

The Dishwasher Revelation

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It was before we bought our house and still had separate apartments. We were getting ready for work and I came out of the bathroom to find him unloading my dishwasher. No asking, hinting or prompting on my part. So I thanked him delightedly, thinking, "Wow! What a great guy!"

Minutes later I opened the cupboard to get my vitamins, and noticed that the measuring cups weren't nested properly. They were stacked willy-nilly, askew, teetering almost perilously on the lazy susan where they normally reside.

Now, everyone knows measuring cups. They're designed to nestle -- snugly, tidily, happily -- one atop the other in a comfortingly solid stack, like warm puppies in a whelping box. And here were mine, doing no such thing.

So I did what any normal person would do. I opened my mouth to speak, saying something like, "Oh, honey, when you put these away next time, would you stack them properly?" But something made me stop. I stood there, mouth slightly ajar, as a question hit my consciousness. "Is this really important to me?"

I was 36 and in the first really serious relationship of my life. This man was marriage material. "Is this really important to me?" I thought of all my friends who complained about their mates not doing chores, not helping around the house, not helping with the kids and I wondered about it. Somehow I had stumbled upon a man who willingly, unprompted, unloads the dishwasher. Do I really want to mess with that? For measuring cups?

In a flash I saw a few months of "Oh, honeys..." and wondered what they might lead to. I remembered my friend Paul complaining how his wife insisted on the towels being folded "the right way," in thirds and then halves. And his wife complaining to me that he never

helped with housework. Is this what happened to all those "unhelpful" husbands? Had women unwittingly ruined them?

What if we inadvertently train our spouses out of helping through our tiny reminders? Imagine you -- a grown woman who has been grocery shopping for 30 years -- are leaving for the grocery store and he is telling you, "Make sure you take the coupons. Do you have the list? Don't get the regular cheese or the fat-free cheese, get the reduced-calorie cheese." Mightn't you get a tad irritable? Mightn't you think, "Hey, I've been buying groceries for 20 years! I know how to buy groceries!" Now imagine that you went ahead and got the groceries after a long day of work and your husband complained about how you shopped, how much you spent, and what you did and didn't bring home. Mightn't you be inclined just to let said husband do the shopping himself? And the laundry, the cleaning and anything else around the house that he complained about?

I realized that I was assuming that my way was the right way, and not just when it came to the measuring cups. The endless supply of jokes about men helpless at housework seems to back me up. But what if they simply just do things differently? What if -- radical thought -- we leave them alone to do it their way and simply kept quiet? I love watching guys hold babies like footballs, and it doesn't seem to hurt the babies one bit.

Sure, you might risk a few laundry disasters. (Solved that one -- anything needing special care goes into a hand-wash bag that he knows to ignore.) You might have to live with one checkbook being unbalanced, or find blue-frosted Pop-Tarts in the cupboard and the coupons you clipped left forlornly on the counter. But if you can stand to keep quiet, you might find you have a mate who grocery shops, does laundry and takes care of the yardwork too. Fifteen years later, he still does all these things differently than me. I figured out how to work with the checkbook in a way that doesn't make either of us crazy, and while we no longer eat Pop-Tarts, he still surprises me with something fun that wasn't on the list. We trade off shopping and I happily pronounce how much I saved with the coupons when I return, victorious. He smiles indulgently. It all works out.

"Is this really important to me?" My mouth was still slightly open. I closed my mouth, turned around and gave him a big kiss. "Thank you so much for unloading the dishwasher sweetie!" And, I thought, maybe I can do this relationship thing after all.