

## “Spiritual Vacuum(ing)”

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On this Labor Day weekend,  
I want to lift up that some of us have had  
a very conflicted relationship with our paid jobs this year,  
the labor we do for money.  
All around our community, too many people have been laid off.  
Others have had to take pay cuts,  
or had to take jobs that are not what we hoped for.  
Still others are holding on to their jobs and their paychecks for now,  
but they are fearful of what might be in store down the road.  
This has not been a glorious year for paid work in our communities.

Yet the work we do,  
the labor of our hands and our hearts and our minds,  
is so much more than what we do for money.  
This Labor Day, I want to lift up the value  
of *all* of our work—  
the work we do to care for our communities and our families;  
the work we do to learn and study and share our knowledge;  
to express ourselves and to bring beauty into the world,  
through art, music, poetry;  
through cooking, gardening, and caring for our homes.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, I want to go out on a limb here  
and sing the praises of the labor we do in service to our home.  
Housework is not glamorous work,  
the work of scrubbing and mending, cleaning and tidying,  
ironing and vacuuming.

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Thomas Moore, “Foreword,” *Work and the Life of the Spirit* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1998), p. xi.

Often this work is despised, both by those who get stuck doing it  
and those who manage to avoid it.  
But it is, or it can be, sacred work,  
caring for that part of the material world  
which has been entrusted to us. Sacred work.

Believe me, I am very much aware  
that claiming there is something sacred about housework  
is a very dicey proposition.  
Up until very recently, as we all know,  
our culture had sent a message to women loud and clear:  
*your job* is to stay home and take care of the housework.  
Let us all give thanks for the women and men  
who have insisted housework is *everyone's* work.  
Let us give thanks for the feminists who have fought like gangbusters  
so that women could do whatever job they felt called to do—  
frankly, so that I could be here in this pulpit today.  
Let us give thanks for all the women like Celia Gilbert,  
who back in 1977 said, “No longer will we [women] agree to protect  
the hearth at the price of extinguishing the fire within ourselves.”<sup>2</sup>  
These days you often hear the younger generation of women  
doesn't want to describe themselves as feminists.  
Well, that's not me. I am proud to be a feminist,  
and I will be one until the day I die.

As we all know, housework is still very much a feminist issue.  
It drives me crazy that even today, all those TV commercials  
and magazine ads for cleaning products are still starring women.  
*Always* women, never a man—  
Women smiling brightly at Mr. Clean,  
women oohing and aahing over the excellent performance  
of All-Temperature Cheer,  
women sighing with delight as the scrubbing bubbles do their work.

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<sup>2</sup> Celia Gilbert, in Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels, eds., *Working It Out* (1977), quoted in *The New Beacon Book of Quotations by Women*, p. 325.

I hate it. I really hate it.

The culture changes slowly. Among straight couples, women are still doing a lot more housework than men. It's hard to change. But I hope we will get there. I think I can speak for a lot of women when I say, nothing ruins the pleasure of a good housecleaning more than the sight of our partner relaxing on the couch while we scrub the toilet.

*That's* no fun.

The novelist Paula Gosling gives us a pointed little description of this kind of scenario:

“They shared the chores of living as some couples do—she did most of the work and he appreciated it.”<sup>3</sup>

Ouch.

Housework is probably *not* going to feel very spiritual if the division of labor is simply not fair.

Being taken advantage of, day after day, year after year, is so demoralizing. And it's *wrong*.

We also have to lift up that a lot of our housework, in the past and still today, has been done by women whose ethnicity or economic status have forced them into a very few choices for working outside their home. Paid housework does not pay well. It's very hard work physically. Most of us find it less than pleasant to clean up after other people. And most of the time you're stuck using cleaning products that are pretty bad for your health. But women in the housecleaning business don't usually have much of a choice. So I want to lift up those women whose paid work is cleaning other people's homes.

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<sup>3</sup> Paula Gosling, *Backlash* (1989), quoted in *The New Beacon Book of Quotations by Women*, p. 325.

You are our sisters, our mothers, our daughters.  
For you I want fair pay, safe conditions,  
and the respect we all deserve abundantly.

The politics of who does the housework are so loaded,  
so full of emotion—shame and rage and injustice—  
that it seems awfully risky to hold up anything good  
about housework.

But I think there *is* something there.  
Speaking from my own experience  
as a woman who, like most women,  
probably does more than her share of housework,  
and also as a person of faith who wants to deepen my connection  
to the sacredness of life,  
let me speak frankly.  
When I can set the politics aside and ask myself,  
how does it actually feel to do housework in the moment?  
The truth is, under certain circumstances, I really enjoy it. I really do.

That doesn't mean I want to do *all* of the work in my house.  
I don't. *I* don't like being taken advantage of.  
(And, no, I will not come over and clean *your* house either!)  
It doesn't mean I'm always happy and perky and not tired,  
ready to dust at a moment's notice.  
I'm not. Some days I come home tired  
and cleaning is the last thing I want to do.  
But would I want to give away *all* the housework to someone else?  
Absolutely not.

Speaking just for myself,  
I do so much of my work on the computer or in meetings,  
trying to use my brain as well as I can,  
and it is so lovely to get the chance to use my hands.  
Granted, I'm not that fond of some household chores.

Doing the dishes late at night after making dinner—  
that, for me, is not so fun.

I try and try to remember Thich Nhat Hanh's advice  
to wash the dishes to wash the dishes, mindfully, joyfully.<sup>4</sup>  
But many is the night that just doesn't happen.

As a side note, I wouldn't mind going the rest of my lifetime  
without ironing.

Also, I tend to resent dust.

However, by and large, I like to clean my own house.

Getting the counters shiny, scrubbing the soap scum off the tub—

I find that so satisfying,

and the warmth of the laundry fresh from the dryer—aah!

I love vacuuming especially—watching the little bits of crud

get sucked up and leaving those nice vacuum marks on the carpet—

talk about immediate gratification: it's wonderful!

And, again, I like the physicality of it.

I like having the excuse to do something physical.

And when you're done, it is so great to sit back

and enjoy the clean house, the fruits of your labor, as it were.

Part of it is just that basic gratification of doing a job well  
and enjoying the results.

But, more than that, I believe the constant cycle of housework,

cleaning our homes when they get dirty,

repairing things when they break,

actually has the potential to be a deeply spiritual practice.

Before you tell me I'm crazy, listen to this.

I will never forget a newspaper column I read

shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

I didn't cut it out, so I can't tell you the name of the author,

or the exact words she used, but I can tell you what she said:

The thing that helped her most in those first days,

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<sup>4</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), pp. 7–8.

the thing that helped her feel safe again, a little bit in control again, was *housecleaning*.

She cleaned her house. She organized her closets.  
She straightened her desk. And it might sound trivial,  
but what she realized she was really doing  
was putting right her own small corner of the world.  
Bringing back order, restoring beauty and calmness  
in that one small, precious place.  
She couldn't stop the grief or the fear or the anger  
in the world outside,  
but in her home she could create peace  
through the work of her hands.

Another wise woman has said, "The actual cleaning is sometimes secondary to the mental housekeeping that takes place."<sup>5</sup>

I have found this to be true.

If I'm upset about something, or confused, or angry,  
housecleaning helps me sort out my thoughts and emotions.  
Scrubbing and vacuuming doesn't actually solve  
whatever the problem is, but for me it's a sort of moving meditation  
that helps me calm down and refocus my mind.  
Restoring order, restoring calm, restoring beauty:  
cleaning as a spiritual practice.

And, though I often fall short,  
I really do believe in Thich Nhat Hanh's advice  
to approach housework as a meditation practice.  
He speaks so wisely on the ways we sleepwalk through life,  
racing to get through all the tasks we don't like  
so that we can get to what we *really* want to do,  
only when we get there, we find we're already distracted  
by our worries or hopes about the future,  
so that we never allow ourselves just to be present in the moment.

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<sup>5</sup> Brenda Peterson, "The Sacredness of Chores," in Douglas Thorpe, ed., *Work and the Life of the Spirit* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1998), p. 157.

When it comes to housework, or paid work, or any work,  
we can rush through it, we can try to block out where we are  
because we think we don't want to be there.

We can wash the dishes to get them done,  
or mow the lawn to get it done,  
or write a report, or go to a meeting, or pull a shift,  
or whatever it might be,  
to get it done so we can go relax, finally,  
and rest up before we have to do it all again the next day.

Or we can invite a different awareness into our mind.  
The next time you find yourself doing something  
you don't want to be doing, you might say to yourself simply,  
"This moment." *This moment*. It only takes a moment,  
but you might find it helps you connect with the beauty and the truth  
that is present in *every* moment.

Washing the dishes, you say, *This moment*.

And you might realize that you really are tired  
and it would be just fine to leave the dishes until tomorrow,  
or to ask your spouse or your roommate to take over  
so you can put your feet up.

That would be a wonderful outcome of mindfulness.

We don't have to martyr ourselves.

We get to ask for help when we're tired.

On the other hand, you might also become aware  
of how nice the dish soap smells,  
how lovely the bowl feels in your hand.

I'm serious. You might think this sounds silly,  
but is it really so silly to practice in a way that wakes you up  
to the beauty around you,  
the sacredness of every day and every moment?

But, you might say, how do you keep it up day after day?

It's so frustrating that the dishes and the clothes  
and the floors and the counters keep getting dirty.  
The great Simone de Beauvoir once said,  
"Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework,  
with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled,  
the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day."<sup>6</sup>  
And of course she is right.  
But I would add,  
the very nature of life is that things break, things get dirty,  
things decay and die. *We* break. *We* decay and die.  
This will happen, whether we will it or no.  
Life happens in bodies that wear out.  
Everything passes, nothing stays forever.  
But something new is always, always coming forth.  
And for the time we are here, life invites us to renew ourselves  
over and over again.  
We have the power to care for what life has given us.

In this light, the simplest things we do to take care of our bodies—  
brushing our teeth, taking a shower, exercising, eating healthily—  
are like tiny sacraments,  
small moments of acceptance,  
saying *yes* to the very nature of the world.

What I want, for myself and for you,  
is to make peace with life as it is.  
I want us to be fundamentally OK with the nature of the world,  
to dwell in this life in a sacred manner.  
And if we understand our homes as an extension of ourselves,  
the simplest things we do to take care of our homes—  
vacuuming, washing the dishes, doing the laundry—  
are also tiny sacraments of caring for what we have been given,  
saying *yes* to this life we have been born into,  
this terrible and glorious cycle

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<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), quoted in *The New Beacon Book of Quotations by Women*, p. 324.

of birth and growth and decay and death.  
With the work of our hands,  
we take up the threads of the web of life,  
reweaving, restoring, renewing.  
Sacred work.

Amen.