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Laundry Habits

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In 2013, I decided to give up the use of my washing machine for one year. I wanted to challenge myself to question each act of laundering clothes.

Figure 1 shows my previous “normal” process, and Figure 2 my current “experimental” process. The experimental model has two process pathways, fast and slow. I have a laundry basket of underwear and basic items that I need on a fast rotation. Fast items come into the shower with me on a daily basis. They are washed in my shower water, wrung out and then hung up to dry. Slow items are separated from my fast items in a second laundry basket. When I have a free day, or the weather is good enough, I wash my slow items in the bathtub, squeeze out excess water with a mangle, and hang the clothes out to dry.

Fast items are continually in my consciousness; I see, touch and clean them very often. I am aware of them. Slow items can disappear for months into my washing basket, only to reappear as if to fresh eyes. I remember why I love wearing a particular garment, and the laborious process of laundering it makes me value the wearing even more.

Since starting to wash garments by hand, I’ve noticed that I now question whether, for example, a once-worn blouse really does need a full wash, or whether it could just be “freshened up” by hanging it on the clothesline.

It has never been my goal to discard technological advances. Time-saving devices such as washing machines have allowed many people to enjoy leisure time that would otherwise be taken up by domestic drudgery. I merely wanted to open up the laundering process, experiment with it, and challenge myself by removing some of the tools on which I had become reliant. My year without a washing machine has enabled me to develop both new attitudes and new skills in regard to this universal domestic task. My hope is that this experiment may encourage others to challenge themselves, and lead to other alternative practices in the use and maintenance of garments.