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Housework by Gender

Our daughters came home from college for the summer. Amanda walked up the driveway and across the highway to a dude ranch six days a week, four or five hours a day, and cleaned rooms and cabins. Juniper drove up the mountain ten miles to a resort, where she cleaned rooms and cabins, took care of horses, and guided horseback trail rides.

Laura, wife and mother of our family, drove about eight miles five days a week to a country club, where she cleaned cabins, rooms, and the club house.

Twenty-seven hours a week, I took care of the Girl Scout ranch where we lived in northern Colorado's Rocky Mountains, and I wrote stories, books, essays, and poems. Sometimes, I sold part of what I wrote and helped pay our way in the world.

While Juniper and Amanda lived away from home and went to college, we forgot some of the smooth team habits that held our household neatly together all through our home school years, that started when our daughters were very small and went on until they graduated from high school, with the exception of one year each of public high school, by their own choice, to see what public school was like. During our busy summer of all living together again, dishes sometimes accumulated or other household chores lacked performance. We agreed to hold a meeting to establish a path toward more order.

I rehearsed a defense. "I put a new starter motor, a water pump, and a battery in the Subaru and got it ready for the road. I cleaned the garage. I take care of recycling, and I cut the grass. I usually fix breakfast and wash dishes after breakfast. Sometimes, I vacuum and sweep."

I read a survey. Many men think they do a larger part of the housework and child care than their wives would agree with. The survey reinforced an idea I've long held: "Don't treat surveys as fact. People often tell you what they wish they were like or did or what they think you want to hear, not what actually is."

When we held our meeting at the table in the kitchen that was fairly well cleaned and maintained, but only fairly, I said, "Men feel guilty because most of them know they're part of a male chauvinist society. Because of their sense of guilt, they lie

about what they do and about their attitudes toward housework, child care, and all the other unpaid work of existence.”

Laura said, “Not necessarily. Some of the discrepancy between what men say and what women say probably comes from a difference in perspective. A man washes the dishes and sweeps the kitchen floor, and he’s finished the housework. He doesn’t intend to lie. Maybe he doesn’t actually know what maintaining a house consist of, because he’s never done it.”

Amanda said, “A woman, especially a woman trained in professional cleaning, washes the dishes, bleaches the sink, cleans the counter tops, the stove, inside and outside, the refrigerator, washes the cupboard doors, sweeps, mops and waxes the kitchen floor, and that room is finished until she finds time to clean drawers and cupboards inside.”

Juniper didn’t participate in that discussion. About the time we had the discussion, she rode her horse to the top of a rise, where the trail emerged from the forest into meadows. She saw a bull moose at the far edge of the meadow, antlers spread wide against the morning sky. She told us later, “I was really excited. I wanted the people on the ride to see the moose, but he walked into the forest before they got to where I was.”

If what Laura and Amanda say is correct, differences in perspective by gender still speak of a culture in which women often do the largest part of unpaid but necessary work to maintain households, even if their jobs take as much time as men’s jobs.

Later, when we all four were at home, we met around the kitchen table and conferred about how we would achieve necessary housework. I didn’t get much chance to defend myself. I launched into the first part of my dramatic defense. My audience looked at me tolerantly. Amanda interrupted me, “Nobody said you didn’t do your part. We love you just like you are.”

Juniper said, “We’re busier than we ever were before, because all of us have jobs. If we want a more orderly house, we’ll have to make that a higher priority. I think we can all try harder, but we need some time just to be, too.” We magneted a written schedule to the refrigerator, with the main household chores assigned.

After our meeting, we walked together down the dirt road through the center of the ranch in late afternoon mountain sunshine. Birds sang and flew across the meadows, through the forest. Deer grazed near the small stream that runs through the ranch, looked up at us, and grazed away from us toward the

rock ridge above the meadow. At that moment, being together and seeing, feeling, and smelling the beauty of nature around us was more important than a clean and orderly house. Maybe at all times, a fastidiously clean house was lower priority than just about anything else we could do, especially if we could do whatever it was together.

Despite lack of criticism, I tried harder to ease part of the burden for the gainfully-employed women of the household. Their jobs took more hours than mine did.

Juniper and Amanda saved money for their plane tickets to England in the fall, with a college class. They studied and wrote papers for that class. Jobs, housework, and outdoor adventures took up much of our time. We found time for writing, drawing, and music.

We didn't refer much to the schedule on the refrigerator. Whoever had time did what most needed doing. If anyone wandered too far from order, we reminded that one we were a team and all members must contribute. All members contributed willingly to the best of their ability. All members remembered everyone's need to be outdoors in the natural world enough to restore their life fires and keep them burning.

One car broke beyond our ability to fix it or to pay for having it fixed. I got up at 4:30 and took Laura to work, again at 7:00 and took Juniper to work. I drove off in the afternoon at different times to bring them home.

I watched red-tailed hawks soar above the meadows and forests of the Rocky Mountains. A bald eagle coasted on air currents above us when Juniper and I rode together toward her work. Deer grazed the ridges above the road. A grey, white, black, and russet coyote crossed the dirt road ahead of us and ran into a densely growing stand of aspens whose leaves yellowed and began to fall.

At daylight the next day, elk trotted down from the ridge above the road. There were so many of them, they looked like the brown, tan, and black ground turned fluid and flowed to lower ground. Juniper said, "The whole hillside looks like it's moving."

Cold days and nights came to the Rocky Mountains. Juniper and Amanda flew to England. Laura and I went on with our work. We read letters from our daughters as they traveled around England and Scotland with their college class. After the class, Juniper traveled to Spain with a friend, and Amanda went back to Scotland. Eventually, they headed home again, stayed there a while, and then went back to college.

Together or apart, all the members of our family support each other. We found a workable way to divide housework equitably. We still have a core of identity as a family, as four people who love each other and work together, that allows each of us our individual direction and goals.

Working together on our education helped us establish a close family, whose closeness holds even when we are around the world from each other. Education became everything we did, not just subjects that prepared our daughters for college.

We didn't focus much on material goals, things we wanted and could own. Food, clothing, some form of transportation, and shelter came to us in ways that were supportive of goals that meant more to us than the fulfillment of material needs.

We focused on love, on spiritual growth and understanding, on the fulfillment of the creative drive that is in us all, on the individuality that is in all of us and that meshes well with loved ones around us. We focused on curiosity that guided us into comprehensive education for all of us. We focused on living that led us to a depth of existence that we have been grateful for through all the processes of our lives and that we are still grateful for. We focused on education that taught all of us how to learn, how to find what we need for spiritual fulfillment, for fulfillment as a family, for fulfillment as four individuals making their way in the world.