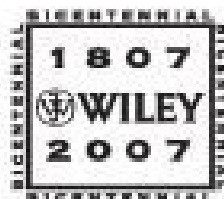


J JOSSEY-BASS

KEEPING HOUSE

The Litany of Everyday Life

Margaret Kim Peterson



John Wiley & Sons

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*In memory of
Lily Ann Mutter,
May 14, 1998-August 14, 1998*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I thought about writing this book and then as I actually undertook writing it, I talked about the project with many of my colleagues, acquaintances, and friends. Their responses fell into four categories. The men, with few exceptions, said either “Hmmm” or “My wife should read that book.” The women, with few exceptions, said either “You’ve got to be kidding!” or “I want to read that book!” I hope that the book I have written will be of interest to members of all those groups: the men who were bored, the men who thought their wives might like it, the women who were horrified, and the women who were intrigued! In any event, thanks are due to all those conversation partners. This is not a book that could have been written in the isolation of a study or library, and I appreciate the willingness of so many friends to talk about the project with me.

Additional support for this book was provided by stipends from the Louisville Institute and the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith and by my home congregation, First Presbyterian Church of Norristown, Pennsylvania, which provided me with an office in which I worked in peaceful quiet during one of my son’s more rambunctious summers. My most heartfelt thanks go, of course, to my husband, Dwight, who makes a sublime risotto, and to my son, Mark, whose enthusiasm for washing dishes, floors, and cars knows no bounds.

PREFACE

Most books have multiple beginnings. Among the beginnings of this book were conversations I had a few years ago with a couple of women friends. Each was somewhere in midlife, busy at church and at home and at work. And each was ready for a change, although it wasn't entirely clear what kind of change was possible or desirable. In talking with each of these friends, I raised the question what she might do if all options were open and money was no object. And in each case my friend burst into tears and said, "I would make a home for my family."

It turned out that each friend's family was dependent on her continued full-time employment outside the home for their health insurance. As a result, each of these women felt locked into a life in which the work of making a home had to be fit in around the edges of unyieldingly long hours laboring at her profession. And too much of the time it seemed as if the work of making a home could not be fit in, that home and family lurched along, barely nurtured, barely sustained, required always to make do with much less than would be comfortable or beautiful or desirable.

Neither of my friends had great housekeeping ambitions. Neither desired a home that was grandiose or spotless. They just wanted curtains at the windows and meals on the table, clothes neatly hung and folded rather than lying in neglected heaps, and enough predictability and order for it to be easy and pleasurable to invite others in for a visit or a meal. And each wanted to do this work herself. It wasn't that either of them aspired to do nothing but keep house or that either wanted to keep house all by herself, with no contribution from spouse or children or hired help. It

seemed rather to be that each of these women sensed, in some place deep in her soul, that the disciplines involved in feeding and clothing and sheltering others, beginning with the members of their own households, were profoundly worthwhile, and it grieved them that they could devote so little of themselves to so life-giving a work.

I came away from those conversations wondering what the church had to say to my friends. The resources of the Christian tradition—scripture, theology, pastoral, and spiritual wisdom—speak to so many of the challenges of life in thought-provoking and encouraging ways. What might those resources have to offer someone striving to find the time and the energy to keep house in trying circumstances?

Another of the beginnings of this book came toward the beginning of my own professional life. I had started my first official teaching job, which, as it happened, was a half-time position. I was happy for it to be so, since my husband's job provided enough additional money to make ends meet (plus health insurance!), and I could then have enough time to settle and care for us in the new city to which we had moved. But we had no children, and when new acquaintances discovered that I worked "only" half time, they would ask, "So what do you do with the rest of your time?" "I keep house," I would say.

That was always the end of the conversation. I had the uncomfortable sense that virtually any other answer would have been more acceptable. People would have been happy to hear that I was an artist or a writer, that I was developing a small business, that I was practicing the piano or taking flying lessons. But keeping house? I might as well have said, "I'm wasting my time."

It didn't seem like a waste of time to me. I was busy every day with marketing, cooking, laundry, making beds, tidying up, the occasional halfhearted swipe at real dirt (cleaning

has never been my strong suit). And the result was that my husband and I had fresh clothes to put on in the morning and a good meal to sit down to at night and the freedom and flexibility to have friends in for dinner or to carry a casserole to a family with illness or a new baby in the house. That seemed pretty worthwhile to me.

As I thought about it, though, I realized that I was virtually the only person I knew who was my age or younger and who neither worked full time nor had small children at home. It didn't seem to matter how much money people had or where their health insurance came from; if they did not have small children (and in many cases even if they did), they worked full time and fit their housekeeping in around the edges or hoped someone else would do it.

I didn't begrudge any of my friends their jobs; they were, many of them, doing interesting and worthwhile work and contributing in a wide variety of ways both to their families and to the broader community. But why was it that not a single other one of them had made the choice I had, to keep house with more than leftover bits of time? Was keeping house really a waste of time, at best a hobby to be indulged in by people who like that sort of thing and at worst an unpleasant set of necessary chores? Or were there broader cultural and theological factors that made housekeeping seem like all of these things when in fact it was, as I had found it, a discipline as interesting and worthwhile as many other kinds of work?

A third beginning of this book (although the earliest in time of the stories I have told here) came just before the beginning of that first teaching job. I had finished my graduate program in the spring and was due to move house toward the end of the summer. Although my husband and I hardly had two nickels to rub together, we agreed that I would not seek paid employment for those few months and

would instead devote my time to getting us packed and moved. I would, in other words, be “just a housewife.”

Around that time my friend Donna gave birth to her second child. Lily turned out to be severely affected by Down syndrome. She spent the three months of her brief life in a pediatric intensive-care nursery, and for those three months Donna practically lived at the hospital with her. I sat and visited with them for a couple of hours two or three days a week, sharing with them in that searing experience of love and loss. Lily died just a week after we moved; we had been gone from church only one Sunday before we were back for her funeral.

All that fall I mourned for Lily, and I wondered how it was that her life and mine and Donna’s had touched so briefly and so deeply. I had, in fact, hardly known Donna before that summer. Why was it that I had spent so much time at the hospital with her and Lily? I realized eventually that to a large degree, I did it because I could do it. Donna and her family were surrounded by a large and supportive church community, but I was virtually the only person who was not busy all day with either work or child care. I was just a housewife.

Those months with Donna and Lily reminded me that time deliberately set aside for keeping house is never just about “making a home for my family.” Of course housework is about making a home, but a Christian home, properly understood, is never just for one’s own family. A Christian home overflows its boundaries; it is an outpost of the kingdom of God, where the hungry are fed and the naked are clothed and there is room enough for everyone.

Keeping house can be a very mundane activity. It is certainly repetitive, and the kinds of work that it involves are varied enough that few people enjoy all of them equally. But at the very same time, housekeeping is about practicing

sacred disciplines and creating sacred space, for the sake of Christ as we encounter him in our fellow household members and in neighbors, strangers, and guests. Lily, in her fleeting appearance among us, was in some sense all of these. This book is dedicated to her.

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What's Christian About Housework?

I have always enjoyed keeping house. From my earliest childhood I wanted to cook, so my mother taught me how. The first thing I learned to make was oatmeal. The second was macaroni and cheese, with a sauce that sometimes involved a can of condensed cream of mushroom soup (I liked it that way) and sometimes didn't (the rest of the family preferred it without).

I don't remember wanting to learn to do the laundry, but my mother taught me (and my brothers and sister) to do that, too: sorting, washing, drying, folding, ironing. One of my brothers got so good at folding that when he was in college, little old ladies would gather around him at the laundromat for the pleasure of watching him fold his shirts.

My mother wasn't much on cleaning, so I mostly figured that out on my own. Perhaps this relatively late start on the cleaning front is why I have never attained (or, truth be told, aspired to) any particularly high standard of cleanliness. But by the time I was in my late twenties, I had spent years rather happily keeping house for myself and for other people, aware that this was not very fashionable but not really caring, because I liked it and on some level sensed the value of it, even if I didn't think about it very deeply.

My adventures in housework became more intense, however, during the years of my first marriage. I married my

first husband at the end of my first year in graduate school and buried him four years later, at the beginning of my sixth year. Over the intervening years his worsening illness absorbed more and more of my energy, until in the last few months of his life I could do little more than moan to my therapist, “I can’t cope; I can’t cope; I can hardly get to the grocery store.”

I understood then, with a clarity that I have experienced at few other times in my life, that getting to the grocery store was one of the things that Really Mattered. The dissertation could wait; dinner could not. Forget all the abstruse theological ideas that my classmates and teachers seemed to debate with such verve in the graduate seminars I was attending. Forget fantasies of “accomplishing something.” Perhaps somewhere in the world there were people who measured their days by how much they got done—at work, in class, wherever. I measured my days by whether, at the end of them, the members of my household had been dressed and fed and bathed and put to bed. If we had been, then that was a good day. I had done what mattered most. Everything else was gravy.

As I moved in subsequent years through widowhood into a second marriage and, eventually, into motherhood, my practice of housekeeping changed to accommodate the changes in my household. But I retained the long-held sense, of which I had been made so consciously aware during those difficult years of illness, that housekeeping—cooking, cleaning, laundry, all the large and small tasks that go into keeping a household humming along—was not a trivial matter but a serious one. People need to eat, to sleep, to have clothes to wear; they need a place to read, a place to play, a place into which to welcome guests and from which to go forth into the world. These are the needs that housework exists to meet. Good academic and theologian that I was, I wondered, “Where are the books about this?

Where are the books that might describe and unpack and explore the significance—both practical and spiritual—of this kind of work?”

I couldn't find many. The more I thought about it, the odder it seemed. After all, Jesus has very strong things to say at various points in the Gospels about the Christian duty to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. He even goes so far, in his parable of the Last Judgment, as to paint this as the criterion by which the sheep are separated from the goats: “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me. . . . Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:34-40).

There is a tendency, I think, on the part of those of us who are well fed, clothed, and housed to imagine that the needy people to whom Jesus refers in Matthew 25 are people we don't know—the sort of people who are served at homeless shelters and soup kitchens, at which we ought therefore to volunteer at least occasionally. But housework is all about feeding and clothing and sheltering people who, in the absence of that daily work, would otherwise be hungry and ill-clad and ill-housed.

There is undoubtedly more to the merciful service that Jesus describes in Matthew 25 than caring for the daily needs of the members of our own households. Housework is a beginning, not an end. But it is a beginning—not a sidetrack, not a distraction, but a beginning, and an essential one at that—in the properly Christian work of, among other things, meeting the everyday needs of others, whether those others be our fellow household members, our

near neighbors, or people more sociologically or geographically distant from ourselves.

FANTASIES AND REALITIES

Housekeeping and domestic tasks in general have come to occupy a complex position in American popular culture. Odd as it would have seemed to my grandmother (who was a housewife all her adult life) or to my husband's grandmother (who did all her own housework and cleaned other people's houses for pay besides), housework is these days the subject of a great deal of fantasy. Designer cleaning products and accessories are marketed to high-end consumers who have no intention of cleaning their houses themselves (for that they have maids) but who like to imagine themselves waltzing about in sheer black aprons while wielding feather dusters. Newspapers bring us columns on fashion that feature haute couture-clad models striking poses on washing machines, the presumed message of which is that you can be expensively dressed, impossibly thin, and dramatically photogenic, all while a load of towels spins dry. Thirty-something women explain their plans to leave paid employment at some indefinite time in the future: "Home will be a total haven. I'll go through a stack of Martha Stewart books and learn to cook. I'll *feng shui* my furniture and pick just the right sheets from Garnet Hill. Keeping house sounds like fun."

Fun, that is, as opposed to work. Domesticity, we are to believe, is a leisure activity, one that results in elaborate, spotless perfection while requiring nothing of us but that we purchase a few brand-name products or publications. "Have the best of everything," coos an ad for one domesticity magazine. "Scatter seeds with your own hands. Pick perfect cherries. Take a nap in an orchard. Lift corn from the earth.