

UNLOCKING THE VIRGO IN ALL OF US

People born under the sixth sign of the zodiac are said to be reliable, fastidious, and perfectionist. Andrew J. Mellen, a Virgo, turned those attributes into a profession: as an organizer and life coach. When Mellen arrived at the home of a client to begin organizing her workroom, the client said, "It's Virgo man to the rescue." The name stuck. "I like the slightly superhero, playful way that sounds," Mellen said



Andrew J. Mellen

of his moniker. "It's a persona, a barrel for me to climb into."

VirgoMan has compassion for the people who come to him for help. He doesn't want a reputation for being intimidating, because that's not his style. Mellen's book, *Unstuff Your Life! Kick the Clutter Habit and Completely Organize Your Life for Good*, was recently published by Penguin. On Saturday, Aug. 21, he leads a workshop, book signing, and discussion at Garcia Street Books.

"I live in a 300-square-foot apartment in Manhattan," he said during a phone interview from that very place. "It's like living on a boat. Three pieces

of clothing left on a chair is a crisis. Everything has to have at least two functions. You get really clever about storage."

Mellen is here to help those people who can't find their car keys in the morning and have no idea where they stashed last year's tax return or the Christmas tree stand. Judging from the before and after pictures at virgoman.com, many people need help with the overwhelming amount of stuff they can't bear to part with. "We rely on our possessions for comfort and a sense of identity," Mellen said, "and we go shopping as a distraction from the things we really want to do."

Mellen has a roster of clients all over the country who hire him to help them take the first steps toward logic in their spaces and their lives. In *Unstuff Your Life!* he offers specific, step-by-step instructions, not generalities or clever sayings. It's a workbook, and if you follow it, he says, you will succeed. Mellen's writing offers a sense of who he is as a teacher: as a Buddhist and student of human behavior, his desire is to bring peace and harmony into people's emotional lives, not just their closets, without judgment. Mellen's goal is not to turn people into organizing maniacs but to allow them to live the lives they want to lead, to spend time doing things they like doing instead of looking for car keys.

"I'm between a plumber and a therapist, and a little bit of both," he said. "You can be emotionally stuck, or stuck, like a toilet," with too much stuff and too little space. Most of us are both, he said. "There are extremely organized people I know that just can't bear to part with sentimental objects."

He recommends placing a basket with "action items" in it by the front door so you never leave home without the bill you meant to pay, the document you need for work, or the book you need to return to the library.

In his chapter on mementos and sentimental objects — "conceptual clutter," he calls it — he suggests people prepare for the sorting that precedes unloading unneeded objects by assembling trash bags, tarps or blankets, dust cloths, tape, tubs or similar containers, a label maker or labels, and a fine-point marker. Sorting categories include give away/donate, sell, trash, and "the fence" — a last resort for those unable to make a decision.

Sorting should be done in a quiet place, and a timer should be set for 30 minutes to three hours. "We don't want to stray into reminiscing, which is dangerous territory when sorting," he writes. "I strongly suggest that any item that evokes maudlin feelings or hurtful memories be discarded. Promptly. There's no need to sustain that form of grief."

"One home for everything" and "Like with like" are the two guiding principles of the VirgoMan technique. Baby clothes and dolls reside together. Each person in the household should have clear, see-through plastic tubs with labels — and he even has a chapter on labeling. "Things you don't love and don't use — let them go," he writes. "When everything is precious, nothing is precious."

Mellen has been featured in *O, The Oprah Magazine*, is a regular on *The Martha Stewart Show*, and appears on many cable network do-it-yourself



and home-makeover shows. On his website, one video clip shows him patiently helping homeowners carry the contents of their basement to their lawn to be sorted on tarps. He discusses with his clients what needs to go and what can stay. "There is a therapeutic component to it," he said of sorting. "It's an action-based program. We touch things and move them. The client becomes reflective. They are called upon to do intentional work."

Before his incarnation as VirgoMan, Mellen worked as a theater director and producer in New York, and he sees similarities between the two careers. "It was big-picture problem solving," he said of theater work. "It was always a puzzle. You were working with actors, set designers, costumers, and lighting people to turn some words in a script into a viable piece of art. Same skills. You had to find the strongest solution."

Mellen has recently been asked to bring his skills into the business arena, where today's open-floor office plans often create conflicts among employees who have varying approaches to clutter. VirgoMan comes in and shakes things up. "Sometimes it's emotional clutter," Mellen said of workplace disorganization. "They get committed to being right."

Mellen has never faced a place as bad as the home of the Collyer brothers, the eccentric New Yorkers who collected books, newspapers, furniture, and musical instruments and were found dead in 1947 at their Harlem townhouse surrounded by 130 tons of junk. He has run into a few animal skeletons along the way but, so far, no customers with a hoarding pathology that crosses into mental illness.

There have been, on the other hand, more than a few garages where there is barely enough room for a person to step inside. "A garage is a house for cars," Mellen said. "People who have driveways and parking often forget the true reason for a garage." Wouldn't it be nice, in the wintertime, he suggested, to walk from the house into a frost-free car waiting for you in a clean, well-organized garage? Maybe, but you'd still have to find those car keys. ◀



details

- ▼ Andrew J. Mellen leads a workshop and signs copies of *Unstuff Your Life! Kick the Clutter Habit and Completely Organize Your Life for Good*
- ▼ 2 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 21
- ▼ Garcia Street Books, 376 Garcia St., 986-0151