

welcome

Loving the Mess

Why are we suddenly obsessed with organizing? Closets. Drawers. Garages. Kitchens. Children. Lovers. The trash. Everything and everyone has to get in line. I read an article in a fashion magazine about a man who comes to your house, paws through your clothes, and tells you what to throw away. *Oh no*, I wanted to shout, *surely not that . . .* as another \$1,000 dress went flying into the trash heap. *Someday you're going to regret losing that.* Now there's an entire magazine devoted to organizing your closets. Its popularity must speak to some great psychic craving we have these days—an ache for simpler times, an embarrassment about the riches we've heaped into our lives. No one is advocating getting rid of everything, but for some reason we want to hide it all. Well, this has its good side, and it has its ridiculous side. The problem is there's nothing real about being hyper-organized, and nothing simple about it either. Life is messy. And it should be.

We get attached to things. They get attached to us. Most of us can remember the trauma of having a dear teddy bear or a tattered blanket snatched from our arms to be thrown into the washing machine. Nothing about it was the same afterward, not the look, not the feel, not the smell of the beloved. It would take weeks for things to get back to normal. Entire books have been written about such episodes. We've barely recovered, and then we turn around and inflict the same pain on our children. Well, we're right, aren't we? Never mind the germs. What about such profound attachments? They're unnerving to witness; we want to protect our children from such intensity—what is going to happen if (when) they lose that thing? Better spread the affection around; there's less likelihood of heartbreak.

And so we begin to learn to keep things in “reasonable” boundaries, which leads to putting things in their proper bins. (Come to think of it, is this search for organizational methods simply the expression of a yearning for the cubbyholes of yesteryear? I do admit there was a great comfort in knowing, as kindergarten life swirled chaotically, intrusively, terrifyingly around you, that there was at least one place that was yours alone, where your things would be safe and protected.)

The kitchen seems to be a place of particular organizational obsession. A mere ten years ago, a knife drawer, with specially built slots in wooden blocks to protect each blade, was a novelty. Now kitchen drawers are so highly articulated that it takes an engineering mind to figure

out how to put things away. These kitchens are about a control that extends far beyond the borders of your house. Try shopping for them. No, you cannot buy that particularly appealing jar of nutmeg; it won't fit into the spice ledge. No, you cannot have another pan. It won't fit into the special sliding drawer for pots. No, you must not indulge in a supersized box of oatmeal; it is too tall for the pullout and unfold pantry. And that antique tray? Forget it. Too wide for the tray slot. Perhaps a little discipline amid the pots and pans is a good thing. But don't anyone dare suggest I straighten out my china cabinet.

I can just see it now: the China Buster shows up at my house to go through the cupboard of stuff I've accumulated over the years. Do you really need four different sets of teacups? *Well, I get bored with the same pattern.* Tell the truth—when was the last time you gave a dinner party for 60? *But you never know, I might have a life again.* Don't you think 20 espresso cups is a little excessive? *But look how beautiful they are; old black Wedgwood isn't so easy to find.* This kind of questioning gets under your skin. It means that the next time you just happen to be wandering by a shopwindow and catch a glimpse of an extraordinary Josef Hoffmann black-and-white-striped espresso set, with a pot shaped like a gourd, surrounded by the most cunning little cups in all sorts of glorious colors, you're going to have to tell yourself firmly you cannot possibly have it, because there is no place to put it. What's the fun of that? Or you have to start convincing a friend that he absolutely must have it, so that you can come over and pour coffee. An unlikely event, perhaps, but altogether impossible if the china isn't available. Where's the hope?

Don't touch my stuff. The china cabinet is off-limits. Just because I can never find what I want when I need it doesn't mean it needs organizing. Sometimes you have to learn to give up control and yield to the happy accidents of chance.

And did I say china cabinet? That was a lie. I have three sets of metro shelving in the basement to hold the spillover from the cabinet upstairs, which is actually a front. It just *looks* like I have a normal amount of stuff.

We all worry about what our houses say about us. I can tell you one thing. If you are too organized, your house will say nothing about you. And that's the worst possible message.

