

"What A Mess!"
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2 December 2007

"After moving I lived with a friend for about six months. Then, as all little birdies do, I decided I needed my own nest," writes Kim Taylor.

"At first, I was determined to find another dream house. Something beautiful and peaceful out in the country. For a mere \$100,000 or two, this dream could be mine.

Okay, new dream. I'd buy a few acres and put a mobile home on it 'til I could afford to build.

I could find land for sale. Lots of land. In chunks. For chunks of money. And no mobile homes were allowed.

Okay, so maybe something even more temporary was necessary. I called my land-baron friends, and they had just the little place I was looking for – until I looked at it. 'Do you have anything else?'

Well, they did have this little trailer out in the woods.

'I'll take it.'

'Look at it first,' my friend said.

And I did and I took it anyway.

It really is a nice little trailer – er, mobile home. Two bedrooms. One for my part-time children and one for me. And just enough room to turn around in the living room, kitchen, and bath.

Apparently, the rental business is not for everyone. I've been cleaning for three weeks now and I keep finding little prizes left by the former tenants. I've been finding boo-boos and the handyman, Doyle, has been coming over to fix them.

Saturday, my bed went through the floor. Not all the way through. Not all of my bed. And not while I was using my bed as a trampoline. I was just sitting on my bed. And one corner of it went through the floor.

I called my friend, the land-lord, 'Sounds like you've got a rotten floor,' says he.

'Yep, pretty rotten,' says I.

'I'll call Doyle,' says he.

Me and Doyle, we're getting pretty tight.

Then after a trip to the laundromat, I went appliance shopping. I went to my friendly used appliance dealer. We made a deal, and they loaded my formerly owned washer and dryer into my truck - where they stayed for two days until I could round up enough people to get them into the house. Where they sat for two days until I could get the right parts to hook them up. Where they sit now as I wait for my friendly, used appliance dealer to come wade through the pond that was once my hallway to find out why my formerly-owned appliance peed all over my floor.

I needed to mop the floor, but I was planning on the old-fashioned mop and bucket routine.

I'm trying deep breathing. You know, the Zen mindful approach. The 'don't let the little things eat your insides up' approach. I've tried playing solitaire. I called a friend. And now, I'm sitting here.

I could go clean the bathroom. Read a novel. Really mop the floor.

But I can't do much of anything 'cause I'm fixated on this hole in my floor, which is too far away from the water to be a drain, and this water in my floor, which is being soaked up by the dirty towels I was planning on having in the washing machine, not under it.

I know, maybe I'll balance my checkbook."

We've all had those days, weeks or months; where nothing goes smoothly and if something could go wrong it does. Anger, exasperation and despair often accompany these moments. We can feel helpless and inadequate in the face of them. Under all the frustration there lies a certainty that somehow we could have prevented the mess we currently find ourselves in. If only we had done such and such, talked with so and so, planned it out more thoroughly. If only we were more organized and orderly all would have gone well. At least that is the fantasy.

There is a pervading belief in our culture that neatness and order prevent and stave off disorder and mayhem. The idea is that if our daily clutter and detritus are under tight management, then we will be better able to deal with and survive what life throws at us. We have convinced ourselves that the unpredictable can be foreseen if only we used the correct organizational tool. And if we are lacking in tools we need only travel to one of the dozen or so shops popping up all over, designed especially for our organizational needs. They are filled with boxes and file folders, cabinets and planning paraphernalia, all promising to get in order the messes of our lives.

Underneath this belief of possible control lies an even deeper and more insidious conviction that mess is innately wrong and never desirable. Whereas neatness and order are deemed examples of divine living. "Order is Heaven's first law," espouses Alexander Pope. In fact, who of us, whether we consider ourselves messy or neat, would disagree with the following statements that appear in *A Perfect Mess*? "Neatness and organization enable us to function more efficiently, and in general more effectively. Neatness and organization simplify and structure the world in useful ways. Neatness and organization reduce mistakes and oversights, and usefully filter out random disturbances from the world around us. Neatness and organization are aesthetically pleasing and relaxing."

It is not that these statements are inaccurate or wrong, but Abrahamson and Freedman argue that they are not true for every situation and circumstance. And unfortunately many people not only believe neatness to be a better way to live, they believe it to be better morally. We make snap judgments of people based on the neatness of their appearance and we worry about others making judgments of us based on our tidiness.

If you are like me, then you have on more than one occasion hurriedly stuffed the wayward items laying around your home into closets or rooms whose doors you can close off to the guests that are about to arrive. Or when making plans with others to travel somewhere together and you feel a sinking feeling when asked if you could drive and you pause awkwardly knowing you have no room in your car to take anyone but yourself because of the files or toys or empty water bottles strewn throughout it. Many

of us are afraid to let others see how we really live, how disorganized and disorderly our homes are, our desks are, our living is.

“On our way to Maine one summer,” writes Rev. Barbara Merritt, “my older son and I found ourselves following one of the most ridiculous looking cars I have ever seen. It was a sports utility vehicle, laden with all the evidence of American consumerism and conspicuous consumption. Lashed onto the top were a canoe and a kayak. Strapped onto the back bumper were four bicycles. Golf clubs, tennis rackets, and camping equipment were visible through the Jeep’s back window. Every car that passed by stared in astonishment at this visible study in recreational excess.

The thing I found most remarkable about the vehicle in front of us was that we owned it. My husband and younger son were driving our Jeep up to Maine and we followed. After staring at our car for some miles, and noticing the attention it was attracting from drivers-by, I decided that this was an auspicious moment to have a discussion with my older child about ‘nonmaterialism.’ I explained, trying to keep a straight face, that his father and I were dedicated to an ethic of simplicity, diminishing consumption, and intentional reduction in material accumulation.

My son greeted this pronouncement with hysterical laughter. Even I had to chuckle. But I was persistent, and after his raucous laughter subsided, I explained how, throughout our married life we had, both of us, consistently chosen jobs that paid less, even when we were offered positions that paid more; how we had invested our modest resources into education and travel rather than in real estate and furniture; and how we tried constantly to decrease our dependence and reliance on material wealth.

Notwithstanding the visual evidence to the contrary, we were working to simplify our lifestyle.

[My son] listened to everything I said, and then he replied, 'I understand Mom. You and Dad are nonmaterialistic. You just aren't very good at it.'

Seeing how we really live isn't always pretty and often it is humbling, especially when done so through another's eyes. And it is the eyes of others we worry about when possibly exposing ourselves as less orderly than we would like to be. It is a measure of friendship even, to have someone over without a full day of cleaning beforehand. You know, those people it doesn't matter if they see you in your lay about clothes or the pile of dirty dishes in the sink, because you can trust them not to think less of you because of it.

Abrahamson and Freedman argue that, contrary to popular belief, mess and the right portion of disorganization can actually be a benefit rather than a hindrance. "Though it flies in the face of almost universally accepted wisdom," they write, "moderately disorganized people, institutions and systems frequently turn out to be more efficient, more resilient, more creative, and in general more effective than highly organized ones." They cite artists and musicians, I would add writers and engineers, all of whom understand firsthand how some degree of mess brings about the ability to create or problem-solve. "To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now," writes Samuel Beckett.

Irwin Kula, a rabbi based in Manhattan and author of *Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life*, speaking to Penelope Green in an article for the New York Times

21 December 2006 is quoted as saying, "Order can be profane and life-diminishing. It's a flippant remark, but if you've never had a messy kitchen, you've probably never had a home-cooked meal. Real life is very messy, but we need to have models about how that messiness works."

Life is messy, unpredictable and denying that is denying the very truth of living. There are those who believe and promote the myth that somehow if everything has its place and there is a place for everything, we will in some way gain control over life. If we can take control and put into boxes the external material things that fill our lives then the internal chaos of feelings and emotions and conflict and fears may also be quieted or silenced. And sometimes that works and they end up in nice neat compartments of our subconscious at least for a little while, but most of the time all those unwanted internal struggles remain.

For me, when I am upset or fretful over something, I tend to clean and often I feel more settled and my manic thoughts seem to be hushed a bit. But what all the cleaning that I could possibly do won't accomplish is actually settle whatever it is I am worried about. My clean house will not ensure that our church budget balances this year; my clothes being washed and hung neatly in the closet above my shoes sitting a row will not bring peace to war torn countries and neither will my manicured lawn and clean pool deliver food to those who go hungry. All cleaning does for me is help me feel as though there exists some order, some small and trivial things over which I have control and dominance.

“No matter how messy the world is,” write Abrahamson and Freedman, “we humans seem determined not see it that way. We enlist all sorts of schemes to avoid having to accept disorder and randomness...” This imposed order is evident even in our theology. Within Hinduism and Buddhism lay the belief of karma, that in one’s current life you are ‘working out’ the karma accumulated in a previous life or lifetimes. We hear the desire for order and purpose in ‘everything happens for a reason.’ We want there to be an order to the world, we want our living to be following some kind of path, whether divinely guided or not. There are those who become profoundly uncomfortable with the idea that they survived an accident that others did not. In order to process that reality, often survivors will imbue the event with deep meaning and see it as an indication that they must have some greater purpose in life other than simply living.

Here is where I stand out, even from many of you. I am not convinced that all things happen for a reason. I am not sure that every life has a plan to be followed or a purpose beyond being our best selves more often than not. Was I always meant to be a minister, that no matter what decisions I made in life I would have ended up here? Were you *meant* to be who you are? Did some action or inaction in a previous lifetime affect who we are today? Personally, my quickest answer is “I don’t know” and my follow up is “I am not sure it matters.” We are who we are, we have the life we have and we must in every moment of every day do our best in deciding how to live it. For me, personally, it is as simple and as difficult as that. I whole-heartedly believe the world to be messy and chaotic and in rhythm all at once. Personally, that is where much

of the beauty lies for me – in the mess amid order. I do not find comfort in the idea that what I experience now is directly related to what and who I was previously or according to some plan I had no part in creating. I do believe that some things just happen, whether they bring suffering or joy, turmoil or comfort. For me, life doesn't follow an easily read path. The power and comfort I seek comes in these words, to paraphrase T. S. Elliot, "Life is what we can make of the mess we have made of things."

"It's chasing an illusion to think that any organization – be it a family unit or a corporation – can be completely rid of disorder on any consistent basis," said Jerrold Pollak, a neuropsychologist at Seacoast Mental Health Center in Portsmouth, N.H., whose work involves helping people tolerate the inherent disorder in their lives. "And if it could, should it be? Total organization is a futile attempt to deny and control the unpredictability of life."¹

It is this unpredictability that is the essence of the work of Abrahamson and Freedman. They believe some degree of mess and disorder are necessary, never mind inevitable, and that those of us who agonize over the amount of disorder in our lives do so to our detriment. "Take it from the real experts," they write, "messy dining room tables and unmade beds aren't the problem. It's when you can't get through the doorways of your home, or can never find room enough on your bed to lie down, that it's time to seek help." For the rest of us, they suggest that we simply not worry about it so much, because we are wasting valuable time and energy combating something inescapable, namely a life filled with perfect mess.

¹ [from the New York Times 21 December 2006 article by Penelope Green]