

WASHERGUY

We knew that we would need to help Jill when she started Paramedic School this past fall at Akron General Hospital. She would be going to classes sixteen hours each week, attending clinical sessions twenty hours each week and working as an EMT thirty-two hours each week to maintain her medical coverage. Andrew got his driver's license the past spring and would be able to transport Connor to Miller South Middle School on his way to Firestone High School, and Austin could walk to Betty Jane Elementary School. Arrangements were made to have the little boys stay with their dad on Tuesday and Thursday nights, and on the weekends that Jill would be working. Monday nights they all had music lessons in Kent and would eat with us. That just left Wednesdays to cover. Ruth and I decided we would spend the day at Jill's house on Wednesdays...Ruth cleaning and making food, and me doing the laundry and man-stuff. I decided to accomplish my laundry assignment at a nearby laundromat so I could do lots of loads at once.

I must admit that I haven't done the majority of the laundry at our house over the years (and I won't even get into discussing cooking and baking), but I have washed a few loads in my time ("Don't put the red shirt with the white shirt!"...She screamed). Now, I would be on my own, soloing so to speak, for after all, these were Jill's and the boy's clothes...no need to worry!

The first day Ruth (the maid) helped me sort the clothes and then I was off to Dry Cleaning World. Jill hadn't washed for six months or so (a little joke Jill...don't get so testy) ...make that four months ...and there were lots of clothes to be laundered. I wasn't sure how to start. I had a choice of single, double and triple load washers. How much is a double load? I didn't do what I saw one guy about seventy-five do...he put all of his clothes into a triple washer, jammed in twelve quarters and went outside to have a smoke. I said, "Doesn't putting all of the various colors in together cause problems?" He said, "It hasn't yet and I've been doing this five years. I was tempted, but I know Ruth (the maid) would be furious if I screwed up one of little Austin's shirts! ("I trust you to do one load of wash....!")" I sought the advice of the supervisor, and she was very helpful. I washed sixteen loads that first day and was very proud of myself. Drying was another matter! How do you schedule the loads so that they get dried about the same time?

Now this is an art form in and of its self...and took several weeks to master. I now put the jeans in the first load and I also bring hangers so I don't have to stack the clothes first and then put them on hangers at home. Hey, I know how to be efficient! I now do about twelve or thirteen loads each week in about two hours. I still haven't got the boys to not turn their socks and tee shirts inside out, but the new incentive program I have instituted, spell that money, has been slowly resolving this problem. Hard as it may for you to believe that I'm not giving a short course on laundry skills, my actual reason for writing this piece is to tell you about some of the lessons I have learned while washing clothes. I also want to tell you about some of the people I've met during my soap and water activities.

Since Wednesday is the only day Ruth (the maid) and I can get to Jill's, I have encountered an unexpected problem at the laundromat on that day. Wednesday is FREE SOAP DAY, and I guess the clientele that day is a little different from the other days when you have to bring your own soap! I know I'm different! Half of the people who come in to wash their clothes don't seem to know what they are doing. I have figured out that the customers fall into six categories: 1. Divorced men, 2. Divorced women with lots of kids, 3. Very old men, 4. Very old women, 5. Former professors who are grandfathers, and, 6. Other. Categories 1-4 have no money and category 5s have shrinking brains, or they wouldn't be doing this. (Oh, I long to be reading Chaucer and Shakespeare, or playing golf.)

I met a category 4 person several weeks ago who was delightful. She is eighty-three and a widow. She has twenty grandchildren, six great grandchildren and four great-great grandchildren. She was washing the laundry of her forty-seven year old son, who had fallen from a tree, while helping a friend, and "broke about every bone in his body." He lost his job because he can't work...or even get around by himself...and she cares for him. She has a 1982 Ford station wagon, which is falling apart, but is "the best car I have ever had...it always starts and gets me where I need to go." I won't tell you about her thirty grandchildren, but she told me about them... and is very proud of every one of them. She lives in a house trailer "the one my husband got before he died," and said she was "very happy." I helped her take her laundry baskets to her car and she said, "I hope we get to wash together again someday." We didn't talk about country clubs or golf or investments or going to Florida and she never asked what my career was or about my degrees. She showed me how to add fabric softener to a load that had too much soap in it to cut the soapsuds to an acceptable level. She was

very nice. I liked her a lot and wish I had more of her personal characteristics. I hope we get to wash together again someday.

Another day, a well dressed, seventy-five-ish (category 6) lady came in with several baskets of laundry. The supervisor was gone and I was the only person in the store. She asked if I might be able to help her wash her clothes and I said that I would try. She didn't know how to put the quarters into the coin slots, or how to put the soap into the washer. I said, "This must be your first time to wash in a laundromat." She said, "This is the first load of clothes I have ever washed in my life." I asked her how she had managed that and she said, "I'm a twin and I have always lived with my sister. We never got married. She hated to cook and I didn't want to clean, so I've done all of the cooking and she had always done the cleaning and laundry." She explained that her sister had the flu and she offered to do the laundry on this particular day. When the laundry, including a bedspread, was finished, I moved her laundry to the dryers and explained about the heat levels. She chose the highest heat level for her three loads and I cautioned her that the highest level might damage her bedspread (notice my knowledge level). She said she was sticking with the high level because, "I don't have all day to spend in this place." Her white bedspread came out of the dryer toasted...and she said she was going to take it back to where she had bought it. She never said thanks. It was probably because she was preoccupied with her newly acquired beige bedspread. I was reminded that it is more fun to be around giving and appreciative people and that being grateful about the good things in our lives helps us overcome the less positive things we have to occasionally endure.

Everyone should spend a little time in a laundromat...getting to know the people who go there. They don't care about where you come from, or what you do or where you've been. Most would rather watch Oprah than CNN (even on September 12th). Few drive nice cars or wear nice clothes. Most seem to be living a pretty hard life. But, having said the above...they were almost all very nice people. They were polite (you don't take someone else's dryer without checking whether they will be using it again), and very positive. One person recognize me as their Papa John's delivery man and when I said that that wasn't me, observed that I was probably too old to do that. (I said that *most* of the people were nice!)

I recommend this experience to all of you...go on Wednesdays because you not only get free soap, but free coffee as well...and, you get to meet so

many nice people. Don't forget that the last four minutes of your dryer time is cool air, so when drying a load, put all of your quarters in first so you will get your clothes dry faster.

Jill likes my work and Ruth (the maid) is proud of me.

The End

November, 2001