

Marni Jameson

Honey Do, Honey DON'T!

By Marni Jameson

Bob is here today. I like Bob. Bob has no idea how much I like him, nor how long I've waited for this day. My husband, Dan, has some idea, but it's better if we don't talk about it. We inevitably wind up in that devil's triangle of male ego, do-it-yourself home improvements, and other men. Which brings me to this essential question: If women don't mind admitting they need a housekeeper, why do guys have so much trouble admitting they need a handyman? Anyone?

It's not that Dan's unhandy. He once built a nice redwood deck and put together a darn cute playhouse for the girls. He's painted and put in light fixtures. But when it came to refinishing the oak front doors, uhh, let's just say, I'm glad he has other ways of making a living.

Unlike men of yore, like my Dad who could take apart a car and a garbage disposal in the morning and have them both back together before dinner, modern men specialize. They're trained to do fewer things really well. Which is why today's modern woman sometimes needs two men.

Bob is re-refinishing our front doors. Dan refinished them the first time months ago. When he was done, the doors looked like me, distressed, which would have been great if that were the look we were going for.

Like many DIY home improvement projects, this one started with a price quote that made Dan choke on his Pepsi. Last time that happened I'd just told him I'd sold an article to a woman's magazine about our sex life.

"For that kind of money, I'll do it," he said. (And who among us hasn't lived to regret those words?) Armed with resolve, he pulled off the doors and began stripping, scraping and sanding. I've since seen a chart that rated home improvement projects by difficulty. Using a scale of 1 (a drunk can do it blindfolded) to 7 (you're out of your mind to try), refinishing paneled doors rated 6. "Not a job for novices," the cautionary note read. "Every imperfection shows."

Ain't that the unvarnished truth.

After a long weekend, the doors were stained, but not sealed. Meantime we had to re-hang the doors because Dan needed to go to his real job Monday. As we struggled to maneuver the first slab back on its hinges, like waltzing with a refrigerator, it slipped and took the nail off my left big toe, then my children heard all the bad words I know, and a few I made up.

The doors looked as if they had measles. Stripping chemical had run onto the inside surface of both doors taking off the stain there, too, which had been nice, plus it had eaten the finish off the brass-plated handles.

Somehow this wasn't the time to suggest we hire someone to do this right. I made the most positive remarks I could without lying: "Well they are darker. We wanted darker." And I waited for him to suggest we hire help. And waited.

Months later I got another bid, now more because the inside of the doors needed redoing, too, and we needed new hardware. I showed Dan the bid. He was silent. Then one day, when the stock market was briefly up, I said: “Honey, why don’t you keep working out the problems of global technology and stop depriving other men of their livelihood?”

He gave in.

When Bob was done, the doors looked fabulous. I’m happy. Dan’s relieved. And though he won’t hold back from future household projects, we’ve learned: There are jobs you do and jobs you let others do. Here’s what to consider:

- The Grief Factor. Why spend your free time doing something you’re not good at? If you pay a pro there’s no cursing and no 20 trips to the hardware store.
- The Trade Offs. You will save money in labor, but factor in the learning curve, and your costs for materials, which a professional can get cheaper and right the first time. Plus a pro will already have special tools you might need to buy.
- The OK. Find out whether your project requires city approval. Many small changes, like switching certain light fixtures, or adding decks, need the city’s okay.
- The Know-How. If you want to tackle a job yourself, like tiling or installing a ceiling fan, check with your local home improvement store. Many offer free courses on DIY projects.
- The Credentials. Be sure the contractor is licensed for the work you’re hiring him to do. (A flooring contractor may say he’s licensed, but his license may be for plumbing.)
- The Contract. Have him put in writing the price, completion time and penalty (usually a discount) should the job exceed the estimated time.

Doing certain home improvement jobs yourself can bring immense satisfaction, but some are best left to the pros, like Bob. I like Bob.

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