



I'm not sure when my wife, Muriel, realized the sort of man she married. Maybe it was the time I brought home a load of scrap lumber someone had left in an alley. I know she at least had a clue when, a few months after we moved to a new home, I asked her what had happened to my hat collection—which included a top hat from a thrift shop, as well as a freshman beanie from Adelphi University. "Oh, I gave those old hats away," she said. "They didn't seem worth moving, and I didn't think you'd notice."

Didn't think I'd notice! Fat chance. I am too confirmed a "saver." Unfortunately, my wife is just as dedicated a "disposer." Somehow we've managed to stay together for more than 20 years, despite her belief that my goal in life is to fill our home with useless clutter—and my own suspicion that Muriel would gladly throw away 98 percent of my most valued possessions, if she thought she could get away with it.

Why is it that savers so often marry disposers? Such relationships are seldom smooth. There always comes a day when the disposer picks up a broken toaster, bent hanger, or year-old magazine and says, "Why don't we get

HELP! MY WIFE MAY THROW ME AWAY!

What happens when a saver, someone who keeps *everything*, marries a disposer, someone who gets rid of anything that isn't nailed down? Some strange compromises!
By Ralph Keyes

rid of this? It's just taking up space." And the saver, with a pained expression, replies, "Oh, let's hang on to it. It might come in handy someday."

Muriel and I aren't the only ones who have had this experience. Peggy and Clayton Thomas are the perfect example of a saver-disposer couple. Clayton has saved everything from old magazines and bits of hardware to a telephone pole that fell over in a storm. After 35 years of marriage,

Peggy, an ardent disposer, has learned to tolerate her husband's "pack ratness." But she occasionally indulges herself by throwing out stacks of Clayton's old *New Yorkers* and *National Geographics*. A few years ago she was even brash enough to give away his Boy Scout uniform from the Thirties. It took him some time to notice the loss, but he eventually did—after reading that such uniforms had become collectible.

Problems sometimes arise because disposers don't believe that their saver spouses actually know what's in their chaos of possessions. They therefore think that an item won't be missed if they pitch it. But all confirmed savers have some order to their piles, a kind of catalog in the back of their minds. It may take years to notice something has been eliminated, but they ultimately will. And then a fight may break out.

The war between savers and disposers usually starts over a tattered piece of clothing. To one it's an ugly rag; to the other a comfortable memory.

For example, when Sue Henderson was a newlywed, she threw out a torn, stained T-shirt she was sure her husband, Bob,
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would never miss. She was wrong. It was Bob's wrestling shirt from college—and he was quite upset. Before Bob could retrieve his beloved memento, it had become landfill. But he had learned his lesson. Many times since, Bob has upended the family trash can to search for a valuable item that his wife had assumed was garbage. Once it was a \$50 check that looked like junk mail. More often it's been that day's newspaper with an article Bob hadn't finished—and which, he says, he usually finds next to "the wettest, smelliest part of the garbage."

Sorting through garbage is the price savers pay to be married to disposers. Disposers, too, have frustrations to bear. They are often falsely accused of having pitched items that are missing.

When Bob Henderson couldn't find some important research notes on his family's history, he assumed his wife, the disposer, had struck again. Sue had a sinking feeling she might have inadvertently thrown the papers away—until Bob found them, buried in one of his many piles.

What makes some people become savers and others disposers? Perhaps it's in the genes. Jonellen Heckler—who still owns notes from her grade-school classmates, the sequined hand-

bag she wore to her prom, all of her college textbooks, and several miniskirts from the Sixties—claims she inherited "saving" genes from her pack-rat grandmother. Clayton Thomas also insists he got his pack-rat traits from his string-saving mother.

But sometimes it's just the opposite. Sue Henderson believes she became a neat-freak as a reaction to growing up with pack-rat parents.

Regardless of where their different traits come from, savers and disposers must learn to get along. All warring savers and disposers eventually meet at the peace table, where deals are struck about how long items can be saved and

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where. "Clutter zones" are identified (*her desk, his end table, etc.*), and agreements, such as "No disposal without fair warning" are made.

Savers sometimes give their disposing spouse permission to get rid of things they can't dispose of themselves. When writer Richard Louv went on a business trip, for example, his wife, Kathy, threw away a stack of old newspapers he had been meaning to scan for story ideas. Her husband never mentioned the papers' disappearance, and Kathy knew that he was secretly glad not to have to face that huge stack any longer.

And it isn't just savers who depend on disposers. Lou Heckler has often been grateful for the things his saver wife has kept him from dumping. He's even been able to put together a scrapbook filled with some of these very items, he said. "Many times I've said to Jonellen, 'Why don't you get rid of this or that?' Later I'll come back and ask, 'Do you still have that thing?' And I'm so grateful when she does."

Perhaps this is why savers and disposers marry: To protect each other from themselves. They could hardly marry the same type of person. Floors would collapse under the load of two savers. And disposers married to each other would spend half their time and money replacing things they'd thrown away.

Savers and disposers need each other, and this is what makes their union so very special. But, as my wife and I have discovered, a little tolerance and a great sense of humor can go a long, long way. And if savers continue to marry disposers, as they no doubt will, I'm sure many more couples will learn that if they compromise—and laugh a lot—they will have a very happy life together. ★