

A tip or two from Chief Keokuk**The Cluttered Family**

My wife and I used to be neat. Then we had children.

When newly married, we kept an orderly house. We moved through our lives without tripping on things left in the middle of anywhere. But the organization of our lives changed dramatically after we began having children. After the first child, and while my wife, Barb, was pregnant with our second child, I recall having nightly dinners with the Seven Dwarfs -- my eldest son's plastic army of nine inch tall Disney figures all lined up at the dinner table.

But after dinner and before bedtime, we always conducted an evening ritual of picking up. Complete with a song, we three would put toys away nightly. But then, with the birth our second child, came more stuff and clutter. Soon, with three children, the clutter was not simply three times greater, but leaped exponentially. What happened to the nightly ritual of clean up complete with the sweet song? Forget it! Because then with four kids, stuff exploded: school projects, extracurricular activities, papers and certificates, family photos and family mementos. The clutter became a mathematical imperative ever multiplying itself; a force of nature far stronger than the mere mortal powers of a pair of out-numbered parents. Rather than go insane, my wife and I surrendered, lowered our standards of neatness and rolled into the ever growing storm.

Cluttered though it may be, our house is, nonetheless, clean. The toilets get scrubbed, laundry is washed, dishes are done, beds are changed, floors are vacuumed, and soap scum is battled and beaten. Even the kids shower regularly, whether they need it or not. The clutter is not for lack of cleanliness. The clutter equation is premised on one simple given: our house is a busy place.

We are responsible for ten beating hearts. Even though John is in college and Grandma lives in a nursing home, we still care for them both and manage the piles of documentation that accompanies both of their lives: one life near its end and the other just beginning adulthood.

Then there are three busy kids in the house, in three different schools with tons of activities. And don't forget the two cats and the dog, not even to mention the lives and activities of the two parents. Yes, my wife and I have a life as well. All this wonderful swirling clutter is revolving like an asteroid field around the gravitational pull of our central core: the family.

Family is not merely a notion. Family is a living, breathing entity that we asked for, sought, created and built. And in the trail of our active family is the flotsam and jetsam, the stuff and debris of an enriched, privileged, fully-lived life: Friday Folders, school newsletters, art work taped here and there, Scouts, sports, band, church, piano, completed projects on display and all the delightful trinkets from Indian Guides and Indian Princesses

All these bits and pieces of life are in our house which, physically, is an attractive, well-appointed home. There is great woodwork, particularly the fireplace surround, all stained in cherry with book cases on each side, a granite hearth and a big mantle. And it should be no surprise that our beautiful fireplace used to be home to a childhood project. For years, smack dab in the middle of this elegant woodwork, right above the mantle, hung a painting my son Tom painted when he was in Kindergarten. The art work was Tommy's Purple Penguin, in tempera paint, a full eighteen

by twenty-four inches, nicely framed as it hung above the mantle. Then one day my wife and I purchased some “real” art, a Vickery seascape print, and Tommy’s Penguin moved into the finished basement. As appealing and nice as the Vickery is, I still prefer Tom’s kindergarten painting.

But so it goes. As our children age our home begins to lose those childish aspects that make our surroundings so rich with color and meaning. Nonetheless, we chip away at the clutter like convicts trying to escape a cell. One example is our shoe corner which lives in a space between a gorgeous china cabinet and nicely wallpapered corner of the dining room. The pile of shoes makes a bold contrast to its surroundings.

From time to time my wife and I tackle the irksome job of thinning out the shoe pile. It’s best to do this as a couple using technical gear, one spouse belaying the other, as the first goes spelunking into the depths of the shoe pile. “Who shoes are these? I’ve never seen them before?” A pair is held in the air and my children stand with gaping mouths and shaking heads all claiming non-ownership of the displayed shoes. The unclaimed pair is cast to the side.

“Here’s another pair that I’ve never seen before. Any takers?” Heads are scratched as the kids look away disinterested when suddenly the light of recognition dawns on the face of my youngest son, “Oh! Those are my friend Joey’s shoes. He was here yesterday.” The image of Joey going home in his stocking feet sends us all into hysterics and we are completely knocked off task. The shoe pile is safe again from parental cleaning having been reduced by only two pairs.

Despite apparent frustration with clutter, I think deep down my wife and I derive a great deal of comfort in the beauty of this chaotic kid kingdom that fills our home. We have come to love and accept it as part of raising this brood. There is a wonderful comfort in being surrounded by the things of our lives, especially those created by our children or portraying our children, the odds and ends, bits and pieces, souvenirs, I guess, of a fun family life.

If your house sounds like mine, know this: There is hope. As the children grow we are winning the war on clutter. Their toys become smaller, the children eventually get too old for childhood activities and then they go off to college. But right now my wife and I are still in the thick of it. Yet I can see light breaking through. I can actually picture a day when the house will, again, be in complete order.

But then I’ll probably get restless. I can picture myself, years from now, sneaking the Vickery seascape print down into the basement and quietly hanging Tommy’s Purple Penguin back above the fireplace. Then I’ll look for the Seven Dwarfs in the attic and bring them to the dinner table. My wife and I will have a good laugh, and maybe a good cry, knowing that we raised a family in an old house filled with a swarm of kids, animals, activities and stuff.

The cluttered family is a great and delightful thing possible only in our very privileged society. Enjoy and accept the clutter. It’s the debris of parenting and ain’t it a wonderful thing!

Peace,
Federation Chief Keokuk
(John C. Lorenzen)