etc. – are strictly governed. In a number of world cultures, a woman during menstruation is hidden away – in the West the issue is more often politely ignored.

But is it just human conditioning that makes me 'turn my nose up' at certain things . . . like vomit? Flies and dogs, on the other hand, seem to have an endless fascination for excrement – perhaps your stomach is churning even at the image? Could it be that it is merely because our family/culture/education has conditioned us that way? Roasted flying ants are a great delicacy in Zimbabwe and could be consumed as a Californian would nibble peanuts. One man's high protein, non-bovine snack supplement is another man's poison.

Maybe our disgust of rats is due to the fact that we don't encounter them enough in modern western society? If they were as commonly seen as cats, perhaps we would just take them as other animals we have to co-exist with?

But human conditioning does not appear to be the only factor. Some animals are as pernickety as homo sapiens. Cows won't graze peacefully where other animals have defecated. Likewise, chimpanzees will not eat in a tree that others have used as a toilet. On a different level, ants have a caste system where those ants that are responsible for the clearing of dead ants are shunned by the other ants and are expected to avoid contact with other residents of the colony. Non-human creatures are not as enamoured of waste as at first we might expect.

Tears for fears

Disgust is often rooted in fear. There are obvious good reasons for this: waste is invariably associated with infection and uncleanliness and so we keep it at a distance, avoid it and shy away from it. Such a fearful reaction is important for the survival of the species, but as our fears are contagious they can be easily manipulated.

We fear something, so we learn to hate it, and pretty soon disgust is not far behind. You can find this being tapped into for political purposes. In Nazi Germany, for instance, Jews were constantly being referred to as 'vermin' and also as 'a disease in the body politic' which should be eradicated. In the more recent genocide in Rwanda, state propaganda would refer to the Tutsi as 'cockroaches', allowing a

natural disgust of the insect to be associated with a tribe, so that it became easier to kill human beings.

The human response to waste/rubbish is a powerfully *emotional* response. We can doll it up with intellectual justifications and philosophical reasoning, but it is our fragile hearts – our poor, good, wise, battered and sensitive hearts – that are the ultimate arbiters between what we feel is good and bad, and therefore what is of value and what is not. Fear can often grip the heart and come to dominate and slant our outlook on life. As Freud pointed out, there are helpful fears (of snakes in the African jungle) and unhelpful fears (of snakes in a high-rise apartment in New York).

Facing the grime

What attitude of heart can we cultivate that will help bring about a positive change in our response to 'rubbish'? One answer, I feel, would be in developing an attitude of *reverence*. We could follow the guidance of St Ignatius:

> I will consider how God labours and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth . . . For example, he is working in the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle and all the rest – giving them existence, conserving them, concurring with their vegetative and sensitive activities and so forth. Then I will reflect on myself. (Exx 236)

It must be faced that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, western spirituality can tend to mirror our attitudes to the household cycle. We don't reverence the rubbish that is part and parcel of our lives. Our hearts tend to drift towards the warm and fuzzy, and they tend not to countenance the darker sides of life. We can focus too easily on the positive and we turn a blind eye to the rubbish, expecting/hoping/wishing it would take care of itself. We have done this in our world and it has been disastrous. If we do it around the house, it leads to chaos. To pursue such a tack in our spiritual lives is pure folly.

In the Spiritual Exercises, St Ignatius of Loyola heads straight into the fray. His First Week is a sifting and sorting of the rubbish. It is a complex and multi-faceted operation. Overall, as a retreatant I am attempting to put myself into a place where I can see myself as God sees me – with all my strengths and weaknesses – and from this humble, yet proud, insight I make my response to God with my life. To do so properly I must try to look squarely at who I am. I must then

reverence and value the God-given values within me: then I must unflinchingly target the accumulated waste that is blocking the natural growth within me, and eradicate those sinful aspects of myself which are cramping my generous response to God and draining life from my soul.

Sometimes I can find myself living in an ethical 'looking-glass world' where all that I perceive as junk has real value and the things with real value are treated as junk. I can be hamstrung because I do not recognize my giftedness in certain areas and put my trust in other values that are suspect and flimsy. Often in a person there are vast untapped reserves of love and preciousness which are overlooked or wasted. Someone who does this is like a person who drives their Ferrari everywhere in first gear – either because they don't know there are more gears available or they fear that a gear change will stall the car. For whatever the reason, the bottom line is that much of the potential in the Ferrari is wasted – a thoroughbred horse condemned to pull a milk-float for the rest of its natural life.

In other cases, we hold on to things which at one time were good, but now are well past their sell-by date and may lethally poison us. Sometimes the thing that is holding us back is a warped desire to hold on to a deadly, yet (and this is the powerfully hypnotic aspect that can catch us) *familiar* thing in our lives. It is like the stone in the shoe: if it has been there long enough, we can fall into an attitude where we prefer to keep the stone in the shoe and 'live with it' rather than throw it out and walk strangely. There is a huge draw towards familiarity in our spiritual lives, and this is not always good. Sometimes we have almost a pathological tendency to hold on to rubbish. We hoard it. It piles up. We don't want to throw things out, so it stays and clutters and eventually clogs up the whole system. Some things have to be removed, otherwise they just infect and corrode all that is good, all that is life-giving in existence. A tremendously vivid image of this can be found in the person of Norman Bates, the unbalanced motel-owner in Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 chiller, *Psycho*. Most of Norman's problems stem from the fact that his mother, who had died and whose skeletal body should have been buried years earlier, was being kept in a rocking chair in the house. You know the consequences!

For a more balanced insight into the human being we must realize the wider cycles of life, the inputs and the outputs, the valuable resources put in and the waste that will be removed: all these things must be taken into some form of holistic account. But is this model sufficient to describe spirituality and global ecology? I don't think so.

More than recycling

Although our insight into the cycle of life can be very liberating, we shouldn't fall into a trap of naïvely applying this system as a total analysis of our lives. There would seem to be at least two aspects of human existence that must be further considered: the first is theological; the other comes more from human reflection and science.

First, the theology. In our world there does seem to be a persistence of evil. Unfashionable though it may seem – and misnomer which it most certainly is – *original sin* must also be somehow brought into the reckoning. There is a long and deep tradition in the Christian faith which would point out to us that as human beings we stand before God as creatures who are good, but with a fundamental flaw in our being which, if ignored or left unchecked or removed from the redeeming grace of God, will lead to destruction. This trait will always be operative in human endeavour.

On a personal level this means that even if we were to achieve the perfect balance in the spiritual life – nutrients in, junk out – it will probably never be steady and smooth and able to be left alone. As with walking on stilts, there will always be a built-in tendency to fall over, and for our part that will require constant application and focus to concentrate on keeping upright. We may become more adept at it, but the situation is always inherently unstable. So it is with our spiritual lives: they will be in constant need of attention and re-balancing.

The second factor concerns evolution. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin threw a spanner into many a well-oiled theological machine with his theory of evolution in nature. One Christian thinker who was not perturbed by such ideas was John Henry Newman. Ten years before Darwin, as part of his movement into the Catholic Church, Newman had published his thesis on the 'Development of Christian doctrine'. Newman realized that the Church and its beliefs were evolving. If the Church were to be examined at two different times in its history and then these two were compared, they may appear to be two quite different churches; but like an acorn when it is compared with the fully-grown oak tree, essentially they are the same thing.

In the twentieth century, especially in the work of people like the French Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and later in the more traditional reflection on faith found in the documents of Vatican II, this notion of the evolving cosmos has come more into mainstream Christian reflection.

From this we must realize that all *cycles* of life are by their nature limited – they are not eternal. They themselves are in process of development. We can sometimes visualize these cycles as eternal hamsters' wheels around which we (and the countless generations of hamsters that have gone before us and will follow us) will continue to scuttle. On the dispiriting side, this cyclic perception can lead to the despair of the likes of the novelist Albert Camus, who in his work would highlight the apparent pointlessness of life – especially in his story, 'The myth of Sisyphus'. However, the cycle may be illusory: the Alps or the Himalayas may seem to be, to our transitory eyes, a constant in an otherwise changing world, but now we know that they, too, are in process. Christians are beginning to realize the hamsters are on a mystery tour, not a wheel.

With this in mind, it is important for us to understand that what is of value and what is rubbish can never be fully and definitively discerned; we should hesitate to rubbish and disdain unthinkingly that which appears (for the moment, perhaps) to be useless. What was an annoying by-product of nineteenth-century oil refineries, pumped raw into rivers, now has become the liquid engineering worshipped by OPEC and the petrol-driven economies of the modern world. It is part of the mystery of creation that we only know a small part of the unfolding story of rubbish. Humility, discernment and reverence must be continuing graces desired by Christians. We need eyes to see that what is just sand and impurities to one generation, may (in the tender care of an oyster), be a pearl to be treasured by the next.

Of all people, Christians should be sharply aware that the stone that the builders rejected can become the corner stone.

Dermot Preston studied chemistry before joining the British Province of the Society of Jesus in 1979. Following ordination he worked as Vocations Director for the province for five years. After tertianship in the Philippines he went to South Africa where he has been Chaplain at the University of Cape Town since 1996.