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CLUTTERBUSTING

with Karen

GUESS who's finished ALL their Christmas shopping?

Sigh ... not me.

But my mother has. Truth be told, she was probably finished a few weeks back. She likes to leave herself plenty of time for the Big Christmas Clean ... and to write something witty and original in each and every Christmas card.

Is it any wonder that depression rates soar during the silly season? Or maybe that's just me?

Most of you don't know my Mum, which is a shame really, because apart from the whole sheet ironing thing, she's actually pretty cool. But I'm willing to bet you know someone like her. Someone who makes that whole being organised thing look easy. Someone who looks around the house at 10.45am, smiles (serenely) and says "my work here is done", then tootles off to take advantage of the cheap seats at the cinema.

Someone who, on a bad day, you could happily ... But in the run down to Christmas this year, I've got a secret weapon - she's a fly-fishing instructor from North Carolina called Marla Cilley, otherwise known as the FlyLady. Hang on, come back, you can Google her in a minute.

FlyLady actually reminds me quite a bit of my Mum but with one key difference. She lives a LONG way away, she doesn't actually KNOW me (just my type - the chronically disorganised) and for some odd reason, I don't take it personally when she nags me about getting my act together.

According to her book, Sink Reflections (more about this later) FlyLady started her Internet mentoring system in 1999 to help people move out of CHAOS (Can't Have Anyone Over Syndrome) and start FLYING (her only-in-America acronym for Finally Loving Yourself).

She hasn't got kids but she does have a husband, a bluetick hound dog (for some reason that really captured my imagination) and an orange tomcat.

I stumbled across the FlyLady website by chance and initially dismissed it as just plain silly. I had no intention of joining the ranks of her legions of FlyBabies (blerk!) around the world that dutifully shine their kitchen sinks morning and night.

I am notoriously bad at routines. No, let me clarify that. I am exceptionally good at starting them but...

Anyway, I found myself drifting back to the website, which is chock full (naturally) of testimonials from SHEs (Sidetracked Home Executives - double blerk!) claiming the FlyLady had changed their lives.

Had there been any charge for the service (which is basically just a steady stream of e-mails that remind you to do stuff including, seriously, Go to Bed, it's late!), I probably wouldn't have bothered, but it's free. So I decided to give it a whirl.

And just for the record, I haven't ordered anything from the FlyShop, not even the seriously cool feather duster.



So I tracked down a copy of her book Sink Reflections on E-Bay (I'm Gen X, not iGen, and I like to do my reading in bed), typed up my Before Bed Routine, my Morning Routine and started shining my sink. I haven't ventured into the world of Zone cleaning yet, but I have dabbled with the 27 Fling Boogie (minus the singing bit, I promise).

The FlyLady is big on BabySteps (and words with capital letters in the middle of them it seems) and cautions her devotees not to burn out by introducing too many changes at once and, by jingo, it actually seems to work.

I've only been at it a few weeks but already I'm aware that being greeted by a clean sink (as opposed to last night's leftover lasagne) is a much nicer way to start the day. And little things, like putting my mobile on the charger before I go to bed each night and filling the car with petrol at the quarter empty mark instead of the (really) empty mark is doing a lot to reduce my stress levels. And I like it.

If the FlyLady system has a major flaw, it's that you've got to wade through an awful lot of hokey, homespun (read - blerky!) stuff to get to the useful stuff, but the useful stuff is really ... well, useful.

And I must confess to taking secret delight in her term for folk like my Mum - in FlySpeak they're the BOs (Born Organised). I don't think it was an accident.

I suspect FlyLady's cult-like following has a lot to do with the fact that not everyone has a mother to nag them, and those who do simply don't listen, on principle. And because Marla Cilley doesn't have kids of her own, she's got plenty of time to hound us.

And yes FlyLady could nag for America, but you do get the feeling she's really got your best interests at heart. And let's face it. She's not likely to turn up and personally inspect your sink (or your sheets!) anytime soon. So if you fall off the wagon, who's to know? To quote one of my other favourite domestic divas Martha Stewart, it's a Good Thing!

I'm not promising I'll have the house in order come Christmas this year, I doubt our Christmas cards will be highly original (or highly on time), I can't be sure Shakin' Dog won't disgrace himself in the presence of crackers ... but I can guarantee that when I wake up on Christmas morning, I'll be able to see my face in the sink. And that's progress

Happy Christmas Everyone!