

Toilet Paper

Thirty years, Liz hasn't learned to shut the bathroom door. She's talking to me, she walks into the bathroom, sits down and takes a leak, leaves the door standing open, goes on talking. A few times, I say, "Liz, shut the bathroom door." She shuts it, but it doesn't last. Next time, she leaves it open. Least if she's taking a crap, she shuts the door. Couple of times, I asked her, "You shut the bathroom door when other people're around?"

"Yes, of course. Of course I do." Okay, so probably she does. One thing I know about Liz after thirty years. She never lies. Even if she should lie, she doesn't.

I can't always be trying to teach her something, so I just let it go, she doesn't shut the door, I just walk away, do something else. But that open bathroom door, that's how I see about the toilet paper. I don't want to watch, embarrasses me, but I'm walking by and she rolls toilet paper off. She wraps it around her hand when she rolls it off, half a roll. Okay, be fair about it, not half a roll, but a bunch, damn near a quarter-roll, big wad, and she uses the whole thing, one wipe, for taking a leak.

I say, "You can't use toilet paper like that. No wonder we go through so much toilet paper. You know where that stuff comes from? That's trees. That's where toilet paper comes from, trees. Don't waste it like that."

"I'm not wasting it, Rod. I have to use toilet paper to wipe with." Now she's blushing, the one embarrassed. I can tell just looking at her, she's embarrassed to talk about it.

I try to be gentle. I got something to tell her, and I don't want to lose her attention before I get it said. I say, "Look, Liz, this is how you do it. Just fold the squares. Two-ply tissue like this, three squares is all you need, just fold them over one on the other, like this. Maybe four in a messy situation, but..."

"Rod, I am a grown woman. I've been using toilet paper all my life, and I do not need you to tell me how to use toilet paper." She finished fastening up and walked away in a huff, didn't even wash her hands. I almost said, "Liz, you didn't wash your hands," but only so much I can say at a time. Bit my tongue and kept my mouth shut.

I fixed my own lunch, fixed her a sandwich too, said, "Liz, you got to wash your hands before you eat." She looked like she was going to say something, but she washed her hands and sat down across the table from me, and we ate. I didn't say anything else about toilet paper that day.

Couple of times after that, we're not even near the bathroom, I try to tell her, figure maybe she won't be embarrassed to hear me talk about it, can't figure out anyway how she can sit there and take a leak with the door open, me watching the whole thing including wiping, and it doesn't embarrass her, but if I even mention using toilet paper right, she's so embarrassed, she can't talk about it. Communication gets weird with Liz sometimes.

I never did see that before. Her working, me working, we never were around the bathroom together much. I'm only working part time now, and I'm here a lot more; I see things I never saw before. Thin walls, too, sometimes Liz shuts the door, but if I'm close, I hear the toilet paper roll when she rolls paper off, and I know she's still using one hell of a lot. I can hear the trees falling.

Am I powerless around this woman I been married to thirty years? I made a few changes in the way we do things. Once I changed from working full time plus overtime to working part time, I took all the clothes out of my dresser and folded them the way I want them and put them back in. I took my clothes out of the closet, turned the hangers the right way, rearranged the clothes, and put them back in. Liz comes in when I'm finishing up and says, "You going to take care of your own stuff? That's a relief. Maybe you could take care of laundry."

So I do, and her stuff, I started to show her how to fold her stuff so she can see what she's got in each drawer and have more room to put everything, but she yanked away that velour top I was trying to show her with, and she stuffed it in her drawer, didn't even fold it, and she stomped out of the bedroom, so I figured, hey, you want your dresser to be a mess, sure doesn't hurt me, and I just put her laundry on her bed so she can put it away the way she wants it.

I'm doing the laundry, so I start taking care of the beds. I like that. If Liz changes sheets, she puts the design on the top sheet up, colorful flowers, and that's not the way it goes. Up, it just gets covered with a blanket. I put the flowers down, shining down on us. Flowers are for us, not for the blanket. I've told her that several times over the years, but she never remembers. Now I'm making the beds, and the flowers face down, face us when we're sleeping, flowers against our skin.

Finally, one time I hear Liz rolling off about five yards of toilet paper, I just can't take it anymore.

When she comes out and goes into the kitchen, I go in, I grab a new roll of toilet paper, I sit her down at the table, I say, "Liz, you got to listen to me. It matters. This stuff, people don't give a damn, but somebody's got to, somebody's got to care.

You got to listen to this. Either you listen, or that's it, we're finished."

So we go through it. "Three squares if it's double-ply tissue. You fold them over on the lines, and you tear it off on the line, and that's plenty. Maybe four squares sometimes. You can tell. If you get it wrong, not enough, you got the sink right there. You can wash your hands, but three squares, that'll almost always be right. Even four, if you use four squares, it'll be a lot less than the way you wind off four or five yards and then wet up or dirty up maybe about one or two percent of it, flush the whole thing down the toilet, just a waste."

She busts into tears, stands up, madder than hell, says, "If you're going to leave me over toilet paper, just get your stuff packed and get going. Leave." stalks off, won't listen. Turns at the door, "Suitcases are in the walk-in closet. The big blue one with wheels, that's mine. Susan gave me that one for my birthday. You can have the rest of them, whatever you need." Slams the door behind her, gone. I don't know where.

Okay, I got a question to answer. Would I leave over her not listening? Maybe so. It isn't just toilet paper. It's me. If she can't even listen to me, whatever I got to say, should I stay?

I wish I'd known this would happen four months ago, when I decided to cut my job to part time. Fact of the matter now is, I can't afford to leave her. She works, makes pretty good money, and I work part time, and we can make it together, but by myself? I don't know. She makes enough, she can support herself, keep the house, make all the payments, she'll do okay, but I don't think I can make it on my own now, maybe have to stand in town on the corner, hold up a sign, "Will work for food, a place to take shelter from the storm."

So if I leave her over toilet paper, will that do any good? If I leave, I'm out there on my own, barely making it, about to starve, freeze to death, she's still here, still rolling a quarter of a roll off every time she sits down. Leaving doesn't save any toilet paper.

But I said I'd leave, and I can't just act like I didn't say it, so I get the suitcases out to start packing and open them on my bed. Then I leave the suitcases and go out in the garage. Several things in the garage I have to get together before I'm ready to pack. If I leave this stuff all spread out on the work bench, she won't know what to do with it. I better put it all away. I can come back for it later, after I move out. Takes me a long time to get everything in order.

Couple of hours go by, she finds me. She's over being mad. One thing about Liz, she gets really mad, but then she gets over it, and she tries to work things out. She comes out in the garage

where I'm putting all the tool boxes away, says, "Rod, I don't want you to leave. I'm sorry I got so mad at you." She starts crying. I can't stand to see her cry. I hate that. She knows it, but she cries anyway. She's talking and crying at the same time. I hate that, but what can I do? I try to listen to her. She says, "Don't you want to stay together? Would you leave, just like that, after everything we've been through together? What would Rob and Susan think if we split up now?"

"Rob and Susan are grown up and got their own families now. They're on their own now."

"What difference does that make? Do you think they don't care what we do anymore just because they're grown up?" She's crying more than ever. I think she gets started crying, it upsets her she can't stop, didn't mean to start, and that makes her cry more.

"Just stop crying, if you'll just stop crying, we can work it out."

I'm about ready to leave, but Liz cares so much, it tears her up so bad, I can't just ignore how she feels, so I'll try it one more time.

We talk a while. Liz, she has stuff to say, but I can't think of much. I say, "Let's go for a walk down to the creek." We walk out of the house, and we walk the dirt road down toward Lone Pine Creek.

I reach out and hold her hand. Lots of times, she says I don't hold hands, I don't be affectionate enough, so I try that, and we walk along holding hands a ways. Warm sunshine. Lush, green grass grows on the meadows, and three deer graze the green grass, far side of the meadow from us, just this side of the granite ridge, house-size, warehouse-size boulders piled high against mountain blue sky. Ponderosa pine trees grow tall both sides of the road, and juniper trees. Mountain bluebirds fly across the road in front of us, and a steller's jay sounds off real loud from a tree ahead of us, doesn't think we have any right to walk this road through the forest and telling everybody about it. I say, "I love being out here, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," she says.

"All the birds, they got to have this forest to live in, all the wild animals."

She slows down. She pulls her hand out of mine. She's ahead of me, figuring things out. She knows I got something to say. What I told her before, I told her all these years she says I'm not affectionate except when I want sex, just, okay, let's do it right now, and that's the only time I'm gentle and wanting to touch her. I told her, every time I try to be close, hold hands, hug, sit and talk and touch each other, she's the one who turns

away, pulls away, then says I'm not very affectionate, but come down to it, she's the one doesn't like to be close.

She is right about one thing, though. I got something to say, and I'm trying to get close enough so she'll hear me say it, trying to get her relaxed and willing to listen to me.

She pulls her hand out of mine and turns to face me, couple of steps away, beyond my reach. She says, "Yes, I know, Rod. We need to save all the trees we can. I know that. You aren't tuned in to nature any more than I am. I'm just as sensitive, just as artistic and creative as you think you are, and I do not like to talk about this, but I'll tell you this. I am working on it. I forget, and I wrap up a big wad, just like I've always done, but I try to remember, and more and more, I do remember, three or four squares, and that's all I need." She's trying not to cry, but the tears come, and pretty soon, she can hardly talk, she's crying so hard. I don't even know why she's crying. I usually don't know.

I figure I better keep my mouth shut and not try to get her to stop crying. I better just let her talk however she talks, with lots of tears or whatever, however she has to talk. She says, "I do remember that more and more. But when I forget is when you start getting pushy about doing everything your way, and then for a while, I get pretty mad, and I wrap up a huge amount and flush it away, so when you do this holier than thou and more sensitive to nature and all this I love wild animals like nobody else loves wild animals stuff on me, you're killing trees. If you just shut up and leave me alone about it, it's going to save more trees by far than the way you do if you can't shut up about it."

She stomps away from me. The rest of our walk together, she's several steps ahead of me or off to one side or lagging over toward the edge of the road, and she says nothing. Way I see it, it's always been that way, there's always been something keeping her from walking close to me, one thing and another, doesn't much matter what. I got all I can do to try to save some trees right now, let alone try to save me or save our marriage.

But she works on it. I don't hear the toilet paper roll rattle turning high speed as much as I used to. Funny thing, what I tried for years to get her to do, now she always shuts the bathroom door.

Things settle down. We couldn't have been together as long as we've been together without we can work out some differences, without we can tolerate stuff from each other. After that walk on the dirt road down to the creek, she doesn't want me near her for a while, takes a while before she lets me get close to her, and then she's spooky as a frightened mare, ready to jump and gallop away, anything startles her. I try to go easy on her, be as quiet as I can. I know she's got a lot to adjust to,

me being around a lot more, her not having much time just alone by herself, working harder to keep her job going too, now she's promoted and making more money.

Meantime, couple of times in town, I seen them guys hold up a cardboard sign, "NEED HELP. WILL WORK FOR FOOD." I don't want to be where they are. I know me and Liz can work through a lot and keep our marriage together. We share a lot of history and two grown kids who still care are we together or not. Worth hanging onto that.

I do most of the shopping now Liz's working full time and me only part time. Last time to town, when I get home, I put out the new tube of toothpaste on the bathroom counter, that all natural toothpaste, jeeze, \$3.89 a tube, but we do like it better. Guess it started out, I like it better, and Liz said, "I don't care, Rod. You're the one doing the shopping. If you're going to spend that kind of money for toothpaste, go ahead and spend the money."

Couple of days after I put that new tube out in the bathroom, I fix breakfast, cutting back on eggs, butter, beef, and bacon, like I been doing, cook cereal, chicken, vegetables instead. Liz looks at breakfast on the table, starts to say something, stops, then says, "Thank you for fixing breakfast, Rod."

We eat, and I go in the bathroom. Liz's in the bedroom, getting ready to leave for work, and I go to brush my teeth, pick up that new tube, and jeeze, that thing is already maybe ten percent gone. Nobody needs to pile it on their toothbrush like that. It only takes a little bit to do the job. She must be mounding it up about to here. So I grab the tube and my toothbrush, "Liz. Liz. Hold on a minute. I need to talk to you a minute."

She's just about to go out the front door, bags of stuff for her work under her arms, and she turns toward me, wants that quick kiss we're supposed to do every morning when she leaves, but I hold up the toothpaste and my toothbrush, and I say, "Jeeze Liz, look how much of this is gone already. I got to show you how to use this stuff right."

She says, "Rod, I have to go right now. I'm going to be late."

"Just take me about 30 seconds to show you how to do this."

No kiss. She barges out the door, slams it, stomps down the stairs, starts the car, spins the wheels leaving, rough on a car to push that hard that quick on a cold morning. I've told her about stuff like that, "Warm it up at least two minutes before you move it, cold morning like this," surprised she doesn't remember, or maybe not so surprised. Lot of times, she doesn't

even listen to what I'm saying. I've told her, "Liz, sometimes I might as well talk to a fencepost, and I should know that by now. I've tried to tell you this about fifty times, seems like you never hear what I'm saying."

Okay, I know that, but I have to try. Cars are expensive. We need to try to make this car last us years yet. We need to treat it right, try to take care of it. I'll talk to her about how to treat a car better when she gets home after work. She should be able to listen about that. She's the one making most of the money now, so she's gonna be the one has to pay for a new car if we ruin this one pushing it hard on a cold morning. And toothpaste. If she can hear me, we got to talk about toothpaste.

I put a note at her place at the table so we can talk about it at dinner, so I don't forget, just, "Liz, we need to talk about warming the car up on a cold morning. Remind me if I forget." That's all I write. I probably better save the toothpaste until we get settled about the car.

Liz's got a lot to learn about stuff I never realized before I had some time to look around, look at what she's doing. We'll talk about the car, see what it takes to get that settled, then, things calm down, we're sailing smooth on toilet paper and warming the car up, then I can talk to Liz about toothpaste.