

## House Proud

1800 words

A while ago I realised, with some surprise, that the times when I felt most satisfied was when I was doing something or other at home. I still wanted other things. I was still ambitious for my work and the world. But I felt most grounded - most unselfconscious and free – when I was at home.

This wasn't the way I'd expected to feel when I was younger. In my twenties I had no reason to suspect that a gleaming kitchen at the end of a long day would ever give me pride. Even into my thirties I had no inkling that a vase of flowers and stock simmering on the stove might one day feel like an achievement. However these days I'm happy to admit that a well-run home, flowers on a window sill and stock on the stove are all things that I strive for.

When people ask what I do, I say that I'm a writer. It's true. I do write most days, and sometimes publish things. I'm lucky to have work that I love - even if I can't rely on it for income. My job, on the other hand, is less glamorous. My job is to keep our family home running as smoothly as I can, without shouting and moaning too much.

Lots of people I know - mainly women and men too - keep their homes running smoothly. They spend as much time as I do shopping and cleaning and cooking and listening and sorting and laughing and generally making things happen - and then clearing up afterwards. Like me, they don't consider this their main work. And, knowing that it's not what makes them interesting to others, they rarely bring it up in conversation. They just get on and do it.

'A perfectly-kept house is a sign of a misspent life'. For years I believed these words by Rose Macauley. Like every other young woman I knew, I assumed that obsessing about housekeeping was to avoid the real challenges of life. But I no longer think this. These days I think that the journey we call life is shaped by two things. Firstly by the gradual identification of what we truly care about. And secondly by devoting ourselves to whatever it is that we discover we care about. (Happily, for some people, what they care

about dovetails in their work. For others, their work and what they care about run along parallel lines.)

And so it follows that if what I care about, among other things, is an attractive and well-run home, I'm not going to consider the time and energy that I spend keeping it that way as misspent. On the contrary, nowadays I think of keeping house as a personal accomplishment. More deeply, as an act of love.

When I was young and starting out I felt that my whole life lay before me. Working in London, it was easy to feel more at home in various offices, out and about, and socialising with friends, than in my small shared flat. It was years before I looked to my home to ground and sustain me, and to help make sense of my life beyond it. A full decade went by before I began to appreciate how much imaginative and practical effort lies behind feeling truly at home.

'The point of civilization', said one of Leo Tolstoy's characters, 'is to make the necessities of life into sources of satisfaction'. Isn't this *the* challenge of domestic life? Every day we give ourselves over to the necessities of life - housekeeping, looking after ourselves, cooking, organising, errands and shopping. All this involves time, imagination and effort. And yet most of us don't count it as work, much less look to as a source of satisfaction. What, I can't help wondering, if we did? My hope is that if we can conceive of what we do at home as work, as valuable and integral to a good life, then, with a small leap of faith, our home life will assume a therapeutic potential within reach of us all.

Most of us accept that the spaces we live in, and the things we really care about, are just as important as the people we love. At the very least, the spaces we live in and the objects we live among frame our intimate relationships - even if we live alone and our most intimate relationship is with ourselves. Our domestic feelings say a lot about us. Looking after ourselves, where we live, and the things we care about is, for many of us, as strong an instinct as sexuality.

However partly due to the inroads made by feminism, over the last few decades, some of this value has been lost to us. While it's a very good thing that women sit on boards and fly planes, these kinds of social advances have had a knock-on effect on our investment in home life. Nowadays real life, the kind our egos feel rewarded by, happens in the world outside the home. And we get precious little recognition for what we do within it.

As a result many of us have lost confidence in the value of what we do to keep our home lives buoyant. Few of us, at the end of a few hours spent housekeeping, look admiringly around our home and credit the beauty we have created as a personal achievement. Precious few of us openly admit to feeling house proud.

The official story, which marketers convey and we end up believing, is that domestic life is a tangle of tasks which full-time work is designed to release us from. This is where the idea that housework is drudgery gets its power. The lack of structure for the work we do at home, the fact that we lack an audience for our efforts, and have no endpoint for them, means that most of us are quietly overwhelmed by our domestic life.

But what if we experienced domestic life in a different way, in an overwhelmingly positive way? What if our homes became a source of satisfaction, an invitation to personal creativity? I think that Shakespeare was right, when he said that, 'There is nothing neither good nor bad but thinking makes it so'. What if the problem we face with housekeeping is psychological before it is practical?

When I describe a particular housekeeping task to a friend, I colour my words with the thoughts and feelings that ran through my head while I was doing that task. Vacuuming the stairs is a pretty neutral activity. Vacuuming the stairs with Cinderella-like thoughts is not. The reason housekeeping often gets bad press is due to the negative thoughts that stream into our minds when we are doing it. This is because the bulk of household tasks are not demanding enough to keep our minds fully occupied, leaving us prey to stray ruminative thoughts. The solution? When we do vacuum the stairs or sweep the kitchen floor, we need to entertain positive voices, silent words of encouragement that give dignity to our everyday tasks.

A woman in the fifties and sixties felt validated in her role as housekeeper. She knew that sweeping the floor was a necessary good. She may harrumph on getting out the broom after breakfast. But she wasn't made anxious by it. She didn't feel demeaned by sweeping. The thought that she really should be earning enough to employ a cleaner, and perhaps put her children in childcare, never crossed her mind. She was clear in her role – especially after a chat over the fence to the woman next door. At the risk of generalising, there was dignity and camaraderie, and markedly less loneliness than women experience at home today.

This may be why books about the home sell in their millions. Yet most of their little gems, their helpful schedules and tips, are soon forgotten. (The next time you spill ink on the rug will you blot the stain with milk?) Not because these books aren't interesting - since in the right mood they can be riveting. But because they don't address the question that lies behind our purchase. Is there an art to running a home, we want to know, over and above making ends meet and keeping our family healthy? Is it a worthwhile thing to do, or just a drain on our energy and earning capacity? Should we be avoiding it, or seeking it out and feeling proud of it?

In the past it was considered a good thing for a woman - or man for that matter - to be house proud. These days it's considered a bit suspect, as if there may be nothing better to occupy her. A lot of consciousness-raising went on in the fifties and sixties to reverse a woman's preoccupation with the domestic sphere, to shake her devotion to hearth and home. This was a very good thing. Many women spread their wings and flew the coop.

However so successful was this movement that today there is a strong argument for consciousness-raising to go the other way. Not to return women to domesticity as stranglehold, as sole arena for a woman's identity - God forbid. But just far enough that being house proud might once more be a genuine compliment, rather than a quiet put down. Just far enough that it might be acceptable to answer the door wearing an apron, rather than whipping it off and throwing it on the back of a chair in the kitchen.

This project is a celebration of domestic life - not just mine, but that of scores of others. It's not about the cosy, patchwork quilt, suffocating domesticity that magazines and advertisers trumpet. But the personal, expressive and evocative home that we all want for ourselves. It's about rising to the challenge of domesticity at the level of detail, all the while knowing that it's the overall effect of home that really inspires our efforts.

The sense of home I and others describe is as much about atmosphere, as it is about physical spaces and objects. It more closely reflects our personality and values, than our income. It's something that we make happen each day, from opening the blinds in the morning, to putting the kitchen to bed at night. Importantly, it's something that we can only go on making happen when we feel secure at a deep level. Because only then can we feel that all our efforts are worthwhile.

A deep sense of home can be hard to achieve. And yet, for most of us, it's crucial to our sense of ourselves, especially as the years pass. 'Know me, come to my home' is an invitation for others to see us in a more rounded way. To see something of how we live inside the rooms and amongst the things that we love enough to look after day after day, year after year.