

# Unstuff Your Life!

## Kick The Clutter Habit and Completely Organize Your Life For Good

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### Chapter Six: Excerpt

## Auxiliary Spaces: Basements, Attics, Workshops, Garages (Including Seasonal Decorations)

No person who can read is ever successful at cleaning out an attic.

Ann Landers

Only in America do we leave cars worth thousands of dollars in the driveway and put our useless junk in the garage.

Author unknown

## Introduction

Did you ever think it possible that you would open the door to a closet in your home and not see a tangle of random items but some clear order? And that you would easily be able to put your hands on exactly what you were looking for quickly, without disturbing everything around it? Congratulations.

We're about to explore the many ways you can maximize these bonus spaces while avoiding new messes and jumbles in the process, keeping in mind that just because you *could* store something somewhere (such as the garage or attic or basement) doesn't mean you *should*. Resist the urge to get drunk on space and think that random chaos and

disorder are more manageable because these spaces are less seldom seen. Clutter is clutter, whether it's constantly underfoot or encountered just twice a day, on your way to and from the car (or laundry or storeroom).

Almost like closets on steroids, these auxiliary spaces offer tremendous potential—both for storage and for clutter. And given their dimensions, they often require jumbo-sized efforts in getting and keeping them organized. That means wielding *one home for everything* and *like with like* with precision and consistency, especially when confronting historic neglect and chaos. We'll use the one-two punch of *OHFE* and *LWL* to clear out and reassemble these spaces, ensuring that whether we're looking for a half-inch washer or a wheelbarrow, we'll still have to look in only one place to put our hands on it quickly and easily. And whether what we're dealing with is a crawl space or a four-car garage, the result will be exactly the same—a neat and tidy space where anything can be found within thirty seconds. That may sound crazy now, but when we're finished, you'll see it's not an exaggeration..

## **Why You Don't Want to Do This Out of Order**

Since these spaces are being “built to suit,” if you cannot easily access every wall you plan to use for storage *prior* to sorting, I suggest studying your options and doing some research but waiting to install a system until after everything's been cleared away and sorted. When designing your layout and installing storage components, you need to be able to get to every part of the space, so your layout will have integrity and accessibility from inception to execution. A half-baked cake may taste sweet, but it's a mess to deal with.

Likewise, do not start to load any storage before everything has been sorted and categorized. It may be tempting to cut a corner here and there, thinking, “Well, I can certainly put X right here. I know where that wants to live.” You may think that you can isolate certain items and store them while sorting, but you'll discover that as you sort, the volume of items in each category and the preferred location for these categories will continue to shift until everything has been touched and decided on. Until you have a completely empty space without any obstacles or space commitments, you can't actually see where the most efficient place to put anything will be.

Having to move things twice is not the end of the world, but a lot of loading and unloading is a waste of time during an already large project. Patience and a willingness to be methodical about this will pay huge dividends as you work through this process. Trust me.

## Stay-or-Go Questions

Now you'll handle each object and ask the following questions, and if the object makes the cut, it will then be placed with other similar items that are also staying.

- Do I really need this?
- How many do I need? (*Once you pick a number, stick to it. Don't amend the number when you come across another one; swap the newest object you'd like to keep for one of the objects you've previously sorted.*)
- Am I keeping it because of sentimental attachment? Would a photo of it suffice?
- Do I already have a better one?
- Is this better than the one I have?
- Am I keeping it for "someday"?
- Will I actually do the work required to restore or repair this? When?
- Am I keeping it because it was expensive and it's "still good"?
- Will my life change for the worse if I let this go? (Actually, really, not just in your imagination.)
- Am I keeping it because it's part of a set? Do I use the whole set or just one piece? Is it useless without the entire set, or could someone else benefit from the pieces I'm not using?

When in doubt, toss it out or let it go.

Other than snacking and bathroom breaks, this should be a continuous activity, and you should not stop until everything has been separated into some smaller pile or grouping organized by category or discarded. At that point, if it's getting dark or you're exhausted, you could be finished for the day. Of course, if you've taken things outdoors, you'll want to either cover everything up outside or relocate any big-ticket items back under lock and key for safekeeping overnight.

## More Pesky Conversations, Feelings and Iris

Sorting and purging may bring up other questions or thoughts or feelings. This is natural and not to be feared or judged as

a sign of anything other than your humanness. The mind is a thought machine and the heart a feeling machine. Generating thoughts and feelings are what they do.

If these kinds of thoughts or feelings have stopped you in the past or prevented you from even beginning, you're not alone. And while they may be demanding and intrusive and annoying, they are nothing more than a product of your fertile imagination and vulnerable constitution—not always a great combination when sorting through random things, but certainly not deadly.

I recently spent three weeks in Chicago with a client, Iris, who had decided that she wanted to put her house on the market and move on. This was the house she had raised her two children in, and after twenty years, it was jam-packed from the attic to the basement with everything from fine art to toy drums. As we sorted through the basement, we came across lots of her kids' old clothes and toys. She never broke down and cried, but she told me the story of each thing we touched. Iris would hold each item and tenderly relate how her son had worn this little baseball cap or her daughter had performed in her ballet recital in these slippers. We kept three tubs and some trash bags nearby—one tub for each child, one tub for her, and trash bags for the local thrift store. As we sorted through box after box and pile after pile, some things were set aside for each child, a few for her—I could always tell which thing she wouldn't be able to part with by the way her smile lit up as she first handled it. She'd start to laugh, and I'd know this tiny jumpsuit was going straight into *her* tub. Anything that didn't make the cut was bagged and earmarked for charity. We continued this process through storerooms packed with books and sporting equipment and old bolts of fabric. Other than a few more sentimental objects, everything else was gathered up to be taken away.

There were times each day when Iris was clearly overcome with feelings as she sifted through years of accumulated belongings, each one representing a particular event or time in her life. When I sensed she had reached a threshold of emotion or exhaustion, or she just seemed to lose focus, I'd check in with her. Was she okay? Was she tired; did she want to take a break, get a snack or a cup of tea; did she want a hug? Most of the time she'd laugh and say she was fine, let's keep going, but there were times when we did pause, head downstairs, and put the water on for tea or grab a slice of cheese.

If you're working alone, you'll have to do that for yourself. Check in with yourself and pace yourself. I've laid out a rigorous plan of action in these pages, but you should consider the human component in this process as well. You don't want to get too hungry or tired when doing this work. Likewise, if strong emotions come up, shift gears; if you're overwhelmed going through your kids' childhood clothing, or an old dissertation that's not quite finished, or love letters

from any number of exes, start shredding or go sort towels or do something equally unemotional. Get a snack. Take a walk around the block. No one's keeping track of the time. The goal is to complete the task or tasks described, from beginning to end. If that takes three hours or three days, that's fine. As long as you keep coming back to it, you can walk away for some fresh air as often as you need to. Just be mindful not to allow strong feelings, exhaustion, or hunger to derail you and prevent you from finishing altogether.

When we got to the attic, Iris and I found an old bedroom set that had belonged to her daughter. We cleaned it off and brought it down to the main floor to set up in one of the bedrooms. Unfortunately, most of what else was up there had been overrun by mice or moths. Surrendering to the situation, we filled bag after bag with trash and hauled it down to the curb. I think it was that much easier for Iris to empty the attic without looking back, having already sorted through the basement and selected her precious totems of two childhoods' worth of memories.

We can take away several lessons from Iris's experience. A few selective items can distill and capture the feelings behind whole swatches of time. And more practically, if you have the sense that time and unwelcome pests have destroyed the contents of some area of your home, sort through another area first and cull your treasures there. It will make the inevitable tolerable as you assess the damage and finally let it go.

## **Our Feelings About Trash**

Undoubtedly, as you sort you will discover additional things that meet the definition of trash. Send them directly into a trash bag. There's no need to fret or talk yourself out of tossing something that is beyond repair or worthless. For those items that are still worth something, if not to you but to someone else, they can be gathered in another area (labeled GIVE AWAY) and taken to your local resale shop or a shelter, or to some other place that accepts donations of still-functional things.

It can be sad to throw things away for a variety of reasons—most of them emotional and spurred on by stories we tell ourselves about either the monetary or the sentimental value of an item, or sometimes the monetary *and* the sentimental value. A popular story often told involves frugality and prudence, and the repairing of an item, restoring it to full functionality “*someday*” or even “*someday soon.*” The sadder truth is that if you have not attempted to repair this item in the last nine months, it is almost certain that you never will. You may argue with me in your head, but I have been a party to this conversation countless times, and in each case not a single item needing repair was ever successfully repaired

without my intervention.

And, of course, beyond money and feelings there are also the environmental consequences of throwing things away. Most of us are mindful of the growing mountains of trash just outside our cities or floating unwanted on barges on our waterways, and we want to keep as much as possible in circulation and away from these (mostly) dead ends. There are programs that convert some trash back into energy, and every day there are more options for recycling things that just last month were considered exclusively trash. I urge us all to pursue every avenue for the proper dismantling and recycling of any and every thing we discard. There will be times, however, when something is still destined for landfill.

When considering the toxic nature of something you're about to discard, a good rule of thumb is: if you wouldn't put it in your mouth, then it most likely has a correct way to be dismantled and recycled, and should not just be tossed into the trash to leach into water tables or food supplies.

I realize this places a particular burden on some people who have limited mobility or live in more remote locations—even so, this just brings mindfulness further into focus. Before bringing home something potentially toxic and thereby tacitly agreeing to be responsible for its eventual disposal, consider your alternatives. Is there a “green” or nontoxic yet equally effective version of the item out there? There may not always be. In those cases, I encourage you to assume full responsibility for seeing your product/item through the complete arc of its life cycle—from arrival at your door to its departure for eventual dismantling and comprehensive recycling. See the Resources section at the back of the book for links to sites that offer more guidance and instruction on this.

And in those cases, no one wants your trash any more than you do. If something is missing crucial parts or is torn beyond use or broken, be responsible and dispose of it properly. Do not pass along garbage to a local nonprofit, assuming they'll do the sorting for you. You may believe that the remaining shoe of a pair might still find some use in the world, but you are mistaken. Throw it away. The exception being athletic shoes—these are collected and recycled!

The surest way to keep things out of a landfill is to use less and be more mindful about what you invite into your life. If you don't want to be responsible for something at the end of its life cycle, perhaps you should leave it where you found it in the first place. If we really do live in a supply-and-demand society, the sooner we stop demanding, the sooner they'll stop supplying. And while we wouldn't want that to include nutritious food, I don't know how many people would mind if that did include Chia Pets and the BeDazzler.