

"The Real Dirt"

It's 3am and I am sitting on the floor of my bedroom, surrounded by dozens of t-shirts. Folding and organizing them by date received, I have been working for hours to get them arranged in my dresser. I am not suffering from insomnia. I think I have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

I cannot remember a time when I did not spend countless hours cleaning my floors, rearranging my closets and drawers and scouring sinks. Growing up, I would spend Sundays drawing or transcribing Kasey Casem's Top 40 countdown on the bedroom wall that my father transformed into a blackboard. The day was not complete, however until I climbed a chair to wipe down the board. I hated to leave streaks. I always knew if my sisters had been using my blackboard – the yellow chalk dust on the edge of the hardwood floor always gave them away.

I didn't think my behavior was odd. I recopied my notes throughout Junior high and High school. Many thought this was a studying technique, but in reality I felt better knowing that my printing was straight, and that there were no crossed-out sentences or misspelled words. Teachers often complimented my penmanship; friends always wanted to borrow my notes.

As a college student, I found less time to recopy notes – I wanted to spend more time socializing. But the need for a clean room and organized closets prevailed. Even with a housemother and a maid, I found myself straightening the living room and study in my sorority house. I never discussed my compulsive need for order and cleanliness, but I was definitely known among friends as anal-retentive.

The summer before my senior year, my neurotic behavior peaked. To afford living in Chapel Hill, I opted to move in with my boyfriend, Glenn. The romantic ideal burst as I met his six roommates – six fraternity brothers with unlimited budgets and no responsibilities. I thought I could close my eyes to the living areas littered with beer cans, CDs, and a steady stream of food containers. But, daily living became unnerving. The first night I scrubbed the refrigerator

and the kitchen floor. On what became my last day in the house, four weeks later, I sweat through three t-shirts as I scoured the bathrooms. I had to go through two cans of Scrubbing Bubbles before you could see the original color of the grout in the bathtub. And then, I raced out of the house so fast that I was on the train back to Baltimore still reeking of bleach.

Years later, a severe case of eczema on my hand made me evaluate my ambitious cleaning rituals. Bubbling skin from too many cleaning agents made my hand immobile – what hurt most was knowing I could not come in contact with Comet for at least a week. The next day I bought gloves. Bright yellow, power-lined, elbow-length gloves. That same year, I began dating a boy who nicknamed me "Hazel." He coined that because of my penetrating eye color, but I secretly loved the reference to America's favorite 60's sitcom maid.

Sometimes my OCD is a thankless condition – I often field calls from friends and family, requesting my advice about how to create the perfect closet. And I no longer like to go to my parent's home several days before a Holiday for fear that I will be obliged to dust or sort the attic for items to donate to Goodwill. My ardor does have its advantages though – Each week I enter my sister's apartment wearing a Walkman and my yellow gloves, only to exit two hours later with a \$100 check. (My sister did not acquire the cleaning DNA that runs rampant through me.)

While not professionally diagnosed, I have always believed I have some form of OCD because I cannot just change my behavior. I can't just choose not to clean. I can't keep myself from seeing the dirt. I don't have a choice about making – and remaking – my bed every day to military perfection (you can always "bounce a quarter" on my lavender-scented pressed sheets), or drying off the bathroom sink incessantly. However, unlike many who suffer from this compulsive disorder, I know my behavior does not disrupt my life.

In fact, two years ago I braved the ultimate test – Moving to New York City, the grime capitol of the world. While definitively cleaner under Guiliani's reign, the stench of urine and Budweiser still frequently penetrate your nose on the subway. Within the first month, I had to step around a homeless man with brown liquid oozing from his pants in order to get into the

grocery store. Instead of becoming anxious, I learned to adapt. I am now capable of overlooking the filth surrounding me throughout the day, that is, as long as my home is a spotless sanctuary. I don't hide the fact that I take off my subway-soiled shoes at the front door, or that I clean the windows inside and out on weekends and fold my clothes "clipboard style" as they do in the GAP.

So, it's not as if I am truly deranged. I don't wash my hands until they are raw. I am not required to avoid the sidewalk cracks, or compelled to take an even number of steps to get to the corner. And, just this year, as I began to explore my compulsive tendencies with the help of a therapist, I discovered that I became the female Felix Unger at a young age as a protective measure. I found that organizing, or in my case excessive organizing, was my feeble attempt to maintain a sense of order during my parent's divorce. Today, the tendencies toward Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder are not threatening, but instead an eccentric part of my personality that friends find endearing. And, I have come to realize that chaos is a wonderful part of life, and from disorder comes clarity. And I, of all people, can appreciate that.