

## Dirty Laundry (With Apologies to Don Henley)

For most of my adolescent life I grew up knowing this domestic ritual by its more common name, “warshday,” as my mother so eloquently called it in her mid-western accent. But it wasn’t until I was in college and exposed to that world of richer language that I discovered the “other” term for my weekend procrastination: laundry day. I suppose that for a lot of what I know about laundry I owe a fair debt of gratitude to my mother, for it was she who first charged me with the early responsibility of making sure the family’s soiled clothes were tended to once a week. However, she always made sure that the first stage—the sorting part—was completely done early in the morning before any of us was awake and that a load or two was well drenched in the process of making it clean again only to be soiled next week. Though the old cliché of “trial and error” is a life truth that generally is safe to live by, your laundry is not something that you want to subject to this common person’s method or learning, for most certainly that other of life’s inexorable truths, “Murphy’s Law,” will set itself at work upon you. So it’s really important that the clothes-challenged pay careful attention if you really want to know *the* way to do your laundry.

I always find that since the sorting stage of laundry requires the most concentration, you should pick a time when your mind is at its peak. For me this is late in the evening, sometime after ten o’clock. Any other time, especially in the afternoon, I risk hazarding sorting an article of clothing into the wrong pile, which means certain failure somewhere else through the process. Aside from your concentration, the laundry demands that you are alert and quick to catch any mistake you might make.

Laundry has a strange way of attacking the olfactory senses because somehow, no matter how little the human body has contributed to the fibers of each clothing article, the aromatic sum of the whole always is worse than that of the piece you put in, even if it was just the day before. So as a precaution, you may want to invest in one of those white masks that doctors also use during surgery. If it doesn’t help the smell, at least be consoled that the protective covering should prevent any microbes that have been commingling, breeding, and reproducing in the dark, dank confines of your laundry hamper.

Once you are in an area that has plenty of floor space it is time to get down to the business of sorting the laundry into specific piles. My mother taught me that sorting the laundry essentially breaks down into four categories: a pile of whites, coloreds, towels, and jeans. Connotations of racial segregation aside, laundry doesn’t know what color it is, but you definitely don’t want an amalgamated melting pot when you wash your clothes. Everyone is going to have different piles, but the basic ones do include the pile of whites, which consists largely of various articles of underwear—including, but not limited to socks, tee-shirts, jockey shorts, panties, brassieres, handkerchiefs, shoelaces, wrist and headbands, and kitchen washcloths and dish towels. Next look for all the bath towels, hand towels, and washcloths that are not white and place them in a separate group. Any jeans—light- or dark-colored (it doesn’t matter)—and any jean-like materialized clothes gets their own pile as well. However if you

have a new pair of 501's that haven't been preshrunk, you'll have to wash them all by themselves because the indigo dyes will bleed profusely all over the other clothes.

But here is where my mother and I diverge in our sorting styles. The remaining clothes are generally going to be delicates, vulnerable to color blending, turgid washer agitators, and dryer heat. Things like shirts, blouses, slacks, nightgowns must carefully be divided along color lines. First, segregate according to dark colors: blues, deep purples, reds, blacks, browns, hunter greens—anything you think has the potential (or God forbid a reputation) of staining another article of your precious wardrobe. Further separate the reds and purples because these colors in the spectrum are never satisfied with themselves, always preying upon weaker, more feeble colors. Don't assume that whatever you have left over will be one neat pile unto itself. Look for anything that is close to white, off-white, or pale, and make a pile for them. Next find the in-betweens. These are the tans, light blues; pinks are acceptable. Pastels should be in this load as well. If you run across something that has multiple colors, decide what its dominant color is and put it either with the darks or the lights. This whole process should take you about ten minutes and leave you with about seven to eight loads of laundry to start washing.

For college students on a strict budget, it is really tempting to divide their laundry into two piles: load one and load two, throwing caution to the wind by ignoring all conventional wisdom about the need to sort clothing by color and fiber. But I cannot accept their economic pleas that the number of loads they can wash is proportionally predetermined by the quantity of quarters they must keep on hand. Plan ahead; you know when laundry day is at hand. Even if you have to sacrifice those two precious Snickers bars for lunch, save your quarters. And while I know it is politically correct to conserve as much water as possible by washing as few loads as possible, I insist on being as politically incorrect as possible—at least when it comes to laundry. I say wash as many loads as possible.

The washer-dryer stage is where the uninitiated dilettante can, quite bluntly, goof-up. Most people think the order of the loads doesn't matter too much when it comes to washing and drying. While this belief is wholeheartedly true if you wash your clothes under the auspices of a laundromat, I'm thinking of those college students who are fortunate enough to be living at home still, or who at least have limited laundry facilities on their premises. The white load always must be laundered last for two simple reasons: sloppiness and laziness. First this is the load that, under no uncertain circumstances, must be bathed in bleach. If by your misguided fortune you happen to carelessly dribble or unknowingly splash bleach on the shelf or interior sides of the basin that don't get hit with water, you most certainly will drag the next load over the un-evaporated puddle of bleach and irreversibly ruin that pair of \$78 Calvin Klein indigo jeans you didn't intend to perform tie-dye miracles upon. Second, you want the white load to be last because after five to six hours of laundry duty, you're going to be exhausted, and the last thing you want to do is have to fold that last load of clothes before you relieve yourself of your watch. Usually it is safe to leave this load in the dryer until you absolutely need a pair of socks or until you are down to your last pair of jockey shorts because it

simply doesn't matter whether these clothes get wrinkled. And if you do have that one blouse that doesn't say "permanent press," then of course, you will be obliged to dutifully fold, iron, and properly hang it in your closet.

Towels can be saved until second to last because they don't need immediate attention either. Normally your guests won't be able to discern any wrinkles anyway. If the towels sit in the dryer overnight and you are really picky about small wrinkles, you can always fluff them up. Jeans also don't wrinkle (very much), so it is fairly safe to leave them until towards the end as well.

The order I really recommend is to wash the delicates first. The order of the colors is not too crucial, but the reason you want to work with these loads first is that once they are out of the dryer, you will have your hands full with ironing since these piles contain the shirts and blouses and slacks and skirts. Once you have cycled through these three or four loads, then move on to the jeans, towels, and whites respectively.

People always seem to have a different method of loading the washer, and I have to confess that my mother taught me the wrong way. Before my sister-in-law married into the family, I had no clue to the damage to which I was subjecting my clothes. Never put the clothes in first. That's a cardinal sin among the serious laundry practitioners. Instead chose the water temperature before adding any detergent. Use cold water for anything that has even the slightest chance of shrinking. Warm is okay for any clothes that you are sure you've shrunk as far as they can go. These are the only two temperatures you really need because the detergent is the real key. Hot water should be used only on the white-colored clothes because the heat will work in concert with the bleach and whiten your underwear every time, whether anyone sees it or you figure in our mothers' proverbial highway accident.

After setting the temperature, spin the dial to the appropriate time setting. The dial usually is self-explanatory for the various loads you have pre-sorted. For this first load, choose knit-delicates. The agitator will be more gentle on the clothes and won't twist them into knots like the regular cycle is prone to do. Pull out or press in on the dial to start filling the basin with water. At this time pour in the detergent. It is really important that the detergent reach full equilibrium in the water. Granular soaps are difficult to monitor and may settle to the bottom of the basin. And if you can't break yourself of the bad habit of using the granular detergent, remember, *never, never, never* pour it on top of the clothes while the water is filling because you can be sure that small particles will get into the sleeves or cuffs or pockets and not wash out completely, and you'll be left with a gooey ball of Cheer inside your shirt pocket.

Go ahead and begin filling the basin with the clothes now. I have to confess that I cringe every time I see people lift the laundry basket up and dump its contents into the basin without a single care. As the water is still filling, carefully lay the clothes in, curving them around the agitator. Spread them out and layer them so that the tank is properly balanced. You will reap the benefits of this exercise when the spin cycle whirls through without that annoying buzz telling you that your clothes are out of balance. If you have the type of washing machine that allows you to pour the fabric softener in the plastic well, do it now. Otherwise you will have to come back in about fifteen

minutes and try to catch the cycle as it fills with cold rinse water. Lastly make sure that the rinse cycle always uses cold water. If the load didn't get clean the first time, chances are that another dose of warm water is not going to help now.

When the cycle's complete, the clothes are ready for the dryer. Usually I find that the liquid fabric softener is not quite enough, for I really like that fresh scent to last the whole day I'm wearing my clothes. So I usually add another sheet of Snuggle fabric softener while my clothes are tumbling through their dryer stage. Bath and hand towels deserve two sheets because they have a tendency to carry a faint mildew smell after a couple days if the bathroom is not properly ventilated. A triple dose of fabric softener will extend their usefulness. Get in the habit of cleaning the lint trap before you even remove the clothes. Keep a small wastebasket near the dryer door so you won't forget. You'll sometimes find it helpful to clean the lint twice during the towel and whites loads because they tend to generate twice the crop of lint as the other loads. If you do neglect this small but essential maintenance step, you can easily stymie yourself wondering why your clothes take two hours to dry. Normally a load of clothes can dry within an hour. It goes without saying that sweaters and those delicate clothes don't go in the dryer and should air dry. Generally these need to dry on a flat surface so they don't get the permanent hanger marks in the shoulder area of the garment.

Conclusion paragraph: