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Cleaning Out Closets

Substitute purse, refrigerator, or desk for closets, and you get something of the same idea of what closets mean in my life, without the crushing necessity of a full day's labor. In my life, those first three items accumulate clutter and disorder in much the same ways closets do, but because they are smaller and less numerous, I find them much easier to contemplate, even much easier to bring to a kind of order.

Before I tackle the actual closets, I propose to look at the smaller tasks as an indication of the scope and terrorizing difficulty of bringing order to closets.

First, my purse. Every week or so I need to examine the contents of my purse to eliminate the grocery lists and tickets, the sales receipts, the lists of library books, the crumpled tissues, and miscellaneous unidentified impedimenta, all of which tend to make that abused necessity bulge and weigh too much. Amazingly, most of these items get transferred back and forth, without cleaning, among the two or three purses I use to coordinate, more or less, the outfits I wear. When I have a tidy mood, sometimes I eliminate weight by scooping out the accumulated pennies. More often, a general inspection will reveal a five-inch scrap of skirt I carried to try to find a coordinating blouse, the agenda of a meeting during which I jotted down items to remember, like "call Helen at 320-3895," or "get carrots," or even, mysteriously, "James River." At the same time, I can return credit cards to their proper storage place so that I can find them next time they're needed. My reward is a moderately slim handbag weighing two or three ounces lighter than when I began.

The refrigerator is a similar chore. When I cannot find an empty shelf for the latest leftover that needs to be stored until it's used or becomes respectably old enough to pitch out, it's time to evaluate the bits and pieces that accumulate there. I can nearly always identify the contents of every container, but each one needs also to be evaluated for usefulness. Frequently, such an inspection will remind me of one or two appropriate items for the next meal. After discarding items no longer useful with a note to myself not to let anything else go to waste, I am rewarded with some extra space to begin my hoarding all over again.

I'm not entirely sure why my desk should become such a heap of papers and books unless it reflects my aversion to filing and my feeling that this particular book will be useful tomorrow, so why return it to its shelf. The desk is really not too big a task to straighten up until I consider that it has spawned several briefcases which attract files that duplicate each other and that always contain papers which belong in one of the other briefcases. Because this disorder causes such chaos in my life, I generally will deal with it fairly frequently. Then, I can feel virtuous and tidy for several days until I find that a similar confusion has started all over again. But purse, refrigerator, and desk are really only micro-symptoms of a much greater need which I seldom address: **CLEANING OUT CLOSETS**. The first ten or so years of our married life, there was no need to have a special closet-cleaning-out session because we moved frequently enough that the act of

moving accomplished the emptying of old closets and the neat ordering of new ones. We had a friend who claimed to have solved the mystery of which household items to move: he claimed he made a heap of all his possessions in the yard, lighted a match to the perimeter, hopped into the middle, and saved the things he really needed. We found the idea amusing but not applicable to us because we had so few possessions that we could easily move them from the old to the new location. We even accomplished a cross-country move by piling all our clothes, linens, kitchen equipment, books, records, and us into our car. But with maturity came a certain stability and the acquiring of new possessions along with a couple of children. When we moved from Dallas to Virginia twenty some years ago, I discovered that I had a talent I hadn't been aware of. I could make total use of a closet, every cubic inch of it. Never mind that the stuff in the bottom and back was inaccessible. It was there - by the ton. Most of it we moved to Richmond, to a larger house, with more and bigger closets.

I started out slowly, keeping the closets in enough order for us to find most things we wanted. As the children left home, we served as their short-term storage. Most of their things are now gone, but I find that a couple of the closets resemble those we unloaded when we moved from Dallas. Oh, we can locate everything we need in our clothes closets, but two others are the ones I need to "clean." They have been attractive parking places for out-of-season clothes, for dress fabric, for knitting yarns and needles, for instruction books for making Christmas ornaments and presents, for package wrapping papers and ribbons, and for birthday and Christmas presents I buy in advance and sometimes forget I have.

Those are the closets I need to tackle. Because they're not as easy as my purse, refrigerator, or desk, they're going to take a full day apiece, at a minimum, and I can't seem to find the will, or the energy, or the time. Like Fibber McGee, I'm going to clean up that closet one of these days. Maybe.

Writing about my disgraceful closets and my disgraceful procrastination made me ashamed enough to tackle the two worst ones - after a couple of days of wrestling with the problem of what to do with the bulk of the accumulations. I resolved to be merciless in assessing the worth of every item, throwing out the useless, giving away the no-longer-needed, and assigning neat locations for the manageable remaining items. First, I switched summer clothes with winter clothes, sorting some of each into a parcel to send to Goodwill. I was in better shape for finding something to wear, but the *closet* didn't really look that much better. So, on to the really difficult one which contains gift wrapping paper, gifts for coming birthday and Christmas, hoarded knitting yarns, and an endless array of "projects," some started and abandoned, many just waiting to be worked on. That closet has two doors to a space which stretches across one end of my study. The left door revealed the gift-wrapping-paper section. "Hmmm, I think I'll work on that later. The right-hand door should be more interesting and possibly more easily handled." The shelves across the end contain some of my knitting yarns and needles in reasonable order. But, the rest is in sad disarray. The first package revealed a partially knitted sweater. I really need a new sweater, and I like to knit when we take a trip, especially one to Washington, such as we had planned for that weekend. Knitting in the car demands

enough attention to keep my eyes down and away from the hazards of negotiating the Beltway. But I had to sort out the next step in the knitting process. So, I closed the door and happily settled down to knitting.

Since then, I've found three projects I had planned for the coming Christmas season. I've never gotten the Christmas spirit so early or been so conscientious in starting planned projects. I've finished an advent calendar, decorated a shirt, and gathered the Christmas cards for addressing week after next.

I think I'll tackle the closets after Christmas.