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To Create Order . . . First Get Organized

By SUSAN STEWART

AS I write this story, I'd rather be straightening my house. This will come as a surprise to anyone who has ever looked at or lived in my house. But organization, like yawning and measles, is contagious. It can infect anybody, even the kind of person who took some of the notes for this story on a piece of paper she found on the floor of her car — a veterinarian's receipt for a dog that had been dead for three years.

No matter how big a slob you are, if you watch somebody organize long enough, you want to organize, too.

At the very least, you want to buy the stuff that organizers use. After observing the reorganization of a walk-in closet in a Harrison, N.Y., home, I had to restrain myself from driving straight to the closest Linens 'n Things and purchasing the fabulous notched faux-suede hangers that Debbie Harwin, an organizer in Larchmont, N.Y., had used for Debra Alpert's clothes.

"Once all the hangers match, it's aesthetically pleasing," Ms. Harwin said.

Ms. Alpert said she bought the hangers after a "pre-purge" of her closet and then an initial consultation with Ms. Harwin, who suggested them. "I went and got a box of 50. I had no idea what I'd need. I went back and bought five more boxes."

As Ms. Alpert sorted through pants, Ms. Harwin, who has a quiet, Zen-like manner, listened closely. They talked categories: daytime, dressy, spring, fall, capris. They purged. The Krizia white jeans stayed, the blue Gap chinos went.

"They've lived a good life," said Ms. Alpert, 41. "Get rid of them."

"It's almost like these are misfitted," Ms. Harwin said, carrying a pair of brown summer pants from the fall to the spring rack.

A few hours into this, it was possible to see that even a woman with more than 72 pairs of shoes — perhaps especially such a woman — could greatly benefit from the help of somebody like Ms. Harwin, who was lining up her dolls at the age of 2 and who, when she worked as a lawyer in Manhattan, had the neatest files in the office.

"It's about finding a place for everything, as cliché as that sounds," Ms. Harwin said.

Looking around Ms. Alpert's closet, with its floor-to-ceiling shoe shelves (purse shelves and boot holders are coming) and its wire bins for tennis clothes and swimsuits, I realized that my own closet was small enough to be a closet in this closet.

But I could at least have the same hangers. I knew that if I owned them, I would never again misplace a shirt or stupidly hold on to an outgrown pair of khakis. I also knew this was wrong-

headed thinking. Plenty of professional organizers had told me so.

"Before I even get there, people want to go out and buy containers," said Deborah Gussoff, an organizer in Montclair, N.J. "I say don't. That's the sexy part of it."

The consummation, she might have added, of your relationship with your space. Something not to be entered into lightly, but with reverence and a good tape measure.

So although I was seduced by the perfect hanger, I did not succumb. Which brings me to the first of my Organizing Tips, culled from interviews with professionals and their clients around the region:

Tip No. 1: Purge first, binge later. People think freshly purchased containers will make them organized. But it's not the containers that organize you, it's the system. And if you are disorganized enough to need a system, you may need a professional to create it.

"Professional organizer" is an even newer job title than, say, "Web designer." Ms. Gussoff, who has an M.B.A., has been organizing for a living since her daughter, now 18, was born.

"Fifteen years ago, if I told somebody I was a professional organizer, they'd get a look on their face and say, 'Labor unions?'"

TODAY, there seem to be as many professional organizers as there are closets. Actually, the National Association of Professional Organizers (founded in 1985) has almost 4,000 members. Nobody knows exactly why so many people are willing to pay upward of \$100 an hour (rates vary) for help cleaning out junk. It is not merely a function of affluence.

"I have plenty of clients who save up money to hire me," said Jody Herman, a Long Island organizer. "We all have a finite amount of space, unless we buy another house."

Also, more women are working outside the home. They can barely get dinner on the table, much less sort through the junk drawer. There's an explosion in communications: Keeping track of e-mail takes time away from keeping track of stuff. And mainly, there's stuff. Even in a recession, we all have too much of everything.

One of the first famous organizers was Julie Morgenstern, author of the seminal 1998 work "Organizing From the Inside Out," now used as a textbook for the professional association's credentialing exam. She appeared on "Oprah" in 1999, then went back to her office to find more than a thousand messages from potential clients.

Ms. Morgenstern is a no-nonsense writer whose "analyze, strategize and attack" formula acknowledges psycho-

attached to them.

Do not keep something just because it was a gift. Adopt the theory that once somebody gives a gift, they lose control of it.

To get rid of clothes, put them in a non-see-through garbage bag, date the bag and put a date a few months into the future on the calendar. If you have not gone into the bag by that date, donate it.



THE STRAIGHT STORY Debbie Harwin, top right, a paid organizer, helping Debra Alpert arrange her clothes and shoes.



logical impediments to organization but does not make them central.

Oprah currently seems to favor the organizer Peter Walsh, author of a 2008 book positing that cleaning your house will help you lose weight. In a decade, organization mingled with philosophy, psychology and self-help to become something rich and strange — and TV-worthy. Shows like "Clean Sweep," which features Mr. Walsh and is still in reruns, are great publicity, but a mixed blessing.

"Organizers do not feel these shows accurately portray what we do," Debbie Harwin said. "It's not about going in, waving a magic wand and cleaning up a room."

Still, cleaning up a room is the first step, which is why Betsy Krobot, an organizer based in Bridgeport, Conn., took two assistants with her to Rowayton, Conn., at 10 a.m. on a summer weekday. Her client, Pam Agonis, 59, lives with her husband in a quirky 19th-century rented cottage near the water. There is one bedroom with a tiny anteroom. By the time Ms. Krobot and her assistants finished this two-day job, the anteroom was a charming office from which Ms. Agonis can start a second career.

"The hope is that if I clear, things will become clear," Ms. Agonis said.

First, things needed to be cleared out. Ms. Krobot made a plan during her initial assessment, and now she started putting books, files, an unused foot nagger and all manner of junk into bankers' boxes.

Tip No. 2: Bonkers' boxes, from the office-supply store, held legal or file-size folders, and are stamped "Destroy

Date" on one end, making them a perfect purgatory for paperwork.

Ms. Agonis's house was so neat, by my standards, that I accused her of cleaning up for Ms. Krobot. She denied this.

"There are different levels of disorganization," Ms. Krobot said, rather pointedly.

MS. KROBOT wore a white tank top with a pink-and-green logo advertising her business. She wiped her forehead with a green washcloth that she carried in the back pocket of her khakis. She buzzed with energy. Every time she opened her mouth, an organizing aphorism emerged:

"When you're not organized, you feel like you're standing on Nambé legs."

"The most successful people in the world are right-brained people who've learned left-brain skills."

Ms. Agonis had one: "My definition of feng shui," she said, is taking all your husband's junk out of the house and putting it in the garage.

Everybody laughed, but Ms. Krobot and her helpers are serious about feng shui. They moved a mirror from the bedroom — unlucky — into the anteroom.

"I totally believe it," said Ms. Krobot. "I've seen it change lives."

On a more modest scale, a Ziploc bag can change the way you store electronics, which brings us to:

Tip No. 3: Use one Ziploc bag for every appliance or electronics item you own. Store extra cords, batteries, warranties

and the other stuff you don't know what to do with. Then put the bags together in a bin.

While Ms. Krobot and Emily Vetrosky worked upstairs, Caroline Winterson and Ms. Agonis sat in the living room, purging books:

"14,000 Things to Be Happy About" went; the high school yearbook stayed.

Five partially full journals went. "People give me journals all the time," Ms. Agonis said, picking up a sixth. "My first marriage," she said, rolling her eyes and ripping out pages for the shredder.

By noon on the second day, Ms. Agonis had an office. Her furniture was rearranged, her bookshelf and papers edited, her desk emptied and sensibly refilled, Wicker hampers held magazines and research material; a new lamp gave her a reading nook, where, if she wanted, she could immerse herself in the literature of organization, from the gospels according to Ms. Morgenstern and Mr. Walsh to "File . . . Don't Pile" by Pat Durif, and "How to Be Organized in Spite of Yourself" by Sunny Schlinger. Or any of dozens of other titles; Amazon lists hundreds of them under the heading "personal organization."

But, as Ms. Krobot, who created Ms. Agonis's new study, points out, just reading the book does not get the job done. "Everybody knows how to file," she said, "but we need to be there."

Besides, buying all those books would just add needless clutter.



FILE FACTOR Betsy Krobot, center, in the anteroom of Pam Agonis, right.

More Tips From the Experts

Do not store your shoes beside each other as if there were feet in them. Store them heel to toe. They will take up less space.

Attractive wastebaskets are the perfect place to store out-of-season wrapping paper.

In September, designate a box for each child's artwork and school papers. Then go through them the next summer, when you are not so