

Goodbye to close quarters, not close lives

There's one amenity in our new Bolton Hill apartment that will mean a big change for our life as a couple after we move next month.

It's not the 11-foot ceilings, the abundance of natural light or the wood-burning fireplace, although they are big perks.

It's having an actual bedroom.

My husband and I spent the first 17 months of our marriage living in a 380-square-foot studio apartment, most of which was a really nice, but really oversized bathroom. The rest of it, with the exception of a closet-turned-kitchen, was a single room. In this room we ate, slept, read, fixed our bikes, and brewed beer. My husband, who is a graduate student, also used our room as a library and an office.

Our tiny space didn't keep us from entertaining or hosting guests. My parents even stayed with us for a week. (Some, when warned about our apartment, did splurge for the hotel.) I think most people thought our challenge would be finding a place for all of our things, which we easily solved by trying not to acquire a lot of stuff.

The actual challenge was living with someone else in a single room, where you have no space of your own, and every activity you do affects the other person. There were times that this caused conflict, like when I wanted to sleep and my husband wanted to watch a late night Law & Order. Or when he wanted to read and I wanted to listen to music. It's not unusual for me to sit on the steps outside or hole up in the bathroom for marathon phone conversations with my mom or sister.

When we first got married, "me time" was really important to me, and the arrangement was entirely frustrating. Over time, however, I realized it was an opportunity. Because of our small space, my husband and I do nearly everything together when we're at home. We cook and clean together. We watch the news together. We read together. We listen to the same weekend radio shows. We typically get up and go to bed at the same time, for the practical complication of

turning lights on and off. If we disagree on something, we have to figure it out then and there, because there's no place to stomp off to.

In 2007, a quartet of Penn State sociology professors penned "Alone Together: How Marriage in America is Changing." They showed that spouses across the country are spending less time with one another - they eat alone, share fewer friends and do housework solo. According to their research, marital interaction has been on the decline since 1980 - the year before my own parents married. Couples are less likely almost always to visit friends, shop, eat the main meal of the day, or go out for leisure time together. The lives of married people had become more separate, which the authors said could erode future marriage happiness and stability.

Living in small quarters has taught us patience, perseverance and mindfulness of the other's needs. There is no way for us to live passively with one another, working or relaxing in separate parts of a house.

When we signed the lease for a one-bedroom in Baltimore, I was excited about having another room - a place where I can read if he's watching golf, or a place for him to study if I want to paint. A place that lets us do things separately. A lot of good will come from that, but I think the companionship our little place in D.C. fostered in our marriage was a great blessing, and one we shouldn't be in such a hurry to move past.