

Home Improvement - Let The Force be with you

You just moved into your new home there's a million things you want to do. Here's expert advice on how to start (and finish) a manageable few.

By SUSAN MEREDITH

One of the joys of home ownership is that you don't have to ask anyone's permission to make changes to your home. On the other hand, you may find that's its biggest curse. Soon after moving in, the Home Improvement Project virus hits. HIPV isn't terminal, but depending on how bad your case is, your family may wish it were.

In our new home, we have a beautiful backyard, with a canopy of trees, and a small creek running through the back. Being in the outdoor building business for over twenty years, my husband immediately had plans to add on a deck, with a cover over part of it, an outdoor screened-in porch, a bench around a huge tree, and a playscape for my son. You get the picture.

Being the worrying kind, I was questioning how much our utility bills would go up, and budgeting for new bathroom towels. And I did harbor a secret desire for a very slight remodel of the kitchen. After all, he IS really good at this building stuff.

Perhaps you have a similar vision for your yard, or big ideas for remodeling your kitchen, or some other project. What does it take to get going? Let's explore what Mother Nature can tell us by exploring how the laws of nature that get something moving in the physical world also apply to getting our projects in motion.

In case you're interested, we're talking about the laws that relate to momentum and dynamics. Momentum is mass times velocity, and relates to when something is in motion. Dynamics states that "the sum of the forces equals mass times acceleration" and addresses how forces can get something into motion, or to move faster. When I was going through my first-year college engineering classes, a friend would say "F=ma, that's all you need to know to be an engineer." He was an optimist. But it does tell you that we are working with some of the most fundamental principles in nature.

First, consider the mass you want to

change. How big a project do you have in mind? What's the scope of the project? The mass we were starting with on our project was a postage stamp-sized cement pad with cement stairs leading down to it. My husband sketched out his proposed backyard masterpiece, which was massive! We could host the entire UT football team on this. Maybe the fans too.

There has to be movement to make a project happen. Consider how far you need to go to complete the project, and how quickly you want it to happen. It may seem odd to talk in terms of distance, but when I ask someone to imagine how far away their project is, they can always come up with some relative estimate. The backyard project was definitely further than my new bathroom towels. As far as timing - Robert is amazing, but even he couldn't tackle the backyard proj-

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HANGIN' THE HAT by Lennie Peterson



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ect in a weekend. Maybe a month would do it, if he didn't work on anything else. Working just weekends, he might have it done by next year. I didn't like the idea of having a building site in my backyard for that long. We needed a better plan. In the physical world getting a mass into motion requires a force, which causes the mass to accelerate, or get into motion. If there is enough force, and the object keeps going, it will have the momentum to travel the distance. How much force is required to make the proposed change in the timeframe you want? How much force are you able to generate?

One aspect of the force you generate is the mass you're working with. In a home improvement project the mass mostly consists of money, materials, and manpower, and the question often becomes how to get more done with a finite amount of resources. Do you have the resources to create the force you need?

Larger projects often take longer to get started, and that's natural. It's like the difference between rolling a tennis ball, or a huge metal wrecking ball, down the street. More mass takes more force to get it going, because of something called inertia. If you find yourself sitting in front of the TV all weekend, you're very

familiar with the feeling of inertia. It means you can't seem to get your mass into motion.

Another factor to consider is that there are usually lots of forces affecting a project. This can be good and bad. There are some forces that hold it back, and some that move it forward. One of my husband's biggest obstacles was... well, me. You see, I really wanted to redo the kitchen instead.

Make a list of the forces affecting your project. Then see how you might change the dynamics. If you really want to do a project, get rid of the forces holding you back. Look at creative ways to deal with them. No, my husband didn't divorce me. He's quite an artist, so he sketched out what he was proposing. His sketch was quite compelling and helped enroll me in the idea.

The forces that move your project forward can be pushing or pulling forces. Pushing forces are those you want to move away from, like a nagging spouse. Pulling forces are those you want to move towards, like the vision of having friends over for a BBQ. The more positive forces you can create, the better. Not that I'm advocating nagging. Paradoxically, that can cause greater inertia on the part of the recipient.

A benefit to Robert's sketch was that it became one of those positive forces. It

gave mass to his ideas, making them more real. He also brought out pieces of lumber and laid them on the ground so I could see how big the decks would be, making it even more concrete. Not in the physical sense, in the figurative sense. The truth is, we can't possibly know all the forces at work in any given situation. But when you understand how the different parts of the equations affect each other, you can determine how to change the probability of success.

Want your project completed faster? Reduce the size of the project - its mass, or increase the net force affecting it. That might include removing forces holding it back, it may be increasing your own personal "pushing force," or maybe coming up with some attractive, pulling forces that can move it along faster. Or maybe enlist the aid of friends or hire professionals. My husband might be available...

Want to do a bigger project? Again, look at how to increase the net force. Or plan for a longer timeframe. Don't have the amount of money? Carve out a smaller goal, or get creative in other ways.

In our case, we decided we weren't ready to do everything at once. The determining force came from a very small mass, in the form of our 2-1/2 year old son. The idea of our son's glee at having a playscape, not to mention its role as babysitter, made our decision clear. Just goes to show that those attractive forces can be pretty powerful.

Robert built the playscape first and then the first tier of the deck. We've been able to enjoy it during the warm weather, and can get started on other segments as Robert's time is freed up.

Sometimes you can't break your project down and can't make the pieces fit. That doesn't mean you should shelve the idea entirely. Get in motion. Besides the fact that you're building up momentum, there is another principle that can come into play called precession.

Precession is the law of nature that means there are "side benefits" to things. You know how the wake behind a boat goes out at right angles to the direction the boat is moving? That's a physical example of precession - one force can cause another force in a seemingly unexpected direction.

Precession can exhibit itself in home improvement projects too. You may think the materials are too expensive for you to do your project. Then you check, and they're on sale. You tell friends or co-workers what you want to do, and they volunteer to help. You end up making a very close friend through the experience. Who knows - maybe by writing this article I'll find a deal on kitchen countertops.

Get into action. The distance may be short to reach your dreams, but no matter how close they are, if you don't move towards them, you won't get the thrill of accomplishing them.

Susan Meredith writes and speaks about "Mother Nature's Laws", and relates how the laws of nature apply to human nature. Susan is also co-owner of a training company called Human Excellence. For more information call 512-326-9300 or visit www.humanexcel.com

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