

Do you think our children notice all the things we do for them?

I don't mean the big things: the vacations, the schools, the meals at the table. I mean the thousands of tiny things we weave into their nests day in and day out. I was wondering about this as I was opening up our beach house for the summer, getting it ready for the precious few weeks when we can be there together. I had unpacked countless boxes of clothing, done loads of laundry, folded it and arranged it in neat piles in each son's closet. Then, after tucking a fragrant paper sheet into each drawer, I caught myself thinking, why am I doing this? They won't even notice it or care in the slightest.

There is, of course, the argument that I care. I love keeping house; it is only in cleaning that I really understand how my house is working, or if it is ailing. The faint water marks in the corners of windows tell me a leak is forming; that scrape beginning to deepen in the paint of the sliding door means the runner needs adjusting. It matters to me that the closets aren't crammed with junk, that things don't fall on your head when you open a cabinet. I have a horror of becoming a pack rat. I find vacuuming therapeutic; it forces me to focus on the task at hand, and I like to see trouble disappearing so easily. It is consoling to have a simple job and to be able to complete it successfully—to lay aside the complications and anxieties of the bigger jobs in our lives.

It matters that there is order, if only because it gives me a sense of security and control. I can hold the chaos of the world (or in my head) at bay when I look around me and the floors are clean, the shelves neatly arranged. I don't think this is false security. It is simply easy security. I cannot think, much less write, if my desk is a mess; perhaps this dates from the grade school lesson indelibly etched in my memory: pencils at the top of the desk, held in place by the ruler; books in a neat pile on the right; paper and notebooks stacked squarely in the middle. Now we can begin; open to Chapter One. If only life obeyed such clear rules.

Keeping house for the boys makes me feel good. It is a way to show my love and my devotion to their well-being. It is a way to surround them at home; everything they touch, I have touched. Cleaning the rooms they don't even live in very often anymore provides me with an excuse to look

through the beloved old books and give the abandoned stuffed animals a little propping up.

It is the smallest gestures that contain the greatest love: Coming home at the end of a long week, going straight out to the garden to pull together a sweet bouquet of anything at all, and leaving it on the beloved's nightstand. Taking down the oversized teapot and boiling the mint and verbena leaves with ginger, lemon, and honey for something soothing on a chilly autumn afternoon. Sending a book in the mail that you know someone will appreciate. Drawing a bath, stacking the towels on a chair, lighting a candle, and leaving someone alone because what they need is solitude buoyed by trust. Tucking stalks of fresh lavender into the wool blankets and sweaters you are putting away for the summer. Making the bed in the morning, and turning it down at the end of the day. Pulling the curtains just so, clicking on the night-light. Some of these things we do spontaneously, others repeatedly. They become ritualized (which, with the implied deliberation, is a bit different from habitual), and we count on these gestures as ways of expressing affection when other means fail us. Surprise is great, but it is reliability that gets us through the long haul.

Is any of this going to change the world? Don't get me started. The details of everyday life are powerful. Just imagine what our days would be like if we tried to approach one another with kindness and consideration, each and every step of the way.

But back to the children: do they notice any of it? Perhaps not explicitly; they may accept our tiny and tender gifts as their due—they may, if they are among the lucky, never have known life without such touches. And such habits of living may seep into their consciousness so that one day they, in turn, will do sweet, small things for their own loved ones. I will tell you that my younger son came home from college, cruised through the rooms, inspecting them top to bottom, nodding approval. He opened a closet door, inhaled deeply, and said, "Smells like Mom."



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