

## COMPANY

“We labor to make a house a home, then every time we're expecting visitors, we rush to turn it back into a house.”

--Robert Brault

Is mine the only house on earth that spontaneously bursts into Cobweb Central when company is coming?

I swear, I can have thoroughly (my admittedly lax definition of “thoroughly” anyway) cleaned every square inch of home sweet home MINUTES earlier, and am relaxing and viewing the polished and scrubbed fruit of my labors. Then the phone rings, or the calendar page flips, heralding the impending arrival of guests. And, in the blink of an eye, a thick layer of dirt drifts in and settles on everything from lampshades to floorboards. The kitchen floor suddenly oozes grime. The bathrooms, which mere moments before were hotel-worthy, now qualify as toxic zones. So I swing into my most delightful persona, Maid from Hell. Beware, husband and children! Brooms will be flung at you, scrub buckets will soar in your direction! I will develop octopus arms as I attempt to sanitize the microwave, refrigerator, dishwasher and family room carpet (it looks like we own a giant shedding dog, when in reality our lone pet swims in a bowl, guiltless), while washing the shower curtain and re-pointing the chimney, all at the same time. As the doomsday clock continues its relentless ticking, I decide it's time to paint the dining room ceiling, re-seal the back deck and iron the drapes. By the time the company is due to arrive, I am sprawled in a chair, waving the limp dustcloth of defeat, totally spent.

And that doesn't include shopping for, and then preparing, the party food. What my menu lacks in “luxe” due to our austere budget, I conclude it must make up in “clever.” So it's handmade naan bread, hand-dipped chocolate strawberries, hand-crafted cheese puffs. Take a peek at the site of Seyfried's Kitchen Kapers and you will probably not be struck by its resemblance to the über-organized mis-en-place of *Top Chef*. You probably will be struck by the fine coating of flour on everything, including the cook. And the chaos. You'll definitely notice the chaos. Burned fingers, broken glass...my specialties!

Lest you think I exaggerate, ask any one of my children to imitate me in full-guest-alert mode. You will get quite the eyeful and earful, believe me. They really have my number, and it's not a number anyone would want to dial.

The more I fuss and plan, the bigger my parties seem to flop, too. For years, we invited the neighborhood for a Christmas weekend open house, which of course annually ruined Christmas Day itself, because all of my focus was on the mega-event to come. The final year of our big “do,” a wicked virus spread through town. I had prepped food for 60 people. By 10 AM on the Big Day, 45 people had called in sick. We were stuck eating the ton of festive crackers and dip until we, too, felt quite, quite ill.

I don't have the energy to entertain often, given my absurd standards of hostess perfection. And it's a shame, because I want to. Really. Hospitality is a spiritual practice to which I am honestly drawn. On those rare occasions that either a) I am still in shape to appreciate my company when they come or b) I am caught by surprise and have no choice but to relax and welcome visitors without the manic prep time, I genuinely enjoy being with people.

Why do I assume everyone will cross my threshold sporting white gloves, ready to tsk-tsk? Do I subject my host or hostess' homes to this laser-beam scrutiny? Of course not—I am so unobservant that I would not notice the sudden addition of an in-ground pool in their living room, or a wayward tree growing through their kitchen window since my last visit. If I registered a little speck on the floor or dust mote on the windowsill, I would only feel more comfortable, not less. So why do I give no credit to my friends?

If Jesus gave me a buzz and said he'd be swinging by for dinner this evening, do I honestly think He'd give a darn if my screen door latch was still broken and my cheese puffs lacked sufficient puffiness?

As the holidays arrive, may I try to be a little more Mary and a whole lot less Martha (both biblical and Stewart). May I cherish my loved ones and fling my door open wide (and without the latch that should be easy) to welcome them. May I do the best I can to get ready, and then let the rest go. It's the togetherness that matters, sharing the time of our lives.

And I hear dim lights and candles cover a multitude of sins.