

In Praise of “Scruffy Hospitality”

Robin Shreeves

My friends Dana and John perfectly practice what the Rev. Jack King referred to as “scruffy hospitality.” Their kitchen is small. The wood cabinets are dark and a few decades old. Spices and jars for sugar and flour line the countertops because there’s nowhere else to put them. A tall, round table shoved in a corner has mismatched bar stools crammed around it. The sliding glass doors in the kitchen lead to a back deck with a well-used chiminea, an outdoor table and a large variety of chairs and cushions, many of them bought at yard sales. We circle the chairs around the chiminea on weekend nights during all four seasons, whenever Dana and John put out a simple call out through text or Facebook that says, “Fire tonight!”

There will always be food, but like the bar stools and deck chairs, the food is mismatched. Our hosts provide some food; John may have the urge to make jalapeño poppers or Dana may put together some version of salsa with whatever’s fresh from the garden, but there’s not a formally prepared meal. Everyone just brings something. It’s perfectly acceptable — encouraged even — to bring odds and ends of foods that need to get used up. I often bring wedges of cheese that have already been cut into or half a baguette to slice up and toast to dip in hummus. Everyone brings a little something to drink. And it’s a glorious feast. This kitchen and deck won’t be featured in *Better Homes and Gardens* anytime soon, but maybe they should be. They are two of the most hospitable spaces I know. By opening up their home as-is, Dana and John are the most gracious hosts I know. I almost wrote “by opening up their home with its imperfections,” but that’s not accurate. Their home is perfect — just like it is.

What is scruffy hospitality?

On his blog, Father Jack defines scruffy hospitality this way:

Scruffy hospitality means you’re not waiting for everything in your house to be in order before you host and serve friends in your home. Scruffy hospitality means you hunger more for good conversation and serving a simple meal of what you have, not what you don’t have. Scruffy hospitality means you’re more interested in quality conversation than the impression your home or lawn makes. If we only share meals with friends when we’re excellent, we aren’t truly sharing life together.

He encourages us not to allow an unfinished to-do list to stop us from opening our homes to friends and family.

I agree, but here’s the problem. It’s hard to let go of the belief that our homes need to be picture-perfect — or maybe I should say “Pinterest-perfect” — before we can welcome

guests over. But the idea that we must make our home look un-lived in before having people over stops so many of us from sharing life together.

Before kids, entertaining for me meant a whirlwind deep cleaning of the entire house. Not being a zealous housekeeper, I used to joke that I had to entertain or my home would never get a thorough cleaning. When I first had kids, I ended up entertaining a lot less, partly because of the mess in the house that I no longer had time to deal with.

Then one day, a woman I very much admired said something so simple. She said whenever someone was coming to her home — a home with five children in it — and she started to worry about how her home looked, she would stop and think: “Are they coming to see me, or are they coming to see my home?” It occurred to her that someone who would have a problem with her home looking like a family of seven lived in it wasn’t really someone’s opinion she cared about.

I’d love to say I embraced that wisdom immediately, but I didn’t. Slowly, though, I have let go of some of the crazy things I believed must happen before people entered my front door. The first thing I let go was the upstairs. Over the years, I’ve become more relaxed.

Next, I didn’t dust. Nobody said a word, and they came back again.

I didn’t plan the entire meal around foods I could prepare ahead of time so my kitchen could be spotless when my guests arrived. Friends jumped in the kitchen and helped me finish making dinner, and we had fun.

I left a pile of boxes in a dining room corner while we were eating in there. The food was just as good.

With each thing I let go, I realized nobody cared. If they noticed, it didn’t bother them. If there is someone who stopped coming to my home because it’s not immaculate, I haven’t noticed.

Having dirty dishes in the sink when friends come over shouldn’t be a reason to fret. For the past few months, I’ve been hosting Tuesday night wine tastings for my friends in the neighborhood. As I look back on these Tuesday nights, I realize I have fully embraced the scruffy hospitality Father Jack talks about. If there are papers piled on the table before my friends arrive, I throw them on the chair at the end where no one sits and push the chair in. If the dinner dishes aren’t done yet, I don’t fret.

“Sometimes authenticity happens when everything is a bit scruffy,” writes Father Jack. Authentic conversations happen during those wine tastings. Authentic conversations happen at Dana and John’s home, too. In fact, I think the most authentic conversations I’ve

experienced have happened during scruffy gatherings. Maybe it's because when everything is polished and shiny, I feel like I need to be polished and shiny, too. When things are a little messy around me, I feel like I can let people know things are a little messy inside me, too. I have friends who are excellent housekeepers, and their homes always seem "company ready" to me. I have authentic conversations in their homes, probably because being neat and tidy is authentic for them. Authenticity invites authenticity.

But for anyone whose home is not naturally company-ready, I encourage you to embrace this concept of scruffy hospitality. Open up your home, big or small, as-is. Value community over tidiness. Invite people over and say, "I don't know what I'm serving. I may have to order pizza. I would just love your company."

"Hospitality," writes Father Jack, "is not a house inspection, it's friendship." It's more than okay to be scruffy. We can have the kind of open, welcoming home we long to have where authenticity shines, even if our kitchen floors do not.