

Housekeeping?
I prefer
pestilence.
... EMILY DICKINSON

DIRT
A COMPENDIUM OF
HOUSEHOLD WISDOM

Compiled by Shirley Gee

Housekeeping provides the setting, if not the solution, to many basic and profound philosophical questions.

What housewife has not, in viewing the unending stream of dirty dishes or unmade beds, pondered the categories of reality: are these things in a state of change, or do they just exist, in and of themselves?

As she picks up dirty socks, has she not considered the contradictions of coherent theory? Has she not empirically demonstrated the limits and the scope of gravitational law as she ascends and descends the twelve stairs to the laundry room six or seven times a day? Or been awed by the law of diminishing returns as she refills the cookie jar?

Is the dust whence she sprung as actual as the dust on the piano?

More basically, what is she here for? Was she predestined or foreordained to be a housewife? What are the things that she can legitimately put before this calling? Was the pestilence of housekeeping provided by the Lord, by Satan, or only by Adam?

Certain contributors to the present issue of *Dialogue* have speculated upon these subjects. Their philosophical deductions are compiled herein. No attempt has been made to give direction to these words of wisdom, only voice.

I am a housewife. When filling out forms I find the title neutral, descriptive, and quite adequate. A housewife is a woman who works at home. That I am also a homemaker seems to me beside the point. If I were professionally employed I would still be a homemaker. My husband is a homemaker. So are my children. Next time I'm asked, shall I list my occupation as Latter-day Saint?

To my mind we pursue the wrong villains when keeping house. Dirt is no enemy but the stuff from which God created our glorious earth. Spiders are nature's housekeepers and are easily tolerated as long as they keep out of sight.

I watch the seasons pass as I am painting window sills. I watch the gigantic snowflakes while scraping paint off a peeling ceiling. I see a bluejay perch on a branch as I Formula-409 the woodwork. I smell spring in the softening earth as I haul out the garbage. Perhaps I want too much.

I clean on impulse rather than on schedule. I clean my refrigerator and stove when I get tired of looking at them dirty. And I have discovered that I enjoy cleaning them more if they are quite dirty, because then I can see the difference when I am finished.

I'd much rather be outside than in, so balmy days assure a swift sweep through the house, a hasty farewell to housework.

I always fold my towels with the four corners precisely together and the hems turned to the inside. I always hang my diapers rather than put them in the dryer, so that the edges won't curl, and they can be folded in precise flat stacks. I always hang my clothes on hangers and put my shoes in the rack in the closet. These are the areas over which I have complete control, and I don't have to depend on the cooperation of anyone else. I'm no executive!

Ironing I detest and I apply myself only when there is a television program worthy of distracting my thoughts from the task. I anticipate the advent of spring days when the washing can again be hung outside to flap in the wind and absorb the sunshine.

“Do not let your children's clothing lie underfoot when you undress them at night, but teach your boys and girls, when they come into the house, to find a place for their hats, cloaks, and bonnets, that, when they want them, they can put their hands upon them in a moment.” —Brigham Young

We are led to believe that proper husband-wife roles are clearly spelled out. It seems to me that an attempt to follow these behavior molds harms more marriages than it helps. My husband and I work together to keep the house clean.

Before the kitchen window steamed up with heat from the dishes I was washing I could see my sons playing ball in the back yard. How I envy them their youth and their freedom. I would like to run and play with them. But who would do the dishes? “Work before play!” It is a harsh rule. I do not impose it, perhaps to my own detriment, but they have so little time.

Making bread is a family activity with us, and a basic one that needs doing regularly. Often the ingredients are put together by one of us, and the kneading is done by another — sometimes my husband, sometimes my son or daughter. The loaves are usually shaped with the help of one or more of the children. Even the smallest can help to pat the tops.

Do not put your loaf into the oven with a fire hot enough to burn it before it is baked through, but with a slow heat, and let it remain until it is perfectly baked; and I would prefer, for my own eating, each and every loaf to be not thicker than my two hands . . . and I would want the crust as thick as my hand. —Brigham Young

In my frantic splintered life, weekly bread-making restores my self-image, calms my nerves, soothes my spirit, feeds my ego (and my family), relieves my budget, and signals my husband and children that mom's in the kitchen, all's right with the world.

Why are L.D.S. women caught so inexorably in the "home-made bread" syndrome? For some it seems to have been elevated to a sacramental ordinance!

While nothing can be more deadening than the routine performance of household chores, nothing can be more satisfying than completing a task that needs doing. To look through a clear window that seconds ago bore finger smears, contents the soul. The most disorderly room quickly responds to fifteen minutes of busy tidying. We wrestle with knottier problems that bring us no satisfaction at all. As housekeeping is one of the crosses that women must bear, how fortunate that even there can be found gratification.

We like large rooms that can accommodate a lot of people or a lot of wriggling, as the case may be. We like materials and textures that age gracefully and do not crack like plaster or fade and smudge like wallpaper. We curse painted woodwork regularly.

Having two toilets is defensible; bathroom line-ups create anxiety on both sides of the door. Bathing, on the other hand, can be planned. Why clean two bathtub rings — or two of anything — when one will do?

Through some illogical process I have become the house and it has to compensate for all of my character failings: thick ankles, thinning hair, etc. The trouble is I can't, can't, can't keep it even forty percent perfect at any given time, and something in my system demands one hundred percent. I feel so confused wrestling with the ogres of peeling paint and ungainly furniture which I have poured hours into, modifying them from sow's ears into sow's ears.

Children like specific assignments of household chores. Lists help because they also eliminate mother as the source of work and all such evils.

Teach little children the principles of order; the little girl to put the broom in its right place, to arrange the stove furniture in the neatest possible way, and everything in its own place. . . . Teach the little boys to lay away the garden hoe, the spade, etc. where they will not be destroyed by rust. . . ."

—Brigham Young

My husband helps me clean before we entertain, and I have discovered that if we entertain a couple of times a month, the house is quite livable.

Food helps with fellowship, and anything will do. Along with a standard but simple Sunday meal for guests, I double dessert plans to allow for evening visitors. If these plans prove insufficient, I've found that any guest will respond, and be charmed by a slice of homemade bread and honey.

But Martha was cumbered about with much serving, and came to him and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things; But one thing is needful; and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. —Luke 10:40-42

The endless pressure of our housekeeping comes not from the needs of our families but from the constantly escalating standards of excellence which require us to decorate our houses like magazine layouts and maintain them as if nobody lived there. We enslave ourselves thus in quest of family happiness, yet “beautiful home” never refers to a harmonious and loving spirit, but to some combination of carpets and chairs.

I've been concentrating on not vacuuming my house before I have company. And what rewards this new virtue is bringing. I have too long equated a nice visit with a just-cleaned house. I've already missed what might have been important moments with friends because I spent the time wondering if they noticed that the candleholders were not polished.

A house should reflect the needs and interests of those residing therein and encourage the best side of their lives without being intrusive. A comfortable house waits patiently for the ministrations of its mistress. Our house is only the setting for domestic drama and doesn't deserve the consideration of a character.

Basically I am a slob at housekeeping. There are things that prevent me from remaining in this state. I have a neat mother-in-law. I have a daughter who is like her. I have a family that cooperates. Early Primary Bluebird days taught me that cleanliness is next to Godliness, and later, in M.I.A. I learned that a ruffled apron and a home permeated with the aroma of fresh-baked bread could keep a husband happy. I wish that dirt were not eternal, and that once objects were cleaned they would stay that way. But I am happy when my house is in order. My family responds to my feelings, and then more serious problems can be tackled.

Instead of doing two days work in one day, wisdom would dictate to our sisters, and to every other person, that if they desire long life and good health, they must, after sufficient exertion, allow the body to rest before it is entirely exhausted. —Brigham Young

Housekeeping is like the Word of Wisdom: we master it, and then go on to more important things. Cleanliness is pleasant but order is more important, and orderly lives require that ordering a house take a minor role. The dirty dishes can never be conquered; we have them with us always. By relegating them to their own brief hour we can rise above them. Housekeeping can be put down by this final insult: Do it but don't think about it.