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At some risk, she attempts to bring order to junk drawer in kitchen



This kitchen drawer may resemble what correspondent Ellen Goss Goldsberry faced recently in trying to organize the contents of the junk drawer in her kitchen.

Cornered by stuff

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Recently I decided to tackle one of life's most formidable challenges, ranking just behind landing the ideal job and raising perfect children: organizing the junk drawer. Or more accurately, junk drawers, since it has been years since all our miscellaneous flotsam could be confined to just one drawer. My inspiration for this daunting task? Spending 40 minutes looking for the Super Glue that I know we own – in fact, we probably own several.

First step: get the drawer open. You think this is easy? Not with partially used rolls of shelf paper and a glue gun wedged against the top. After trying the “just yank harder” method, I grab long metal tongs from the kitchen and pry out enough stuff to allow the shelf paper and glue gun to lie in their natural horizontal position. I pull the drawer open with a sense of victory. I look down, and victory turns to dismay. What greets me isn't pretty.

On top is a mass of over-sized rubber bands, which, through some force of their own, are woven into something resembling spaghetti that's gone through a blender. It is hard to imagine that human intervention, even that of a teenager, got the rubber bands to this state, so now I am wary of nonhuman intervention. With trepidation, I remove the rubber bands from the drawer and drop them on the floor. I am prepared to be startled by something that scurries, but all is quiet. I peer closer. Is that mouse droppings I

see, or just bits of graphite from the broken pencils? I decide that gloves are a good idea.

Now, I am ready. Gloves are on, and my attitude is one of determination. This drawer will not defeat me.

Rubber bands and glue gun out of the way, I finger the next layer. My organizational juices flow. Clearly, there are three categories of items: things I can identify, things I can't identify but possibly someone else can and things that no one could identify, possibly ever, and were put here just to make my life frustrating. The drawer seems to be primarily full of things in category three.

Undaunted, I retrieve one of the thousands of ubiquitous plastic shopping bags that line our supply closet (another venue for junk, but that's another day) and christen it the trash container. Miniscule plastic pieces, fragments of metal, dirty cotton balls and the instructions to a camera purchased in 1983 all go in there. On second thought, the camera instructions can be recycled. I pull them back out and toss them into our paper recycling, feeling virtuous as I do so. I'm cleaning out the junk drawer and helping the environment. Then I look back in the drawer. I have not made a dent.

Perhaps a faster approach is needed. I decide that I will pull out everything bigger than a wallet. “Wallet” comes to mind because it seems that somehow, somehow, I should be getting paid for this task. But who, exactly, would pay me? Certainly not my husband, who would be happier starting a new junk drawer than cleaning out the old one. Certainly not my kids, who consider all junk to be veiled treasures. I momentarily lose focus on the value of my task. Oh,

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right, I remember. ... A clean drawer will allow me to find things quickly, and time is money, and money is pay, at least I think that's the economic logic. “Time is money, time is money,” I say as a mantra.

“Then why,” the left side of my brain asks, “am I spending so much time cleaning out this drawer? I could be doing something that would actually earn me money!”

I shake off such sobering thoughts and dig back in. I drop four bent screwdrivers, a roll of duct tape that the dog has chewed, a flashlight with no battery, scraps of sandpaper, dry erase pens (the last dry erase board we owned was in a previous house, 17 years ago), a caulking tube, some glazier's points, a tray of dried-up fingerpaints and a pile of wooden clothespins onto the floor. Then, I reach down to salvage the flashlight and the screwdrivers, and, after some thought, the clothespins. My frugal mind thinks there might be life still left in these. The rest goes into my ordained trash bag. Yes, progress.

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Now for the smaller items. I decide to fill a shoebox with little things that fall under the category of "we might need these someday." I'll consult the family on these items, then, if none can convincingly argue for reprieve from the garbage, in they'll go.

I start off with a yellowed plastic bag marked "Wheel 6J." I can't imagine what this would go to, but then I remind myself that figuring out function is not my job.

Underneath "Wheel 6J" is what looks like half a drill bit, several mysterious keys, a package labeled "side switch," and what looks to be a metal tooth. I hope that it is not a metal tooth, but it sure looks like one.

I am pretty sure all these items appeared through spontaneous combustion, and I'm equally sure they've been in this drawer, unneeded, since Clinton was president. I also know, however, that if I throw them away, my husband will be looking for one of these items tomorrow. It occurs to me that he will tell me

to put all of the objects in my "we might need these someday" box back in the drawer. That will invoke pouting on my part, refusal on his part, and exasperation all the way around. I take the "we might need" box and dump it all in the trash bag, praying that I have not just thrown away the only available replacement switch to our finicky snow blower. This is life on the edge.

I examine the drawer. I examine my watch. Exactly 44 minutes have gone by, and I seem only slightly closer to the bottom of the drawer than I was at the start, and no more organized. I decide that my mission needs to be revised. I will uncover one corner, wipe it out with a paper towel, and declare victory. Pulling up my gloves, I shove items away from the front right corner, pick out some dog hair, dust balls, and what I tell myself must be graphite, and dispose of it. Then I use a wet paper towel to create one perfectly clean sparkling corner in an otherwise deplorable drawer. Good enough.

Super Glue I still don't have, but one clean corner is almost as good.