

THE POLITICS OF HOUSEWORK

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Housework. What? You say this is all trivial? Wonderful! That's what I thought. It seems perfectly reasonable. We both had careers, both had to work a couple of days a week to earn enough to live on, so why shouldn't we share the housework? So I suggested it to my mate and he agreed-- most men are to hip to turn you down flat. You're right, he said. It's only fair.

Then an interesting thing happened. I can only explain it by stating that we women have been brain-washed more than even we imagine. Probably too many years of seeing media-women coming over their shiny waxed floors or breaking down over their dirty shirt collars. Men have no such conditioning. They recognize the essential fact of housework right from the very beginning. Which is that it stinks.

Here's my list of dirty chores: buying groceries, carting them home and putting them away; cooking meals and washing dishes and pots; doing the laundry; digging out the place when things get out of control; washing floors. The list could go on but the sheer necessities are bad enough. All of us have to do these jobs, or get someone else to do them for us. The longer my husband contemplated these chores, the more repulsed he became, and so proceeded the change from the normally sweet considerate Dr. Jekyll into the crafty Mr. Hyde who would stop at nothing to avoid the horrors of---housework. As he felt himself backed into a corner laden with dirty dishes, brooms, mops and reeking garbage, his front teeth grew longer and pointier, his fingernails haggled and his eyes grew wild. Housework trivial? Not on your life! Just try to share the burden.

So ensued a dialogue that's been going on for several years. Here are some of the high points.

'I don't mind sharing the house work, but I don't do it very well. We should each do the things we're best at.

Meaning: Unfortunately I'm no good at things like washing dishes or cooking. What I do best is a little light carpentry, changing light bulbs, moving furniture. (How often do you move furniture).

Also meaning: Historically the lower classes (Blacks and women) have had hundreds of years doing menial jobs. It would be a waste of manpower to train someone else to do them now.

Also meaning: I don't like the dull stupid boring jobs, so you should do them.

'I don't mind sharing the work, but you'll have to show me how to do it'.

Meaning: I ask a lot of questions and you'll have to show me everything, everytime i do it because I don't remember so good. Also, don't try to sit down and read while I'm doing my jobs because I'm going to annoy hell out of you until it's easier to do them yourself.

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'We used to be happy! (said whenever it was his turn to do something)

Meaning: I used to be so happy.

Meaning: Life without housework is bliss. No quarrel here. Perfect agreement.

'We have different standards, and why should I have to work to your standards. That's unfair.'

Meaning: If I begin to get bugged by the dirt and crap, I will say 'This place sure is a sty' or 'How can anyone live like this?' and wait for your reaction. I know that all women have a sore called quilt over a messy house or housework is ultimately my responsibility. If I rub this sore lone and hard enough it'll bleed and you'll do the work. I can outwait you.

Also meaning: I can provoke innumerable scenes over the house work issue. Eventually, doing all the housework yourself will be less painful to you than trying to get me to do half.

'I've got nothing against sharing the housework, but you can't make me do it on your schedule.'

Meaning: passive resistance. I'll do it when I damn well please, if at all. If my job is doing dishes it's easier to do them once a week. If taking our laundry, once a month. If washing the floors, once a year. If you don't like it, do it yourself oftener, and then I won't do it at all.

'I hate it more than you. You don't mind it so much'.

Meaning: Housework is shitwork. It's the worst crap I've ever done. It's degrading and humiliating for someone of my intelligence to do it. But for someone of your intelligence...

'Housework is too trivial to even talk about.'

Meaning: It's even more trivial to do. Housework is beneath my status. My purpose in life is to deal with matters of significance. Yours is to deal with matters of insignificance. You should do the housework.

'In animal societies, wolves, for example, the top animal is usually a male even where he is not chosen for brute strength but on the basis of cunning and intelligence. Isn't that interesting?'

Meaning: I have historical, psychological, anthropological and biological justification for keeping you down. How can you ask the top wolf to be equal?

'Women's Liberation isn't really a political movement.'

Meaning: The Revolution is coming too close to home.

Also meaning: I am only interested in how I am oppressed, not how I oppress others. Therefore, the war, the draft and the university are political. Women's Liberation is not.

'Man's accomplishments have always depended on getting help from other people, mostly women. What great man would have accomplished what he did if he had to do his own housework?'

Meaning: Oppression is built into the system and I as the white male receive the benefits of this system. I don't want to give them up.