

The Doctrine of Acceptable Use

By Holly Lisle

Writing “C,” I had cause to recall a colleague I’d worked with back when I was a nursing supervisor.

We’d finished report and the staffing discussion, and had time left before I went home and she started rounds. And for some reason, we got to talking about home, and kids, and cleaning.

And she said something that dumbfounded me. “My toilets are clean enough to drink out of,” she said, “and you can eat off my floors.”

Ever one to understand the incomprehensible, (and cursed with as little tact then as I have now) I asked her, “Why?”

We then looked at each other like two women in a horror movie who had each discovered the other one was really an alien in human disguise. She was horrified that I didn’t get it – and I was horrified that she thought this thing she’d said was something sensible. (She didn’t have pets, either, for those of you who’d consider the dog’s habit of drinking from the toilet when doing your cleaning. No living thing would ever have cause to drink from her toilets.)

I didn’t get it then, and I don’t get it now. I’m all in favor of cleanliness – my floors are picked up, the dishes and the laundry get done, the cat boxes are clean and the house never smells like cat.

But while I would certify my floor as “walk-on ready” – even in bare feet – and will state categorically that no one would be repelled by using my toilets for their intended purposes, I have to claim the Doctrine of Acceptable Use here, which

states, “Any household object that is in condition for its appropriate use need not be maintained in condition for unintended and/ or unexpected usages.” (Yeah, I just made that up. But dammit, it’s a good doctrine, so I’m adding it to the Household Codice.)

Did she think that at her funeral, the people who knew her would stand up to eulogize her by saying, “Yeah, she was a demanding, picky, impossible-to-satisfy martinet and an utter bitch on wheels, but by God, you could drink out of her toilets”?

Does the person who spends life cleaning the already clean find more virtue in this than in cuddling on the couch with a kid, reading a book? Or playing Chutes and Ladders for the millionth time? Or in watching the hubby’s favorite movie with him, while secretly wishing he liked something a bit less depressing? Or taking the time to walk with a friend?

Our lives are the people who love us, and whom we love – not the box we live in. The toilet will not fondly remember that extra scrubbing. But the kid will remember that we had time to sit on the carpet and watch him gloat as we slid down the loooooong chute for the umpteenth time, leaving him in the lead.

So I’ll keep on claiming the Doctrine of Acceptable Use – and if you drop by my house, I suggest you eat off the plates and drink out of the glasses. I use the floor and the toilet for other things.

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