

Sometimes the choice to redo the interior of one's home can be a matter of life and death. That was the case when my friend David, a holistic psychiatrist, asked me to help him transform his space and consciousness. Though he is a man of refined tastes and sensitivities, his living space had fallen into shocking disarray. He couldn't walk from the front door through the crowd of furniture, stuffed animals, musical instruments, tapes and videos, holistic products for clients, plants, mobiles, large exercise balls and piled up notes, mail and magazines in the living room without tripping or bumping into something, hurting it or himself. In frustration and rage he had ruined things he cared for by hurling them aside after colliding with them.

He deeply values vibrant life and material beauty, but his plants were dying and many of his treasured objects broken. Wishing to honor and share what he has, he could not even locate many valued belongings. His fledgling organizational attempts had been overcome by the sheer volume of clutter. Desiring community, he had no room even to nurture himself. Although he wanted his environment to reflect and support his dedication to health, clarity, balance and beauty, the discrepancy was driving him crazy.

Intrigued by the prospect of serving another with skills from my lifelong passion for creating beautiful and soul-satisfying space, I embarked on the project enthusiastically. I had relied on deep intuition within my own environments, not needing to describe decisions or to delineate their development. Now the opportunity to guide another invited me to explore and articulate the principles and processes at play.

Our work together turned out to be an interactive adaptation of the 4,000-year-old Asian art of feng shui (pronounced fung shway). This ancient art is often referred to as acupuncture for the environment, for it takes the pulse of the physical environment, identifies impediments to the healthy and balanced flow of chi (life energy) and offers corrective adjustments, known as "cures," to restore harmony. The cures, or solutions, fall into two categories--the mundane, what is logical and linear, and the transcendental--what appears illogical, often because we don't understand or see associated energy patterns.

Traditional cures include mirrors and crystals, water features, lights and wind chimes to draw in or circulate chi or light bamboo flutes to lift the effect of a heavy beam. We can use our imagination and our own cultural symbols to create effective cures for our own space. Feathers or photos of clouds or balloons can create a light, lifting effect. We can make a mobile, collage or dreamcatcher incorporating small objects or images significant to us. A cure works best when we support it with spiritual intention. While some feng shui schools adhere religiously to specific practices, others encourage an individual to activate a cure through his or her own spiritual practice and deity. Our method of working was unique to our own specific beliefs and experiences.

We approached the process as practice in new consciousness rather than adopting the more limited goal of improving that particular space. David intended to be there only 6 more months before taking a sabbatical to travel and possibly to relocate. Therefore, stripping wallpaper, investing in new furniture, implementing structural changes, or repainting rooms were off limits. He most wanted to learn how he and his physical environment could one another anywhere he might go. The basic guidelines that emerged from our experience can be used by anyone who wishes to enhance both their living space and their life.

Work from the inside out. Don't just move furniture. Mobilize the energies of your consciousness. Look at what lives in you as well as the space you live in. Consider your physical space and your relationship with it as a metaphor and mirror of internal reality. If there is no place to sit down and eat, consider in what ways you are unable to nurture yourself. Like it or not, what you see around you is in some way a reflection of what is within. These aspects of reality work powerfully in tandem. Once you have identified the internal culprits linked with the dissonance in your environment you can join conscious intention with external changes. In making room for his dining table David chose to nourish himself daily.

Welcome your invisible support team. Do you believe in angels, guides, the healing energies of the universe or a higher power? Invite them to help you see beyond the obvious. As healers who offer energy work to our clients, David and I shared a conviction that invisible energy infuses and influences all aspects of life. We intended to create in cooperation with this unseen energy rather than simply seeking outwardly apparent aesthetic beauty and functionality.

Each morning we asked for guidance about where to work, what focus to hold, what factors to consider. We also viewed our work as taking place in the context of a community of all beings, seen and unseen. As a Buddhist might extend loving-kindness practice to the benefit of all sentient beings, we asked that our activity benefit our friends, our community and the world. At the end of the day we identified the energetic shifts we experienced, acknowledged the assistance from other realms and released the intentional connection with thanks. These practices were a natural prelude and postlude to times of quiet listening.

Ground your work in meditation. Beginning and concluding your work with meditation focuses and informs your endeavors. When David and I combined meditation with our simple practices of connecting with unseen helpers, we were sometimes inspired us to draw an angel card or medicine card to invite the wisdom of a pure angelic energy or animal characteristics. Other times we were moved to offer a small object as an icon. A pin of a phoenix served one day to herald the splendor that would arise from the dismantling process.

Often a key word, phrase or focus arose in the silence. As we gained appreciation for the effect our work had on objects, space and ourselves, the word "forgiveness" emerged one day. Synchronistically, we drew the angel of forgiveness that day. David realized how distressed he was to have created the painful reality in which he had been living. Forgiving himself was a natural and necessary step in his conscious change.

Name your reality and claim your dreams. Ask yourself: What is? What wants to be? What in this environment works well? Does a particular object or area bring focus, peace or beauty? What oppresses or distresses? Can I find what I need? Can I relax and nurture myself here? Can I and others breathe freely and move comfortably through this space? Am I plagued by broken objects or cluttered areas? What is and isn't working in my life in general? How do I want my life and space to be? What do I want to have happen here? What is most important?

David wanted room for nurturing himself and others with food and conversation, playful crafting, enjoyment of incense and aromatic oils, presentation of flowers, playing musical instruments, gathering gifts to be given, photographs, bodywork, client conversations. He wanted the space to be beautiful, creative, and playful. A single man who clowns, loves children and has some young clients, he wanted children to feel welcome. This meant having paper and crayons, toys, stuffed animals and rattles in easy reach.

Clear away clutter. One way to make room for life energy to circulate and invite new energy in is to live only with what you love and use. Toss out the cracked vase from your former lover, keep the heirloom picture frame with its valued family photograph. Think of each item as part of a gigantic inventory in your computer and your consciousness to dramatize the weightiness of accumulation. David's patterns of holding on caused accidents and drained physical and psychological energy. Did he really want each questionable object to take up inventory space? Was it a burden or a blessing to keep the interesting wooden telephone table set aside for years because its cracked leg needed repair?

Everything matters, yes everything. Summon humor to make tedious tasks fun. The contents of the smallest drawer affect the healthy flow of life energy. Attention to this level of detail may feel impossibly tedious, especially if you have years of accretion. If you can see it through you will feel much freer inside, as well as enjoying the more mundane reward of knowing where things are. David and I went through every closet, drawer and cubbyhole. When bogged down, we tried to be silly. Burrowing through piles of clothes, we entertained ourselves by creating a single socks club for socks without partners.

Don't be intimidated: Simplify and clarify. You can do what seems undoable if you give yourself a simple framework. David's house was so overwhelmed by clutter that we needed to devise ways to keep it from intimidating us. The small back bedroom, out of sight of friends and clients, overflowed with toppling stacks of papers, piles of clothes, computer paraphernalia, craft materials, art objects and mismatched furniture. No surface was clearly visible, not even the small futon, the only place to rest. Peeping from beneath one heap was an angel card--release!

To address each stack felt too daunting. Instead, we imagined a violent hurricane was coming and he needed to leave immediately. What few things would he take? Easily he named the computer, some photographs of friends and trips and a beautiful ceramic bowl made by a friend. The computer symbolized his creativity, the photographs highlighted the importance of connections with people and places, and the bowl could provide the center of a new altar space. The supporting cast of materials could be recreated elsewhere. We simplified the room to honor these elements. We were rewarded by enough space to hold a larger, more comfortable futon languishing unused in another room.

Go deeper for more release and reward. Let "Less is more" be your relentless guide into ever deepening layers of application. Initially changes are dramatic-- moving furniture, emptying rooms, hanging new pictures. Return later to areas where you have already worked to refine them further. David and I were surprised that even more subtle levels of clearing and enhancement caused tangible shifts in our experience of the space.

As we meditated one morning I heard the words "breathing room." As releasing objects and spatial arrangements allowed us to breathe more freely we sensed the room and each object in it as a living breathing entity as well. Visitors began to perceive the presence of items that had long been there but never been noticed. A sense of living energetic community with the objects and room replaced a subtle feeling of us versus them battling for control or survival. The objects began to play active roles in our process. A rich red oriental rug grounded the scattered and dreary energy of the faded blue kitchen and gave it a voice, summoning us to clean, clear and reorganize the remaining areas of the kitchen.

Don't resist. Just imagine.... Inevitably, some belongings end up squeezed into the space of last resort--in David's case the basement. This out of the way space held mountains of old files, broken furniture, jumbles of old tapes and videos, empty boxes kept for mailing, old medical supplies, stamp and postcard collections, sports equipment, gifts waiting for a recipient, unsold water filters from an earlier business venture, and baskets and bags full of old articles, photos, letters, and notices banished to the basement over the years because there was no time to organize them. David had hurriedly shoved everything together to minimize damage from an unexpected flood. As we worked we had added furniture, clutter or other items that did not fit in the newly created environment upstairs.

Your imagination can be your most important tool in confronting the last, most resistant residue of belongings. David and I were struck by the similarity between the basement and the unconscious. We resolved to approach the material stored there with love, gently reorganizing it and releasing items no longer functional or necessary. We decreased our resistance to working in the dark basement on sunny days by imagining the floor as transparent, with light readily available to us. We held that image in meditation. To support it with physical reality we took an occasional break for a small project upstairs.

You can create what you want. Believe it! Hold unswervingly to your cherished intentions. At first it seemed there was no place to put David's dining table; I declared that if a dining space would enhance his life we would create one. We identified the space and removed any intruding object, in this case the TV, VCR, coffee table and miscellaneous stored materials. Collecting a wonderful table hidden in a kitchen corner, two matching chairs from the basement and healing room, a silk tapestry from India, candle holders and candles, we completed an elegant dining area in minutes, a new nurturing focal point for the front living area. Within days the first guest dined there. We came to trust the natural flow of such intentional enhancements.

Expect delightful surprises. Occasionally David and I were surprised by what I call enhancements. One day he and a friend spontaneously were moved to practice new tango steps. Wondering where to practice, they discovered that newly opened space between the treatment table and the closets became a small dance floor by moving the rug. You might find that moving the table blocking an "extra" door to the back yard beckons you to go outside more often, where you notice a perfect spot for the plant that isn't getting enough light indoors. As you visit this corner of the yard to check on the plant you notice that some simple weeding and pruning makes it a perfect place to sit quietly and meditate or have a quiet chat with a friend.

You will change too, for the better! This work does not merely shift the physical world. We are working with subtle energies, whose effects on our lives can be anything but subtle. As we dance with intention and its physical expression we see how our patterns of consciousness imprint our physical realm, and vice versa. As we intentionally change the space and objects around us we also change our experience of ourselves and the world around us.

David changed at many levels and in unforeseen ways. His decisiveness grew as we gradually streamlined his belongings and our process. At first he had difficulty focusing on the unmanageable filing system. Over time, organizational decisions flowed with ease. He particularly wanted to honor his own work by organizing his presentations and published pieces. When he did, the results in his life were immediate. As he honored his accomplishments, cleaned and organized his files and space, his freed time and consciousness brought new clients and honors.

He had decided not to answer phone calls during our work but to check messages and respond as necessary. The one phone call he answered spontaneously during a break was an author wanting to feature him as one of five physicians whose work had taken an unconventional turn. His process of preparing for presentations also changed unexpectedly. Instead of setting aside time to prepare in a linear logical way, he honed his capacity for presence. He knew his material and trusted that through an expanded sense of presence in the moment with the audience he would know what parts to express.

One day in meditation the word "bigger" came to me. Judging it as non-poetic and not seeing its pertinence, I didn't share it. The next day in meditation my friend commented that the space felt bigger, his body felt bigger, and he longed to take his rightful bigger place in the world. He soon was confirmed to speak at a United Nations conference on healing environment.

The work goes on. Such radical inner and outer change needs to be stabilized, integrated and supported in an ongoing way. Just as holistic medicine focuses on wellness rather than waiting for disease to appear, so too we need to maintain a healthy environment. You can teach yourself to feel subtle shifts in your commitment to new habits, to notice how stress affects your interaction with your environment, to address newly created imbalances early. If you find yourself again unable to find the bills to pay because you have set the mail aside when hurried, covered it with maps and brochures for your vacation, then moved it all to a closet floor to make room for your current work project, you will need to look again at your patterns of avoidance and revisit your intentions to sort mail as it arrives and to store things where they can be retrieved if they cannot be finished. The work is never completely done. It becomes a way of life. David consciously asks himself in the morning, evening, and on arriving and leaving home to scan his environment and his feelings about it and take any needed corrective action.

It is an intimate honor to participate in such a revelatory, thorough, integrative and transformative process grounded in spiritual practice and linked with life purpose. Positive new developments in my friend's personal and professional life postponed his sabbatical and relocation plans. I knew we had crossed a threshold when he commented one afternoon as we concluded that he planned to skip yoga class that night and just enjoy being at home.