

Three Months Later—The Biggest Mystery of My Life, Solved

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You know how there are things about other people that you envy and wish you could emulate, but no matter how hard you try, you just never manage to pull it off?

I had this image of me someday being a person who did not have to throw stacks of books into a locked bedroom and spare children under beds in order to make my house presentable before having company over. I had visited friends, sometimes on the spur of the moment, whose houses, while they were comfortable and lived-in, were always, and I do mean **always**, neat.

This was a mystery to me considerably bigger than how early humans with low-tech tools managed to build the magnificent pyramids of Egypt and Central and South America.

After all, I have and have had kids for closing on 26 years now, and I know damn well how the pyramids were built. It's called slave labor. You have one person with a vision in charge, and a whole bunch of mean dudes with whips to force the visionary's grand concept to become a reality.

The miracle of the self-cleaning dishes? "Children, your chore this month is to wash, dry, and put away the dishes every day. You want to go to the movies this weekend, the dishes will be done, and done well." You get some broken dishes (and some interesting attempts to hide evidence of same—one involving a garbage disposal—with this method, but it *does* work). I'll bet

the Egyptians had the occasional broken giant block of stone, too.

Not even with children assigned to clean up their messes when they made them, however, could I ever open the front door without being painfully aware that what people were seeing behind me was ... messy.

I told myself that I worked. Hard, and a lot. Some of my friends with those enviably neat houses did not. (Some did work...but I didn't let myself consider them. They screwed up my Bell curve.) I don't particularly value, and definitely don't enjoy, the act of housecleaning, either. I have countless other things I'd rather do with my time. What I needed, what I wanted, what I yearned for, was the seemingly impossible. A house that stayed clean by itself.

So three months ago we moved. And there was this little problem of going from 2000 square feet packed to the eyeballs with our stuff into 1100 square feet. It was not going to happen.

We were on a brutal clock. (The length of time we took going from having the idea to move and and finding the place we wanted to rent to actually backing the truck up to the door of our new place and offloading everything we owned was 15 days.)

In the meantime, though, we had a mass/physics issue of horrendous proportions, in that the sheer mass of stuff we had accumulated over fourteen years together could not, by any physics known to man, be made to fit into the place we were renting.

So I had this freakin' genius idea. I told Matt, "You know those dumpsters you always see at construction sites? I'll bet we could rent one of those. And we could get rid of a lot of stuff."

We'd already done the local book giveaways and the yarn

giveaways and the clothes-to-goodwill giveaways, but the fact was, we lived way out in the country where NObody was willing to pick up anything, we had just the trunk space of our Chevy Cobalt in which to transport stuff, and we were going to grow old trying to empty the house using that method.

You know what? You CAN rent one of those construction-site dumpsters.

So we did. And we started pitching stuff in. We'd hung onto the first fan we bought together (non-working), half a dozen non-working computers ranging back to the days of DOS, every piece of clothing we'd ever owned in every size we'd ever been, stuff that we intended to fix someday, books that we bought and then hated, old VCRs, older TVs. Everything we had ever owned, we still owned.

Once we'd given away the best stuff, we looked at everything else and lugged it out to the dumpster. We filled not one, but three of those bad boys. (Dumpsters come in all sizes. Ours were the size nicknamed "honey-do," as in Honey, Do Get Rid of All The Crap from That Downed Tree, or Honey, Do Clean Out The Garage.)

When we were done, we were lighter on the inside, as if we'd cut some huge chains from our ankles that had been holding us to the ground. And when we backed up our moving truck, we discovered that we only owned enough stuff to fill it halfway.

We were pretty well unpacked, moved in, and living our new life inside of a week. We do not have stacks of boxes awaiting our attention. We do not have stacks of boxes.

And I have discovered the answer to the house that stays clean all by itself. Don't have so much stuff. Don't buy stuff you won't use. Get rid of stuff you don't like as soon as you discover you don't like it. If you bring something you love into the house, make room for it by getting rid of something you don't.

I am now the person I envied. I occasionally straighten the throw on the couch. The living room stays neat, tidy, comfortable without much effort beyond that. (Sweeping and dusting are no big deal when you don't have to move stacks of books to get it done.) The kitchen...the same. My office...the same. Bathrooms and bedrooms, ditto. Rogue stacks of books are no longer roaming the halls accosting innocent passersby and attacking every flat surface with the intent to crush all living and inanimate things into submission.

And I never have to clean before company comes over. Which means we actually HAVE company over.

Mystery solved.

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