Unstuff Your Life!

Kick the Clutter Habit and Completely Organize Your Life for Good

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Chapter One

You Are Not Your Stuff

We don’t think our way to right action; we act our way to right thinking.

William James

When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.

Lao-tzu

Happiness is a how; not a what.

Hermann Hesse

Introduction

In the beginning, God created man. And then, apparently right after that, She must have created stuff. Because it’s everywhere. You can hardly move without tripping over stuff. And since stuff is probably not going away, we need to get right with stuff. Because otherwise, stuff will never be right with us.

Please get a pen or pencil and a simple notebook. We’re going to do a little writing. I suggest that whatever you use as a notebook, you keep it handy and use it only for this work. I don’t suggest you do this in your personal journal or on a series of Post-it notes. You’ll probably want to refer back to this work at some later date, and it should be cohesive and somehow bound together.

There are no right or wrong answers to the following questions. They are not intended to humiliate you or to expose your faults or foibles. They’re intended to start the conversation about where stuff lives in your life. If we want to unstuff your life, we need to know what needs unstuffing. You won’t be graded on your answers,
because this isn’t a test—it’s an exploration. Take your time, write out your answers (rather than answering them verbally), and tell the truth. To yourself. Because you’re the only person who’s going to be reading this. We’re not looking for pretty; we’re looking for honest. So resist answering them as if this were an ideal world and this is how you wish you felt. Or answering them as if you had already finished this book and have your stuff well under control.

- Are you right with stuff?
- Do you often feel stuck?
- How often do you feel overwhelmed?
- Do you feel that there’s something else you should be doing but can’t seem to ever get to it?
- Are there things you keep telling yourself you’ll do as soon as some other things are finished?
- Do you ever finish those other things and actually get to the things you’ve put off?
- Do you ever actually feel “caught up,” as if everything on your “to do” list has been checked off?
- Do you ever complain of being bored, or of having too much time on your hands?
- If so, how do you address that? What do you do to fill that time?
- Do you stop what you’re doing when anyone calls and shift all your attention onto them?
- Do you do this whether it’s an emergency or just an everyday call?
- Do you always agree to do a favor for someone, whether it’s convenient or not for you?
- If so, do you ever feel put upon or get resentful as a result?
- Do you think that saying no makes you a bad or selfish person?
- Is there ever an appropriate time to say no? When?
- Do you get resentful if people say no to you?
- Do you take “no” personally—do you think they might have said yes to someone else under similar circumstances?
- What do you do when you feel this way?
- What’s the difference between an excuse and an explanation?
- Do you think you’re often offering valid explanations for things and not making excuses?
• Have you ever had a disagreement with someone over this interpretation?
• Does your stuff seem to have a life of its own?
• Do you set something down and swear it moves sometime during the night?
• How often during a week do you misplace something you need—keys, wallet, cell phone, etc.?
• Are you mostly upbeat, except when you think about your stuff?
• Or did you used to be, and now you just feel beaten down?
• Do you have piles of papers around but swear you can find anything in them?
• Has anyone ever moved your stuff and you freaked out—becoming panicky or unreasonably upset?
• Have you ever lost something that was important to you because someone confused it for trash?
• If that has happened, do you feel partly responsible or are you the victim of someone else’s mistake?
• Do you get nervous when the phone rings?
• Do you screen your calls?
• Has stuff made living in your home challenging?
• Does your stuff seem to force you into smaller and smaller living spaces?
• Do you sleep to one side of your bed because you have a pile of stuff next to you?
• Do you sometimes have difficulty breathing?
• Do you spend more time looking for things than doing the things you love?
• Is looking for things running a close second, threatening to overtake your passions?
• Are you often just a few minutes late to get somewhere?
• Do you tell yourself that’s not a big deal?
• Do you think that the people you love are more important than stuff?
• If someone looked only at your behavior, would they objectively see that?
• When you’re feeling blue, do you think that shopping will get you out of your funk?
• Does the act of buying something give you a warm-and-fuzzy feeling?
• Have you ever said, “I’d die without ________________?”
• If you’ve said the previous sentence, were you talking about a person or a thing?
• Do you often speak in absolutes (such as “I always . . .” or “I never . . .”)?

• Do you have stories for most of the things you own?

• Do you like to tell them to your friends and family? How about strangers? Anyone who’ll listen?

• Do they find the stories as fascinating as you do?

• Do you think you spend more time talking about stuff or about things you’ve done or plan to do?

Wow. Congratulations. That’s a lot of questions. Thanks for taking the time to answer them all. Did you answer them all? If you didn’t, please go back and do so. And yes, I am serious.

As you review your answers, make note of any patterns that are revealed—about your relationship with things, about your relationship with time, and about your relationships with people. These questions, again, are not designed to shame you or to hurt you in any way. They’re here to help us identify where you’re stuck on stuff and where stuff is stuck on you. I’ve often seen that lightbulb go on behind clients’ eyes when they first recognize that what they thought they were spending their days doing was not in fact what they were actually doing. Or it was getting done, but with a heap of resentment or resistance or avoidable delays.

So use the information gathered from your answers to clarify if you are in fact spending your time doing the things you think you’re doing and the things you want to be doing. If, instead, you discover that you are caught in a cycle of activities and tasks that may be necessary but are also consistently pushing their way ahead of things that matter more, in the following pages, you’ll learn how to reverse that process and put the necessary tasks back in their proper place.

If you find that you spend more time with things than with people and that doesn’t please you, here too you will learn how to manage your possessions so that you are not spending valuable time interacting with them when you could be enjoying the company of friends and family.

**Half-Measures, Staying on the Hook, and Perfectionism**
I don’t have rules about much. But I am sure that half-measures are useless. Actually, they’re worse than useless, they undermine our ability to accomplish anything of significance in our lives. So if you’re someone who has a history of enthusiastic beginnings and rapid losses of interest or picking and choosing how you’ll participate in something, constantly evaluating your commitment and efforts, I’m strongly suggesting you let that go for the rest of our time together. This is voluntary; no one showed up at your door and said, “Read this book and get your act together” . . . did they?

If they didn’t, then this is something you think is or thought was worth checking out and doing. So I’m going to support you in doing it fully. What’s laid out before you is a feast of tools and tips and questions and suggestions to help you unstuff your life. Whatever that means to you. And whatever that does mean to you, I want you to do it completely. Not three-fourths of the way, not seven-eighths of the way—all the way. You won’t know what could have been possible if you let yourself off the hook.

And believe me, I’ve heard all the excuses . . . I mean explanations. You’re tired; you’ve got chores to do; you’ve tried this before and it didn’t work; so-and-so tried this before and their best friend told them that it didn’t work; you recently read a study that said this could never work; you’re too busy; you’re not smart enough; you’re too smart—you’ll figure out all the angles (there are no angles); you’re too fat, too thin, too tall, too short, too old, not old enough; someone’s on their way over; someone’s just about to leave; you’re just about to leave; you’ve got somewhere else to be or to get to; you’ll do it “later”; you don’t see the point . . . The list goes on.

As a reformed perfectionist, I also understand the corollary notion or thought that if you can’t do something perfectly, there’s no point in attempting it at all. Which I know today is baloney. Of course there’s a point in doing something imperfectly. And more important, there’s a big difference between imperfectly and incompletely. You can get a perfect score on a math test, but if you’re looking to get a perfect score on life, you may need to redefine what perfect looks like. First of all, life doesn’t always add up, and second, unlike a math test, no one’s grading you on life (except maybe God, depending on how you define God—but I’d like to think She grades on a curve, anyway).

So let’s shift our thinking about how we evaluate our efforts and use a model in which effort expended =
results achieved. That way we can get off the thankless merry-go-round of “everything has to be perfect the first time or it’s a waste of time.” And we now know that if we are diligent and thorough, if we don’t let ourselves off the hook or make excuses for ourselves, if we apply ourselves and give 100 percent, then we are guaranteed to receive a 100 percent return on the experience. And when that experience is unstuffing your life, of turning chaos into order and moving from confusion to organization, no wholehearted effort is wasted or fruitless. The outcome may not be perfect, and if so, you’re free to try again. Hmm, so maybe with enough earnest attempts you actually can get a perfect score on life?

If you still haven’t answered all those questions, please go back and do that now. Believe me, I can sit here longer than you can. So just do it and get it over with. Besides, what’s coming next is so great that you’ll be bummed to miss it and of course it won’t make a lick of sense if you haven’t answered every single one of those questions!

**What We’re Going to Cover in This Chapter**

- What Stuff Is and What Stuff Isn’t
- You Are Not Your Stuff
- If I’m Not My Stuff, What Am I?
- Your Core Values
- Aligning With Your Core Values
- The Stuff Behind the Stuff
- The Promise

**What Stuff Is and What Stuff Isn’t**
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All this talk about stuff, and what exactly is stuff?

Stuff (noun):

Miscellaneous unspecified objects, as in "the trunk is full of stuff."

Indeed it is. And may still be. I love that definition. Stuff is the vaguest of vague objects. Not only is it miscellaneous, it’s also unspecified. How perfect is that? So now that we know what stuff is, let’s talk about what stuff isn’t.

Stuff isn’t people. Stuff isn’t animals—companion, barnyard, or wild. And it isn’t plants. Stuff is nothing that’s alive, so let’s add that to our definition above.

Miscellaneous inanimate unspecified objects.

That’s what we’ve got piling up around us and dragging behind us, and that’s the subject of this book. The accumulation of so many individual specified things that they have now morphed and blurred into a mass of miscellaneous inanimate unspecified objects. That makes the next part easier.

You Are Not Your Stuff

As we now know, stuff doesn’t breathe. So at least in this instance, you’re off the hook. You are not your stuff.

Radical, isn’t it? You are not your stuff. Madison Avenue might have you believing otherwise. They’d argue that you are completely your stuff. That you’re nothing if you’re not your stuff. That’s a rather bleak outlook, and surprisingly pervasive. But we know better.

Say it out loud with me: “I am not my stuff.”


Now go to the window, open it, lean out, and shout, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take it anymore!”

*Just kidding!*

Please don’t do that. But I appreciate your willingness to consider it. You’re a good sport.

On one level, I’d like to think we could all identify where our sweaters or our computers or our music collections end and we begin. But many people cannot distinguish between themselves and the objects that surround them. The stereo system, the television, the dishes, the clothes, the car. They may know that they are not literally a machine for amplifying sound, but somewhere, in some subtle or not-so-subtle way, the lines get blurred. They start to feel like the sports car *is* an extension of themselves. While not exactly flesh and blood, it’s an expression of their thoughtfulness, their talent, their success, their discernment and taste. Maybe even the best parts of themselves. And suddenly we find we are defining ourselves in part by what we own.

The solution for this is not the elimination of objects. It’s not their fault. And I’m not suggesting that you get rid of everything you’ve worked very hard to accumulate. I’m suggesting that in our hurry to gather more and more things around us, we become confused as to what has purpose in our lives and what provides self-definition, or self-reflection, or even distraction.

Think for a few moments about how you or someone you know talks about the things that surround them. Have you ever said or heard someone say, “Man, I love my (new) ______________?”

When’s the wedding?

How about, “Oh my God! Where has this been? I don’t know how I’ve lived without this ____________ for all these years! This is going to change my life!”

We usually leave it at that, that the implied change we’re speaking of is assumed to be “for the better,” even though it’s unspoken.

But how often is the addition of stuff, of some thing, actually the agent of transforming one’s life, particularly for the better? Maybe the invention of the modern washing machine. Or the wheel. But an iPhone? Tickle Me Elmo? A remote-control ceiling fan? Really? That might be setting the bar a bit too low.

Computers have certainly made writing this book easier, but I do know exactly how I lived before one. I
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used a typewriter. And before that, sheets of paper and lots of pens and pencils. I think I also played a lot more tennis and rode my bike more often. So let’s try to distinguish between comfortable, convenient, and life-altering. Hyperbole can be fun, and certainly dramatic, but particularly when it comes to unstuffing your life, we’re going to want to accurately describe the scale of an event and its impact on our behavior and our choices.

As a teenager, I collected record albums. I loved music. I still do. The point is that I was surrounded by record albums. Collecting them gave me an identity. And allowed me a place to get lost. I owned albums I never listened to because I liked the cover art, or because I thought a particular artist or record was a good addition to my collection. Especially if you were impressed by the breadth of my musical tastes. I lugged those albums all over the Midwest for years. Milk crate after milk crate.

And books—same story. Books I had read and would never read again. Books I found at thrift stores, on the street—who could leave a copy of Catcher in the Rye or To Kill a Mockingbird lying on the ground, looking so forlorn? It’s a classic. It deserved a home. Mine.

Since I was a little disorganized back then, you may not have noticed that I had multiple copies of Catcher in the Rye, since they weren’t sorted or stored in any kind of order, just randomly shoved onto shelves somewhere. If I actually needed to find a book, I’d search through hundreds of them, trying to remember something distinct about the spine or cover to narrow it down for me. Catcher, in particular, benefited from that burgundy cover with yellow print. Not every book was that easily identifiable.

Most of those books are now gone. There are used bookstores all over the greater Detroit and Chicago areas that became the recipients of my purged collection. Today I buy books that interest me and that I’m committed to reading. I sometimes swap books with friends. And I spend a decent amount of time in public libraries—reading and borrowing books I very much want to read but do not feel compelled to own.

There are plenty of books that we should purchase. Books we use for work. Books we study and need to write in. I’d like to think this book is one of those books. Cookbooks, books for pleasure, favorite books that have become too dog-eared, all worth purchasing. But there are also times when borrowing or swapping with a friend or the public library is a viable alternative. So this is a perfect example of shifting our thinking toward experience and away from possession. If the reading of the book is the primary goal, we can carefully consider
the best way to accomplish that—which may or may not include adding another possession to our lives.

All of those albums are now gone, too. Some have been replaced with their CD equivalents, but only the ones I still listen to. I let them go long before I started helping others unstuff their lives. And the experience of getting rid of them was bittersweet, to be sure. I loved those albums, I had a great deal invested in them, and certainly the money was in some ways the least of it. They were, I thought (as our sports-car driver thinks about his car), an extension of me—a visible, easily readable piece of me out in the world. I know now today that that’s slightly off the mark. That while others may have in fact been judging me on my taste in music, I was much more invested in my own judgment of myself.

I am not my stuff.

You are not your stuff.

We are not our stuff.

Now, I’d like to say that what we think of ourselves is the most important thing, which I believe is true, and that nobody else really cares what kind of cars we drive, or whose name is on our clothing, or what we’re reading or listening to, which is not true. Some people do care. They may even care more than they should or more than is appropriate or more than is even healthy. We can’t control them. We can control only ourselves.

So instead of projecting into our friend’s or neighbor’s mind, which can’t be very comfortable, let’s just say that going forward, what other people think of us is none of our business. Unless they make it our business by sharing it with us. So until they do, and given that few of us, if any, can actually read minds, let’s take all that energy and funnel it through our imaginations into much more fun and productive pursuits.

**If I’m Not My Stuff, What Am I?**

Have you ever fought with someone you cared about over a thing? Something misplaced, or borrowed and not returned, or returned soiled. Or damaged. Did they seem genuinely sorry? Was that enough? While it’s not
acceptable for someone to lose or destroy your belongings, accidents happen. As a result, you may decide that you’ll never lend out anything ever again. You might take it a step further and decide to never have anyone in your house again, either. Because even under your watchful eye, accidents may happen there, too.

Rather than holding on to things tighter in an attempt to control their permanence, could you decide instead to loosen your grip even more? To recognize or even entertain the idea that all things are impermanent, even you? To shift your relationship with things toward one of appreciation while they’re intact, and celebration when they break or fail? This may influence you to lend out only the Honda and keep the Rolls Royce in the garage—that’s a fine compromise. But how important do you want to make any one thing, really? What is worth ending a relationship over? You can usually get another thing, even something as special as a Donna Karan cashmere sweater that was on sale for so little money it’s both thrilling and embarrassing to mention. It’s a little harder to replace the friend you’ve known since kindergarten.

So if we think of ourselves as guardians of these things, as stewards responsible for the care and maintenance of these objects, but not their God, then we can be appropriately vigilant and also softer when something about their condition or even existence shifts. We can feel sad or disappointed or relieved, and still not feel called to do anything other than feel. That sounds liberating to me.

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**Notable Note**

As much as you may think you own anything, when you leave this planet, wherever you’re headed next, the stuff you’ve surrounded yourself with is staying right here and will be redistributed for someone else’s use. Unless your kids, friends, or other heirs have always hated a particular object, and then it’s just going in the trash. How about that for an image? Sobering, eh? Take a moment and imagine the thing you are most attached to. See it. Feel it. Hold it. And now imagine it broken and in the trash. Wow. If that’s its inevitable fate, can we get right with that? Accept it? Wills and codicils aside, once we’re gone we’ll have no control over what will happen next to our belongings. As we’ve no doubt heard so many times before,
the lesson is to enjoy them now. And then let them go.

Your Core Values

What is important to you? This is not a rhetorical question.

Your core values lie at the very center of who you are. If you’ve ever heard anyone mention their moral compass, core values provide direction for that compass. When what you do and what you value are in sync, your life is in balance and the direction and purpose of your life are easy to articulate and pursue.

In relation to unstuffing your life, once you know your core values, you can eliminate activities that don’t align with them. Such as accumulating things that don’t really serve you or support you in achieving your goals. Such as spending time on activities that distract you from accomplishing the things you’re passionate about, or paid to do. Or doing things you are passionate about but not adequately compensated for, and then feeling like a martyr or growing resentful. We may at any time experience acting in opposition to our core values for any number of reasons—feeling that we “should” do something we know isn’t right, or doing something we’re “expected” to do, when we feel pressured or when we feel we have no choice, or even without thinking, because it’s something we’ve always done.

What follows are some questions and a list of values. The values list is not exhaustive, but it’s comprehensive. If something is missing from it, feel free to write it in. As a favor to me, I’d appreciate an e-mail with any additions so I can update my own lists used in workshops and with clients.

There are, once again, no universally right or preferred answers. The right answers are the truthful answers for you. If you value something that you judge as unappealing or wrong or stupid, either shift your feeling or shift your values. Circle fifteen words to begin with, from the list below, that most strongly express the ideas you value.
Unstuff Your Life

Abundance
Accountability
Achievement
Adventure
Ambition
Candor
Caring
Casual
Challenge
Charity
Clarity
Cleverness
Collaboration
Commitment
Community support
Competition
Contribution
Cooperation
Courage
Creativity
Dedication
 Dependability
Dignity
Diversity
Effectiveness
Efficiency
Empathy
Energy
Entrepreneurship
Environmental concern
Equality
Ethics
Excellence
Excitement
Fairness
Faith
Fame
Family
Financial growth
Financial security
Flexibility
Freedom
Friendship
Fulfillment
Fun
Generosity
Grace
Growth
Happiness
Health
Honesty
Honor
Unstuff Your Life

Hope
Humility
Humor
Independence
Informal
Inner harmony
Innovation
Integrity
Intimacy
Joy
Justice
Kindness
Leadership
Learning
Listening
Location
Love
Loyalty
Mutual respect
Obedience
Open communication
Openness
Order
Originality
Passion
Peace
Persistence
Power
Profitability
Prosperity
Purposefulness
Quality
Receptivity
Recognition
Relationships
Reliability
Resiliency
Respect
Responsibility
Responsiveness
Safety
Security
Self-esteem
Self-control
Service
Simplicity
Spirituality
Stability
Stewardship
Strength
Success
Support
Great. Now, a few exercises. Please write your answers to these questions in your notebook.

1. Imagine yourself at the end of your life—there’s no pain or drama (this isn’t an acting class!), just the culmination of a long, well-lived life. Looking back, what are the three most resonant and meaningful memories that you have? And what are the three most important lessons that you’ve learned? What makes each of them so significant? Imagine you’re going to share this information with the person you love the most so they might benefit from your experiences.

2. Think of someone you deeply respect and admire. Write down five qualities that they possess that most define them for you. Give examples of those qualities in action.

3. Think of a mentor or someone who has influenced your thinking and choices in a fundamental way. Write down five qualities that they possess that most define them for you. Give examples of those qualities in action.

4. Describe a time when you were particularly proud of how you participated in something, when you felt you were your best self. List the qualities that you exhibited.
5. What do you want to be remembered for?

6. If resources and access were not obstacles, what would you choose to do with your life?

7. What do you love to do, what makes you the happiest, what are you most passionate about?

8. What do you want to accomplish in the world?

9. What do you want to give back to the world?

Excellent. Now, of the first fifteen words you selected, and of everything else you’ve written above, what are your top five values? What are the five qualities that you cannot imagine living without, that’s how essential they are to who and how you want to be. Write them either here or in your notebook.

These values are at the very center of who you are. And that’s most definitely not stuff.

**Aligning With Your Core Values**

Now that you know what’s important to you and have a clearer understanding of what you value, it’s finally time to put those analytical skills to use on something practical. Return to your answers for the first set of questions in this chapter and evaluate your responses, looking for where your core values are reflected in those answers. Write next to your answers each core value that you see reflected there. If you see none of your core values in your answer, put a zero there, and write what you do see reflected there instead, whether that’s fear, resentment, reticence, resistance, envy—just note it.

Once more I’ll remind you that you have nothing to fear from the truth—you’re doing private work and your frank assessment of your behavior will only help to clear the way for the kind of change you desire. If you value love and kindness and find that you’re mostly scared and resentful, how do you get from here to there? What are the choices you need to make to shift your conscious or unconscious stance from one of resistance to one of receptivity? How do you let things go that you don’t value or don’t serve you to make room for and embrace the things that you do value and will serve you?
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There are no universal answers to the above questions. What I believe are universal tools for discovering the answers are open-mindedness, willingness, honesty and quiet reflection. You don’t need to become a monk to sit still long enough to hear something beneath the constant chatter of your mind. Five minutes of doing seemingly nothing besides sitting still and reflecting on the questions above (as well as others that may start to come to you once you begin this process) can quiet your thoughts down enough to reveal some answers. Let’s try it now.

Get an egg timer or something similar that will make a sound when it goes off. You’ll set it for five minutes. Focus on your answers to the first questions, your core values and the questions of how to bring your behavior into alignment with your core values. Ask, almost in a prayer, for the ability to find what you have been responsible for in the past or present and what you can change for the better, now and in the future. If it helps you, you may dim the lights but do not sit in the dark.

If you find yourself starting to judge yourself or calling yourself names for any of the places where your behavior is not yet in alignment, or even for doing this exercise, recognize that. And then, rather than tightening up or resisting it, just look at it. As if you were looking at someone else who was judging himself or herself. Approach the tension or judgment with a degree of curiosity rather than disappointment or anger and you should be able to refocus on the questions before you.

It may be that the entire five minutes are filled with just judging and looking, with just spinning around mentally with only brief glimpses of the questions. That’s fine. The goal is simply to begin or resume a process of sitting still and reflecting. With patience you will learn both what you have been doing that runs counter to your core values and ways to do something different to yield different results. When the timer goes off, write down anything that seems noteworthy from your quiet time. Do this for thirty days consecutively and you will be amazed at the clarity you obtain around your behavior and effective ways to shift it in your favor.

Set the timer now.

The Stuff Behind the Stuff
Some of the mental “noise” or distractions mentioned in the last section may occur in the form of stories. We tell ourselves stories all day. Some out loud, and some as chatter, running just in the background, barely audible to our subconscious. We make up new reasons or reinforce established reasons why something should be done, or why something shouldn’t be done. Why if it is done, it should be done a particular way. We spend a lot of time trying to figure out what something means—whether that’s guessing at the motivations behind someone’s behavior or evaluating and assigning value to stuff.

Let’s set the analysis of others’ behavior aside for now. What I want to focus on are the stories we tell ourselves about our stuff. I call these stories, “the stuff behind the stuff.”

I’m not suggesting that these stories are lies, although some may be untrue or at least not based on fact. What I am suggesting is that we often take an object and weave a narrative around it, until that story is now bound up in that object. Any interaction with that object means also interacting with the story. So much so that the story almost stands guard over the object, the story becoming the first line of defense. You have to get through the story to get to the object.

This complicated relationship between story and object is why so many people struggle with any part of getting organized, particularly that first step. If often doesn’t matter what the objective is—whether it’s finding a proper home for the object or sifting through piles of stuff to possibly purge some surplus items. Often the story has so much power over folks that they stand immobile in the face of it—it’s become an effective barrier to any change, even at times simply putting something away.

So getting to and through the stuff behind the stuff is key to this process. Your grandfather’s top hat is still going to be your grandfather’s top hat. And if the story is that your grandfather wore that top hat at his wedding to your grandmother, that’s not going to change, either. What is, I hope, going to change is the imperative that story places on your grandfather’s top hat: “You must keep me. I’m eighty-five years old, and that wedding was the reason you’re here today. You’d be a terrible grandchild if you got rid of me.”

We think nothing of discarding a gum wrapper once we’ve taken out the piece of gum and put it in our mouths. At a core level, that top hat is no different than the gum wrapper. They both exist, they both served a purpose, they both might have no more purpose to serve in our lives at this time. You must know, of course, that
that top hat is not your grandfather. That bears repeating. That top hat is not your grandfather. It’s just an article of his clothing. So I’m not suggesting that you get rid of your grandfather. You might be hearing that. In fact, the story, the stuff behind the stuff, might actively be telling you that. “Hey! He’s suggesting you toss your grandfather in the trash, or send him off to Goodwill. Your grandfather would never do that to you. You ungrateful brat. Put me down!”

But if you’re done with the hat, if that hat, practically speaking, is a burden—if it’s taking up room that you need for something you do use, such as one of your own hats or bags, or if it makes you sad to look at it, or if it’s disintegrating and literally falling apart on your closet floor and could never be worn again by anyone, let alone your grandfather, then we can celebrate your grandparents’ wedding. We can appreciate the history woven into that hat, and we can reverently and respectfully let go of the hat. Don’t turn everything you own into a ball and chain. Actual balls and chains will be enough. Let the hat be just a hat. And if you’re done with the hat, then you are empowered to release the hat back to the universe for its next chapter, a chapter that may not include you.

The Promise

I can’t promise you that if you’re single, by the time you finish working through this book you’ll be happily married. If marriage even interests you. I can’t promise you that your boss will start treating you better or that you’ll finally get along with the guy or gal in the next cubicle or that you’ll always get a good parking space.

What I can promise you is this: If you are diligent about this work, if you are consistent and alert and apply yourself, when you are finished with this book, you will have more time on your hands than you ever thought possible. You will do less, and you will accomplish more.

You will always be able to find anything—in your home or office, kitchen or car—within thirty seconds. You will never be late because you misplaced your car keys. You may be late because of traffic, but we can’t control everything.

You will finally have the time to do the things you love to do. Or to discover the things you love. Or to
rediscover them.

If you don’t have to waste another minute looking for something you were certain you just saw but now can’t seem to find, that’s one more minute you have to write a love letter. Or the great American novel. Or to bake some brownies. Or to bathe your daughter. Or to visit your mother. Or to solve global warming. Now imagine what you can do with another hour, or hours, or days, or weeks. Exactly.

I can’t tell you what to do with that time once you get it. That’s another book. Or at least a conversation over a cup of tea. What I can do is guide you through a precise process that will enable you to *unstuff your life* of everything that doesn’t serve you and shine a light on everything that does. How’s that sound instead?

Now, so we don’t waste another minute discussing theories or waxing philosophical—let’s get you cracking on this new way of life. I want to launch you into the book with whatever messy mix of enthusiasm and skepticism and inertia and hope you’re currently brewing and help you change your life.

Deep breath. And here we go.