

When is it Clutter?

By Deborah Redfern



This Christmas I devoted time to completing projects. The biggest one on my list was an embroidery kit that's been in my life for a number of years. I remember clearly the day I began it. I was teaching a seminar at my home in Portugal Cove, Newfoundland, and during one of the breaks, the kit was brought out and proudly displayed. The image was a Native American maiden and at the time I was learning about Native American ways, so it was very timely.

One of the women in my class offered to have it framed for me, if I finished it in six months. I didn't think any incentive was needed to complete it, but then again, I had never done an embroidery project before. As it turned out, I seriously underestimated how much time it would take. More than once I wished I had taken the student up on her offer! It isn't a very large piece, but perhaps a deceptive amount of work. I stitched for 4 hours straight on January 10th, the day I finished it. It was more than 6 years after the day I began it!

There were many times I asked myself why it was taking so long. For some mysterious reason, a pattern developed after I began it. I would work on it enthusiastically for two or three nights, and then put it aside for awhile. The six months came and went. Soon it became my winter project. Every winter, I got a bit further ahead and every spring it was put away again. Isn't this the classic definition of clutter? Embroidery clearly is not an activity I love, although on those rare occasions when I am in the mood, I do enjoy it.

So what is clutter? For me clutter is an awareness of the 'mind chatter' attached to the item in question. Examples of mind chatter are self-criticizing, admonishing, and energy-draining, unpleasant thoughts that do not feel good. If there is no mind chatter, it isn't clutter. Whenever I saw the embroidery kit in my closet, I didn't experience unpleasant thoughts. It was more like greeting an old friend. Okay, maybe there were mild pangs of guilt or regret, but it didn't drain my energy. It actually felt kind of good seeing it there. I always looked forward to the day I would finish it.

And that day finally came! In the past few weeks I've been thinking about why it took so long. It occurred to me that the embroidery may have been my way of keeping the door open on a part of my life that was almost over. It is similar to being immersed in a book you really enjoy or strongly identify with. When the book ends, your experience of being a part of the story will end as well, and sometimes there is a kind of reluctance to finish the story.

In my 20s and early 30s I did a lot of needlework and sewing. I made things for the house, designed my own clothes, and even had a brief stint as a doll maker. Somewhere along the way I decided I no longer wanted to sew. I gave away the sewing machine and all the supplies, but somehow a skill like being able to do your own custom tailoring dies hard. I wonder if the reason the embroidery took as long as it did was because I needed that much time to really give myself permission to let my identity as a seamstress go. I finally arrived at the point where I just wanted closure.

I determined that 2006 would be that year of closure and I missed the deadline by only 10 days. Perhaps that is all the more fitting because in numerology 2007 is the year of '9' which means this will be a good year for completion. I am proud of myself for sticking with it, to see it to the end, but even as I was celebrating the completion I was wondering what the bigger message was.

I believe that message is this: if there is something in your life that seems to fit all the criteria of 'clutter' – you don't use it and you don't 'love' it -- and yet you are not ready to let go of it, there is probably a good reason for it. Trust your feelings! Do you feel good, bad or indifferent about it? If you feel good, or even indifferent, there might be a part of you that needs it in your life and it may have a message for you. It may be to give yourself time to absorb changes in your life or to get closure on a part of your life that is over – or it might be something else entirely.

When the time is right you will hear the message, and you will be able to come to completion – whether it is finishing the project or finally letting something go.

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