

It's a guy thing

Renovation can be about more than you think

By Kathryn Young

It's tempting to think the word 'renovate' simply means to remodel or repair a room or building.

But oh, how naïve you would be. I learned the true definition of that deceptive word in the midst of our basement family room and home-office makeover. Through some act of God that I still don't understand, my handyman husband had actually agreed to hire someone else to rip out the stucco wall, cheap 1970s era paneling and stained carpet and replace them with drywall, better insulation, built-in shelves, oak treads on the stairs, new carpet and new windows.

But I was puzzled by Bill's ensuing behaviour.

Although he had made the decision to hire renovators (because he knew he was too busy himself), and he was happy with the selection of Oak Ridge Construction, he began to create countless make-work projects for himself.

For instance, he insisted that we tear down the old walls ourselves. I sighed, but discovered I was quite pleased to take a sledgehammer to that stucco wall that attacked my elbow every time I took a back-swing with the vacuum cleaner.

However, Bill was getting frustrated that we were doing the work while our three children watched TV.

"I don't want them growing up thinking you just hire someone to do all your work for you," he grumbled one Friday evening. "It's not right. They're going to learn how to do this stuff."

Early the next morning, he was back downstairs prying nails out of paneling. I hustled the kids one by one out of bed and sent them downstairs to learn from Daddy. When I came down with the third bleary-eyed child, Bill looked entirely frustrated. "What's this? I can't get any work done with them all here," he said, picking the crowbar out of our five-year-old's curious hands.

"But you said...." I began, then shrugged. I knew renovations typically caused couples much stress and I didn't want to fight. "Never mind. Let's leave Daddy to bash walls by himself."



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His angst only increased when the Oak Ridge boys -- Mike Dion, André Jacques and their team -- swarmed our basement and took the figurative reigns of power from Bill. That's when he headed to the garage and began building storage shelves out of the old basement doors.

"You know, we hired these guys so we could relax in the evenings," I ventured while holding the ladder for him. He put down his hammer and shook his head. "You just don't get it, do you?"

Nope. I didn't. But a few days later, the lightning bolt of understanding struck. Mike and André had departed for the day, and Bill was attempting to move speaker wires after the drywall had already been installed. I sat on the stairs, watching while he cursed and muttered, trying to coax the wires past a stud.

"Why don't you ask Mike and André to help you fish the wires through?" I suggested, ever the helpful wife. "I'm sure they've had lots of experience with that."

"What?" Bill exploded. "A guy ask another guy for help?"

Ah, the crux of the matter. Now his weird behaviour began to make sense.

Apparently "renovate" is equivalent in meaning to "emasculate," especially to a man who grew up helping his father with plumbing and roofing and other home repairs. He carried that tradition into our own home and is actually quite competent at

it. Which makes it all the more difficult to pay someone to do what he knows he can do.

Thank heaven Mike and André proved to be wonderful workmen -- friendly guys who enjoy their work, answered our children's countless questions, and were meticulous in getting all the details just right. If they hadn't been as talented as they are, the damage to my hubby's psyche would have been much worse.

As it was, he spent an entire weekend, with his Dad's help, roughing-in the pipes for a future central vacuum system.

Next, he announced that I didn't need to continue searching for a new entertainment unit or coffee table because he was going to build them. Neither would I have to comb the stores for a new desk for my office, because he was going to build that too. And a hutch for my desk and a sofa table and an end table....

He just couldn't bear to sit idle while other men worked on the house.

While the actual renovation was done over two months (including a month delay in carpet delivery), the renovation to Bill's male psyche took much longer. He built the entertainment unit, my beautiful new maple-topped desk and a coffee table. I nixed the sofa and end tables, but I'm still awaiting my hutch.

No matter. It's worth the wait if it allows my dear husband to restore his dignity.

Kathryn Young, an Ottawa writer, is still happily married to Bill Davies.