

I do things differently from my wife. And that's OK.

How she folds laundry bugs me, and how I bag groceries galls her — but we don't fight about it anymore.

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The moment I realized we would be bagging our own groceries I knew it wasn't going to go well. My wife, Mel, had worked at a grocery store after high school and sees herself as somewhat of a “bagging expert,” while I have yet to choose any sort of grocery bagging identity. So, I would finish a bag, and she would reach inside, pull things out and rearrange them.

I told her to knock it off, and she told me I was doing it wrong.

We weren't exactly fighting, but we definitely weren't getting along. It was this strange middle ground we often find ourselves in after 15 years together, where we are working toward a common goal, but we each have our own way of accomplishing it.

Near the middle of bagging groceries, we ended up in a playful hand-slap fight, both of us laughing, and then continued to bag the food our own way. But if this had happened 10 years ago, we could have easily driven home without speaking. It's taken us years to realize that full-blown arguments about how things ought to be done are a waste of time.

The fact is, I'm never going to do things the way my wife does them, nor is she going to do things the way I do them. This doesn't mean either of us is wrong. We are going to care for the children differently, fold the laundry differently and bag the groceries differently because we're different people. Trying to force your spouse to do things the way you do them makes life harder, when marriage and family are already hard enough.

Clarity has come with experience — and with learning from other couples' stories. I was at a blogging conference last year, chatting with a cancer survivor who had just given a great speech. We talked about her children, her recovery and her husband, and I told her that he sounded like a wonderfully supportive man. Then she said something that gave me pause.

She told me one of the things she learned after going through cancer treatment was how capable her husband was. I couldn't help but take a step back and think, “It really shouldn't take cancer for someone to realize their spouse is capable.”

Because of my parenting blog, I get messages from mothers trying to figure out how to raise a child with an absent father, or a father who puts his feet up the moment he arrives home from work and plays video games. There are some bad fathers out there. In contrast, I also get messages from fathers who are interested in engaging on all levels of parenting, from play dates, homework, dishes and cooking to those endless triple-header soccer Saturdays with a birthday

party in the evening. However, these dads feel as if their wives don't trust them to do basic domestic tasks. And you know what? I understand where they are coming from.

The really damaging part is that these arguments can cause both parents to take on additional work that should be evenly distributed.

About six years into our marriage, when Mel and I were new parents, I hated seeing her stressed and I hated when she said she couldn't recall the last time she took a shower. I wanted to do something to make her life better. Yet, there were so many times I would walk into the kitchen, or the laundry room, or a number of other rooms in our house, and feel like an outsider with no clue of how to ease her burden.

I knew how to accomplish the tasks, but I wasn't sure how to do them the way Mel would. So I would ask a lot of follow-up questions and skip the more troubling items on the to-do list. I would load the dishwasher, vacuum and clean the sink because I did those jobs "right," but I avoided decluttering the kitchen counter and making the beds.

Keep in mind, I wasn't any better. I would let it be known that I disliked the way Mel did laundry. She would split it into daily installments, while I would rather knock it all out on a Saturday, so I didn't have worry about it throughout the week. I liked socks turned into each other, so they stayed together and didn't get lost, while she preferred socks folded like a taco, so the elastics didn't wear. I could go on, but you get the idea.

During the first 10 years or so of our marriage, my wife and I argued about every domestic chore under the sun — but did this mean our marriage was failing?

Gosh, I don't think so. If we got divorced over bagging groceries and folding socks, then maybe we shouldn't have gotten married. Still, performing domestic obligations the "right" or "wrong" way was an unnecessary source of tension.

Eventually, we stopped bickering about this sort of stuff. I knew Mel was just going to redo my work, in turn causing her more work, so I stayed in my lane, performing only those chores I could get "right," when I really should've felt comfortable doing whatever needed to be done, because I was an equal partner and parent.

Please realize this is a commentary on marriage, not an indictment of my wife or women in general. Mel is the most amazing person I've ever known. And none of what I've said will help ease the incredible mental labor a mother endures. But I can say that in the past few years, we have stopped worrying so much about the right and wrong way to keep house. As a result, we both feel more appreciated as full-fledged partners in our marriage, and it's lightened both our workloads.

There was no big turning point in reaching this realization. It was a gradual transition. And like everything in marriage, it's a work in progress. But now we focus more on working shoulder to shoulder on household chores, we say "thank you" a lot and we don't make it a habit to redo each other's work.

Our new approach has been transformative.

It's time we as parents and partners stop thinking in terms of right and wrong when it comes to domestic obligations and begin accepting that our spouse is in the fight but will do things a different way. Because, let's be real: At the end of the day, a folded towel is a folded towel.