

Neat Freak No More: Some Thoughts on Housekeeping

Yesterday morning I walked through the kitchen of the house where I am living and, like the Apostle Paul, the scales fell from my eyes.

My scales disappeared when I recognized the kitchen for the untidy pit it had become. For well over an hour I washed the dishes I'd neglected for two days, put foodstuffs onto a shelf, wiped down the countertops, swept the floor, bagged the trash, and neatly piled various knick-knacks left behind by my daughter, who recently moved with her family from this house to Pennsylvania.

When I was finished, the kitchen was shining, and so were my spirits.

Three-and-a-half years of military school in my youth and 20 years of running a bed-and-breakfast while raising four children on the premises left me with a penchant for order and cleanliness. I like things to have a place. I like dusted bookshelves, vacuumed carpets, a desk kept free of papers, clothes in the closet or in the laundry hamper.

Apparently so do many other folks. Go online, and you'll find dozens of blogs about cleaning, organizing, and decluttering. You'll also discover a small library of books, practically a genre all its own, on these same topics. All of them stress the satisfaction, in some cases the glow, derived from making the bathroom sparkle or hauling off bags of unused clothing and old toys to Goodwill.

Decluttering and organization come first. After all, what's the point in cleaning that bedroom if books, papers, art projects, pennies, paper clips, and pocket knives still litter the bureau?

That Americans do tend to collect far more possessions than they need was previously addressed here at Intellectual Takeout in Daniel Lattier's "[15 Stats That Show Americans Are Drowning In Stuff](#)." In [*Outer Order, Inner Calm: Declutter & Organize to Make More Room for Happiness*](#), Gretchen Rubin offers scores of tips on getting rid of household items we don't use and then organizing what remains. By ridding ourselves of such items, she believes we can bring tranquility and beauty into our lives.

Ideally we give away or trash what we don't use: that shirt we last wore in 1999, those ten-year-old receipts, that secondhand encyclopedia set we bought on a whim – decades out of date and a dust-gatherer extraordinaire.

Next, the experts tell us, we organize what we have decided to keep: our books and papers; our tool benches and children's art supplies; and our closets.

Finally, we break out the Windex, furniture polish, cleaning rags, and paper towels. Few people I know look forward to housekeeping chores. As my youngest son at age fourteen once said, "What's the point? It's just going to get dirty again." I know a few adults who clearly agree with him, but many of us take pleasure in the satisfaction that follows a thorough cleaning, enjoying that polished mirror by the front door or basking in the perfume of Pine-Sol. (Not, I am sure, to everyone's taste.)

Of course, for some who work from home, cleaning brings dangerous temptations. We're supposed to make that cold call to a paper manufacturer in North Carolina, but find it less stressful to run the vacuum cleaner. Our boss has given us a batch of data to enter into the company computer, but we're quickly bored and decide instead to wash the windows in the den. We feel overwhelmed by some freelance assignments, and so leave our desk and dry vac the garage floor.

Now for a confession about my orderly bent, or rather, the suppression of it: I do work at home, and in these last few weeks – okay, months – I have successfully resisted the temptation to organize and clean the basement apartment in which I live. Oh, I've hit a few places with a dust cloth; I keep my car keys, wallet, and phone from being swallowed up by the detritus on my desk; and I make the bed at least three or four times a week. However, these Lilliputian efforts don't put a dent in the books and papers spread around the carpet, the dusty shelves on which I can write my name, the spider webs in various corners, or the dust bunnies on the floor.

Some additional work commitments are in part responsible for this neglect, forcing me to turn a blind eye to the jumble and disorder of my living quarters. Some are afflicted by snow blindness or night blindness, but I have been cursed – or is it blessed? – by an advanced case of mess blindness. The departure of my daughter and her family abetted this condition. With them gone, I moved a card table into the now empty upstairs dining room and work there. This arrangement allows me a view of the street outside and the hills beyond, but the change in locale is also, I suspect, my way of ignoring the litter below my feet.

Or perhaps I am no longer the neat freak I once was. Whether that's good or bad I don't know, and it doesn't matter anyway because sooner or later my disheveled apartment will demand the requisite broom and bucket.

Until that day comes, I'll just go on closing the door at the top of the steps, writing and reading at the card table, and keeping the kitchen clean.

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