

# PAPER HEART

essay by  
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HOW CAN TWO PEOPLE AND TWO CATS MAKE SO MUCH GARBAGE? My husband used to ask this question almost every time he took out the trash. I had pondered it myself ever since we started living together. There was only so much we could blame on the cats. ¶ Among the many things Glenn and I have in common is an interest in recycling whatever we can. Together, we ditched plastic water bottles for a water filter. We pack up our newspapers the minute we read them. If it's on our town's recycling list, we dutifully collect it and haul it out to the curb.

On the other hand, we're not exactly environmental saints. We designate canvas bags for grocery shopping, and almost always forget to bring them. We've never composted anything in our lives. Still, we thought tackling our trash output was a good start, especially considering we had barely been married a year.

Obviously, some forensic analysis was in order to see what the heck was going on in our trash bags. Yup, we promised to love, honor and go through the garbage together.

We didn't have to dig very far to realize that Glenn and I have something else in common: A love of paper, and, evidently, an even greater love of throwing it away. All kinds of paper: Napkins, paper towels, tissues, junk mail, notepaper, post-it notes, computer paper . . . dear God, I felt like a war criminal. The wastebasket from my home office alone was filled to the brim with a confetti of post-its and crumpled up notepaper.

We had met the problem, and it was us.

We skipped the finger pointing. Now was the time to work together as a couple and come up with viable solutions. I, off course, couldn't eliminate all *my* paper usage—some things will always need to be printed out or written down; what if there's a power outage?—but those wadded up napkins and paper towels that *someone* was so fond of using? They could be strictly rationed or even eliminated from everyday use. I put a stack of dishtowels next to the kitchen sink and unearthed cloth napkins for meals.

This did not go over very well. It wasn't the type of marital challenge I anticipated during our first year, but we had to face the facts about our respective paper obsessions. Glenn goes through paper towels and napkins the way I go through pads of paper—like there's no tomorrow. Eventually, we managed to reach an amicable and environmentally-friendly compromise: The stack of dish towels remained by the sink, the cloth napkins went back into storage and my home office got its own recycling outpost.

By the time we celebrated our one-year anniversary, we were able to take out the trash in fewer bags and with a clearer conscience. We decided to scrap the traditional first-year anniversary gift—paper—in favor of his and hers recycling bins. ☐

