

BOOK REVIEW | HELP DESK

Cleanse Creep

By MOLLY YOUNG MARCH 21, 2016

A peculiar thing about humans is that we're persistently disturbed by reminders that we are, in fact, mammals who sweat, shed, bleed and expel foul matter on a daily basis. Entire industries exist to subdue the horror of having a body. Plentiful aisles in the drugstore are devoted to it. You'd think humans would have gotten used to the beastlier realities of existence by now. We've had millions of years to get used to it.

But no. How else to explain the prevalence of cleanses and detoxes, if not as antidotes to some perceived state of filth? In the early 20th century, John Harvey Kellogg prescribed yogurt whey enemas to promote "intestinal antisepsis" at his Battle Creek Sanitarium; today Cher tweets about getting colonics. If the impulse to cleanse ourselves is eternal, the areas to which we extend this metaphor are multiplying rapidly. It's no longer enough to decontaminate the lower digestive system. Today we're urged to purify closet, kitchen, desktop, checkbook, behavior and spirit. We are living in an age of "cleanse creep."

"Toxins are better understood less as poisons than as *barriers* — obstacles to the life and health we truly want," Deanna Minich writes in **WHOLE DETOX: A 21-Day Personalized Program to Break Through Barriers in Every Area of Your Life (HarperOne/HarperCollins, \$27.99)**. Minich, a nutritionist, defines "life toxins" as "mental, emotional or spiritual challenges" like gossip, water in plastic containers, people-pleasing impulses, disruptive electromagnetic fields, sugar, Splenda and nonorganic cocoa.

The book kicks off with a six-page quiz designed to suss out which areas of your

life are most urgently in need of care. My impoverished areas were what Minich terms “the Fire” and “the Spirit,” signifying that my self-esteem, work-life balance and mind-body connection are out of whack. (This is correct.) What follows is an exhaustive program that readers may customize according to their personal weaknesses.

Woo-woo tips mingle with practical pointers. “Eat from heart-shaped bowls, and put heart stickers on your refrigerator,” Minich recommends. (Why? “To keep the spirit of love alive,” duh.) Ripe pears, she advises, are “especially good for moistening the lungs.” Eating barefoot with your legs uncrossed can make you feel more rooted. Among the more practical tips: Use green tea as a smoothie base if you want the health benefits but hate the taste. Buy seaweed flakes and put them in a saltshaker to sprinkle over your salads and soups. (Think of it as salt’s wacky uncle.)

Like many people, I chafe against the phrase “clean eating,” and I’m suspicious of the implication that nonapproved foods are unclean. The idea strikes me as a crude counterpoint to the vogue for bestowing malevolent names upon enticing foods like deviled eggs and devil’s-food cake. There’s something penetratingly sad about our need to be reassured that a “sinful” chocolate cake is not literally going to damn us.

That doesn’t make Henrietta Inman’s **CLEAN CAKES: Delicious Pâtisserie Made With Whole, Natural and Nourishing Ingredients and Free From Gluten, Dairy and Refined Sugar (Jacqui Small, \$29.99)** any less visually appealing. The author, a British pastry chef, is photographed in filmy white cotton garments, pink-cheeked and lissome with a basket of currants. The recipes in her cookbook are flower-strewn and photographed in mesmerizing close-up. Who wouldn’t want to emulate this lifestyle?

For Inman, “clean” means soy-free (which is easy; you don’t generally whip tempeh into cake batter) and, as the subtitle says, also devoid of gluten, dairy and refined sugar (which is a much tougher baking task, chemically speaking). To her credit, she uses the phrase “guilt-free” sparingly (once, by my count) and affirms that “the most important part of cooking is to bring happiness to the people who eat your food.” She is also a shrewd experimenter, boiling coconut milk into caramel and

offering cashew cream as a frosting or pastry cream replacement. The cashew recipe yields an addictive satiny goo that reconstitutes itself into cement in your stomach, like anything properly delicious.

Fay Wolf's **NEW ORDER: A Decluttering Handbook for Creative Folks (and Everyone Else)** (Ballantine, paper, \$20) is a detox manual for the home. Fittingly, it starts with a purge. "Perhaps you're here because you have an inkling that life might be a little sweeter if you had less stuff and more order," she writes. "And you'd be right." Clarity, control, peace and quiet: All of these "nebulous golden nuggets" can be obtained by following Wolf's sensible decluttering program. She is not Marie Kondo. There is no playful animism here; no thanking of socks or folding of underwear. It's a book for people with a low tolerance for mysticism.

Among Wolf's tips for home-cleansing: Label makers rule. Never buy accordion files. Get in the habit of donating old stuff by keeping a permanent donations box in your hall closet or near the front door. Unsubscribe from every email list and consider revising your own email habits in a minimalist direction. (Remember: The more email you send, the more email you'll receive.) It's fine to store things in quirky places. This last piece of advice especially delighted me. For years I've kept my drinking glasses in the freezer, because (1) I enjoy frosty glasses; (2) the freezer is mostly empty; and (3) my cupboards are mostly full. I think it's a genius move. None of my friends have adopted it. Weirdos.

Francine Jay, who runs a blog called Miss Minimalist, has more in common with Marie Kondo than Wolf does. In the updated and revised edition of **THE JOY OF LESS: A Minimalist Guide to Declutter, Organize, and Simplify** (Chronicle, \$16.95), Jay uses the word "joy" as a filtering mechanism — if a household item "fills your heart with joy," keep it. If not, consider giving it the old heave-ho. She also recommends talking to your possessions, as Kondo does.

Similarly, Jay takes purging to Kondo-like extremes. "It's illuminating how little we actually need to keep ourselves alive: a simple shelter, clothing to regulate our body temperature, water, food, a few containers and some cooking implements," she writes, also granting allowances for "anything you use often, and that truly adds value to your life," like a laptop or some forks. Key verbs for Jay include "reduce,"

“pare,” “cull” and “simplify.” She even confesses to having dreams about decluttering.

After all, Jay reminds readers, the stuff in your home is more than just stuff. It has needs. It requires attention and care. You might have to buy specialty cleaning products or insurance for it. You may go into debt for it. If it breaks, you must fix it (or purchase replacements and begin the journey anew). We spend so much time pining for new stuff that we forget how much work it takes to own the stuff we already have. Like green juice, the orthodoxy of decluttering can be hard to swallow. It takes sweaty labor and psychic exertion to comb through the junk we’ve accumulated. In doing so, we confront our broken ambitions (the Billy Blanks Cardio Inferno DVD we never used) and weakest impulses (the \$69.95 Indoor Flameless Marshmallow Roaster we used with unsettling frequency).

So why do we crave more — and not less — of these punishing regimes? I suspect the appeal of asceticism is a response to the state of overstimulation in which we find ourselves permanently awhirl. We receive billions of texts and emails and alerts; we gobble foods described as “umami bombs”; we watch HDTV on our phones in bed while refreshing Instagram and nipping at pints of salted caramel chile chocolate ice cream. Is it any wonder we wake up gluttoned, ready to wrest control wherever we can? Might as well start with the sock drawer.

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