

College Presidents Pen Admissions Essays

Barnard College's Debora Spar on daily routines

By

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Please describe a daily routine or tradition of yours that may seem ordinary to others but holds special meaning for you. Why is this practice significant to you?

Routines are good. Routines are comforting. Routines bring order and efficiency to the messiness of life.

I do so wish I had some.

But my life, like that of most women trying to juggle a job, some kids, a husband and her hair, never seems to settle into anything that approximates ritual. Unless, of course, you include chaos as a meaningful pattern of events.

Take a typical recent day. My eldest son stayed home from school to finish his college applications. The high-speed internet connection isn't working (again), so he uses my computer instead. Two hours later, envelopes in hand, he emerges, reminding me that a) he needs the car tonight; and b) he can't be around to watch his younger siblings. I drop him off at school and dash to the grocery store for dinner fixings. I come home to the cat and a writhing, half-dead chipmunk. I leave the chipmunk on the rug, lure the cat away, and try to determine the best combination of open doors and closed windows to give the poor rodent some chance of escape.

Meanwhile, my younger son calls with an enigmatic message. Something critical.

Tonight. At 7:00. I can't call him back because he dropped his phone under a moving car and it doesn't get incoming calls anymore. I can't possibly get him where he needs to go though, because son A already has dibs on the car, and I'm due at a black tie dinner at 6:00, delivering a speech on women and leadership.

I head back to the computer to write, trying desperately to finish tonight's remarks and deal with the dozens of messages that have accumulated in just the past hour. Because it is, after all, a work day. I pack my daughter's clothes for soccer practice and put her Hebrew homework where she has at least a remote chance of encountering it. In between, I check back on the chipmunk, which is now expiring sadly on the downstairs rug. Should I whisper quietly to it? Administer tiny little Heimlich maneuvers? Pick it up with the dust pan?

Sometime around 5:00, my husband calls. My daughter is off to soccer by now, and my sons (after several rounds of intermediation) have coordinated their evening plans. Dinner is nearly done, and I've thrown on something that will hopefully pass for black tie garb. I haven't yet figured out how to handle tomorrow morning, when the three kids need to be at three different schools and I am convening a campus conference at 7:30.

"Hello, love," my husband says sweetly, "is there anything I can do to help?"

My husband is in Buffalo. He is in Buffalo a lot lately. It's cold there, and it snows. But I'm moving at lightning speed, racing between the kids, the speech, the conference, the roasting chicken, and the dying chipmunk. "No," I say. "We're all set." Chaos and I are doing just fine.

The next morning, I learn from the radio that a freak blizzard has hit Buffalo, taking with it my ambitious plan to have my husband retrieve the children from track, piano, and chemistry tutoring that afternoon while I discuss advances in feminism. I'm toast.

I creep into my daughter's room and silently lift the lid of a shoebox that has been poked with airholes. The nuts and water are undisturbed, and he's there, eyes closed, curled into what I can only take to be a position of resignation and accusation.

The chipmunk has died. And another day begins. Thankfully, I've never been much for routine.

Source:

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