

HOUSE RULES

t h e p o d c a s t

Episode 6: The Secret to a Welcoming, Inviting Home

I'm Myquillyn Smith and this is House Rules:
Welcome to Episode 6

I recently received two catalogs in the mail on the same day, they were both home catalogs selling furniture. One had amazing photos of styled rooms that I wanted to hang out in and recreate the feeling in my own house. The rooms were homey and realistic and gorgeous and I couldn't look away. As I slowly turned the pages, I was inspired and took note of interesting layouts and ideas. Although many of the items they carried were out of my price range, the images were approachable and homey and I didn't feel intimidated or insulted by any of the photos. I found myself taking my time turning the pages and lingering on every detail. This catalog was gorgeous and they captured a bit of the feeling of home we're all looking for. I saved it. Just like I save every issue of this particular brand's sales catalogs.

The other catalog featured photos that were instantly obvious I was looking at an advertisement. I spent about 14 seconds quickly flipping through the pages. Womp. It was boring. It kind of looked like robots decorated every room and although it had rugs and throw pillows, it still felt cold, sterile and unwelcoming. It looked fake. The rooms, they had no soul. And I threw it away.

It took me a minute to realize what the difference was.

By the end of this episode you'll be relieved to learn the secret to creating a welcoming, inviting home that sets the mood for connection.

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A friend once told me that she and her husband didn't like the color of their bathroom but they didn't want to repaint it because it was too much work. I asked what part of it was so hard, and she said, "Removing the toilet." Insert the loud noise of a record scratching while the earth's

rotation grinds to a halt and every human stops what they are doing and looks our way. “What? You said you wanted to paint, not renovate, right?”

She answered “Yes, but my parents recently painted their bathroom and they took the toilet out. Otherwise, how would they paint the wall behind it?”

Guys, this is what perfection does to us. We put off doing all sorts of fun things because to do them perfectly would be entirely too much work. So instead of having a slightly imperfect finished space with a few unpainted inches behind a permanent toilet that no one’s ever going to see, we choose to live with a space we don’t love.

I like to use this example because many of us have moved past this level of perfection. Most of us don’t feel the pressure to paint every square inch behind the toilet. If you can’t get to it with a tiny brush, then our eyes probably can’t get to it either. Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. Or, in this case, the toilet water.

When it comes to perfection we have two choices: **We can work really hard to attain it, or we can give up.**

Many of us have tried the first way working ourselves to the weary bone trying to measure up to an unrealistic goal. We’ve either failed or are still wasting precious time chasing perfection. We overbuy, overspend, over decorate and over fret. We have a cute somewhat organized hoard of home accessories tightly packed away in the closet. Or we’re constantly trying to DIY our way to contentment.

Others of us have just given up. Sometimes giving up looks like using hand-me-down furniture that isn’t serving your family well because you’re so worried about making a bad decision. You have a stack of framed photos behind the sofa for fear of making errant nail holes. You throw in the ugly towel you have left over from college because the thought of buying new towels is overwhelming. You give up on the dream of having a home you love.

Sometimes giving up looks like having an almost empty house with just the bare essentials. You’re not sure what to choose so you choose nothing.

Whether we work too hard or just give up, both tendencies stem from one main issue: we’ve allowed the myth of perfection to boss us. We want perfection and we want it yesternow and we won’t settle for anything less. And in the meantime we’ve settled for nothing at all.

What if instead of giving up on ourselves and our house we give up on the idea of aiming for perfection. Go ahead, pick the sofa that is super comfy knowing that in five years it’s going to look used because it has been used. Do you know what’s more sad than a 5 year old, falling apart sofa? A five year old sofa that is pristine because it’s never truly been fully used.

Lower your expectations and realize that as long as we choose to walk around clothed, the laundry will never really be finished. If we live in a house there's going to be messes. Why does this surprise us and make us feel guilty? As long as we eat, and walk and need places to sit, the kitchen sink is going to hold dirty dishes, and the living room is not going to stay clutter free.

Years ago I was invited to a gathering. I entered the home of a new friend and two things were obvious: she had impeccable taste, and she had the budget to back it up. Her home was beautiful and I loved it. I was looking forward to getting to know her better, and I believe I did within the first five minutes of walking into her home.

I was welcomed in with an apology for "what a mess" her house was. So I started scanning for the mess but nothing caught my eye. Not to worry, she pointed things out: "Oh, just ignore that window, we've been meaning to get new drapes," "I've been trying to get my husband to paint that wall forever," "I'm so sorry, those old pillows look awful on our old sofa." Room by room, she showed me around, being sure to tell me about everything she didn't love.

After the tour, she covered everything with a shocking statement. "I'm so embarrassed. This house is such a mess." I was floored. This house was not a mess. It was stunning.

Every time someone came to the door for our gathering, she welcomed them in with an apology, making sure to point out every invisible flaw—so the guest was sure to know that SHE knew her home was less than perfect.

All I could think was if this beautiful, well-appointed home wasn't good enough for her, then my ramshackle, motley house certainly would never be okay. I made a mental note right then and there to never invite her over. No matter what. This girl was not for me.

But the truth was, I had fallen into the apology trap myself. Of course, I always apologize for my home to protect myself so people wouldn't think I was a slob. Or at least so they would know that I acknowledge I can be a slob and that I'm not okay with it. And that really, I have much higher standards than this and my house does not meet my requirements.

But that day, it became obvious that when I apologize for my home I'm declaring to everyone around that I'm not content. That I'm ungrateful. That I'm silently keeping score. That I put huge importance on the appearance of my home in order to meet certain standards and it gives the impression even though it wasn't true, that maybe, just maybe I'm doing that when I visit your home, too.

One time, I took my apology too far and went on and on about how a big beautiful home that we were renting was so not my style. My guest quietly commented that she would love to live in my house. I'm so glad she said that because it made me realize what I was doing. I was being ungrateful.

I decided at that moment to never apologize for what I had been given again. It makes guests feel uncomfortable, it encourages discontentment and it proclaims that what you've been provided with isn't good enough, which is so hurtful for everyone else in the family. I'm embarrassed that I spent so many years early in our marriage focusing on what our homes were lacking instead of paying attention to what they had.

Years have passed since I visited that apologizing friend and now, if we still lived in the same town, I would have no problem inviting her over. She probably wouldn't even notice things about the state of my house because the truth is, people caught up in perfection are actually more hard on themselves than they are on others. And if she did notice, I'm willing to bet that the fact that I opened my home to her and am okay with the imperfectness would give her a little bit of freedom to do the same. No apologies needed.

Someone has to go first.

In her book *Sink Reflections*, Marla Cilley, also known as The FlyLady, says, "Housekeeping done incorrectly still blesses the family." It's the same with creating a beautiful home. Decorating done incorrectly still blesses the family. And decorating done good enough is prettier than decorating not done at all.

Of course, there are some things in life like taxes, flying a plane, heart surgery, dialing 911, these things need to be done as close to perfect as possible. But other things like killing a spider, washing your face, painting a wall, well they just need to be done. Whether it's saving money, cleaning your house, brushing your teeth or picking a paint color, doing these things is still worth it even if they aren't done to absolute perfection. At times, good enough and done is a smarter choice than perfect, and simply making a choice is often a sign of maturity, balance and contentment.

Once we realize that the goal of creating home has nothing to do with perfection, we can create welcoming, approachable beauty and warmth out of freedom instead of fear. Instead of seeing a used sofa with wear, we see a loved-on piece of our story, a cushy place that has faithfully held the heinies of friends through joys and sorrows. Sure, we may still need or want a new sofa, but instead of making that decision out of disdain for what we have, we can make a choice out of gratitude.

A pile of dirty laundry can be a sign of recent adventures. The broken chair leg propped up with a stack of books – yes, I actually had that for years and I even put it on the cover of my first book with the broken leg side showing – is a reminder that we could have spent cash on a new chair but decided to spend it on something more important right now. The kids getting too tall for the twin beds could be an annoyance that we have to get a bigger bed or maybe even a bigger room, or it could be a chance to appreciate that the kids are growing up, just like they should.

Instead of seeing imperfections as thorns in my decorating flesh, I want to be open and see them as signs of life. These messes and wear and tear all stem from gifts in my life. I'll clean the

mud tracked in from my boys and the dog. But I also know I don't have to be embarrassed if a neighbor pops by before I do. Messes are proof of lives being lived, and houses are for living. My home and your home are reflections of our lives and life's messes can be gloriously beautiful if I choose to see it. And if you choose to see it.

Years ago, before I met the apologizing girl and learned from her, I basically told a dear sweet friend that I absolutely did not trust her. We had just pulled into the driveway after doing something together and she asked if she could come in and use my bathroom. I flat out told her no.

It wasn't because it was messy – I could have run in and wiped the counter and grabbed the underwear off the floor. It was because I carried a deep shame over the 100 year old house that we rented and the outdated state of it. She and her husband lived in a new house in a beautiful neighborhood. My house was in the bad part of town and had been a rental for years. It had bright orange Formica counters and one weird, old bathroom that looked like a serial killer grew up taking showers in there.

I thought I was protecting myself by not letting her come in, but really, by not allowing her to see my bathroom, I was telling her she couldn't be trusted with the imperfections of my life, which is why I went to great lengths to hide them. I was telling her that I expected she would judge me. To this day, I'm still embarrassed to admit that's what I did. I wish I'd had the courage to invite her in. She would not have cared, and I would have seen that, and it would have solidified our friendship and I could have started to deal with my perfectionist ways earlier. Instead, I held her at arm's length and we never got that close.

The truth is there are some people in the world who can't be trusted with the imperfections of my life. But usually, I'm not friends with them and those people aren't dropping me off in the driveway with a hug and asking to use my bathroom. Why be friends with people if I can't trust them with my mess? If not them, who?

Not only do I regret not inviting her in, I regret not realizing that I could have made a big impact on my bathroom with small changes. Back then I believed the lie that the only worthwhile changes would be to completely gut and renovate that bathroom. We were renting and also didn't have much extra money, and I assumed I was stuck. I could have found a pretty rug, hung some cute cafe curtains maybe made from napkins. I could have purchased some pretty towels, created a beautiful vignette on the counter with a thrifted vase and some branches from the yard. But I thought it was all or nothing. So I chose nothing.

I know that creating a welcoming home, one that's hospitable to both us and others is important to you. We want to create the home we've always wanted so we can use it the way we've always dreamed.

Over the years I've redefined what a dream house is. It's not full of brand new gold plated, marble lined, high end finishes. Dream house is a home that I use and love. And yours can be too.

When we open our doors to our friends, what we are saying is "Welcome to my home where things aren't perfect, I trust you can relate." The great thing about letting people see a little imperfection is that it naturally leads to connection. If everyone pretends to be perfect it's exhausting and all surfacy. Once someone goes first and shares something deeper, messy, true, imperfect, connection happens and trust begins. Imperfection plays a huge role in our lives and it's so vital in helping us form healthy relationships we'd be crazy to try to banish it from our conversations, and our homes.

When we believe that it doesn't have to be perfect to be beautiful, the pressure is suddenly diffused. Our home and the imperfections within it aren't just something we choose to overlook and deal with, no. When you understand the connecting role imperfections play, you begin to welcome them.

"Embrace the imperfections," It's not just a cute thing to say. It can be a strategy. Imperfections play a role. Imperfections put people at ease.

When someone goes first and allows us to know or see something about them that isn't perfect it's vulnerable and opens the door for deeper connection because sharing imperfection is an act of trust.

In her book *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brene Brown says, "Staying vulnerable is a risk we have to take if we want to experience connection."

I want to have a pretty home and I want you to have a pretty home too. But creating beauty has absolutely nothing to do with getting rid of imperfections. Imperfections put people at ease, and maybe allowing welcoming imperfections in our home is one way for us to go first and set the mood for connections to happen. Afterall, isn't that our home's highest calling?

So, back to that catalog that I mentioned at the beginning of the episode. The one I slowly looked through, dogeared pages and KEPT with all the others that company has sent me.

This catalog that was eye catching, layered and highly interesting was by a company that sells new furniture and vintage pieces. The venues and homes that they rented out for the backdrop of their photo shoots are all a little old, a little bit chaotic, they're obviously rustic. They've combined new and old loved-on pieces, pristine items placed in historic settings. Every image included something with a story, a patina, a warmth, something that had age and scars, or maybe you would call it something imperfect.

The images included imperfect items, metals with natural or even a purposeful look of age, a new vase with a wild branch or table cuttings laid on the table scattered about, waiting to be put

into a container. There was a random pillow that looked like it had been used for hours, kind of flattened down. Even tiny collections that added a bit of visual clutter, a rug with wrinkles in it. One page even had a baby goat or maybe it's a sheep, I don't really know my animals. But this little animal was walking through the scene. These imperfect items added an endearing quality that made these styled and staged images designed to make me want to buy furniture, they made me feel at home and welcomed.

The imperfectness of it all was the very thing that cast a spell over me and made me want to linger. That's the magic of the secret ingredient of imperfections.

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Much of today's content was pieced together from my first book *The Nesting Place: It doesn't Have to be Perfect to be Beautiful*. Although the images in this book were taken 12 years ago in a rental house and styles have changed, the message is still just as true today as it was then.

This is your personal invitation to join the 100,000 people already on my weekly Cozy Minimal email list.

You can expect pretty encouragement in your inbox weekly, September through May. In today's email I'm sharing a few images from those catalogs that I couldn't look away from.