

Spring Cleaning



Laura Leist of Eliminate Chaos checks over a closet after putting it in order.

Especially now that Martha Stewart has served time, poking fun at her continues to be fair game. Martha's obsessive use of her label maker, her freshly pressed tablecloths arranged by colors (and kept on hangers!), her impeccably ordered heirloom seed collections – they're all ripe for mocking.

But admit it: You may not have your

own fleet of gravy boats stored in an antique hutch, but it sure would be nice to have a home even remotely as organized as hers – preferably without having to work 20 hours a day at it, as Martha the insomniac is rumored to do.

Since women often bear the brunt of housework responsibilities, it usually falls on us to remember where every essential piece of paperwork is hiding.

where an empty shoebox may be retrieved for a school diorama at 9 p.m. the night before the project is due, and, of course, where the ever-disappearing checkbook or car keys may be lurking.

When clutter gets the better of a household, it's hard for everyone to function. According to the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO), 80 percent of the clutter in a house is due to disorganization and not – as many imagine the case to be – a lack of space for all the “stuff” that we wish a little magic elf would come and tidy up for us overnight as we snooze.

While the elf fantasy is farfetched, you can have an organized abode, for a price – if you can find the darn checkbook, that is. About 50 personal organizers have set up shop in the Seattle area, and they will cheerfully help you tackle that precariously tall stack of papers on your desk (what, in their business, is referred to as “a horizontal filing cabinet”). They're also adept at clearing out the years of junk accumulating in your closets, or even just ordering an intimidating collection of photographs desperately in search of a photo album to call their own. And while the \$40 to \$55 an hour that many organizers charge may seem hefty, consider that NAPO estimates that we all spend an hour a day just looking for things.

If that doesn't twist your arm into calling for professional assistance, consider the story of a former reporter colleague of mine in Boston, in the days preceding online newspaper editions and archiving. While David was at lunch one day, the seven-foot-tall tower of newspapers he had hoarded behind his desk for a decade lurched forward in a horrifying tumble. The boss of the department (of health and sci-

ence writers) guessed that if David had been sitting at his desk, he would have suffered, at minimum, a concussion. The comical twist was that this guy's writing beat was astronomy and physics. Couldn't he have calculated when the stack was bound to tip over? At least the “Timber!”-worthy descent of wood pulp prompted him to go through all those back-issues and finally clip the copies of his articles, which is what he was saving them for in the first place.

While a near-miss concussion is certainly cause for alarm, it's nothing compared to what most personal organizers have seen on the job. Diana Thomas, of Visible Results Organizing in Kirkland, says that one client dropped a bag of prunes on the floor, and let them sit there for a week, “because she didn't want to waste them. But she never picked them up.” She's also seen homes that were “otherwise perfectly immaculate,” fit for a home-design magazine spread, with the exception of one room, “which was a total disaster area.”

Laura Leist of Eliminate Chaos says it's not uncommon to find a house where it is impossible to find one's way from room to room because of all the clutter in the way. “One client I worked for had two big boxes filled with empty disposable pie pans – perfectly cleaned and washed,” she says. That client had survived the Depression and couldn't bear the thought of getting rid of something that could potentially be used again.

That house may have been in rough shape, but homeowners shouldn't be afraid to let an organizer see whatever mess they're too afraid to tackle. Says Leist, “I would say to (potential clients) that they don't need to be afraid to have someone come into their home and see it. We're not judgmental.

We're there to help them and help them solve what's going on, and live a more peaceful life."

Psychological Barriers to Organizing

"It's amazing the stuff people hold on to," says Thomas. "Junk mail, gifts that people have given them that they've never even liked, but they keep 'just in case' the gift giver comes to visit, and they don't want to insult them by not having the gift on display – even though they have it hidden in the back of the closet!"

Leist says she commonly sees houses overflowing with "tons of pictures, lots of old letters, birthday and Christmas cards, baby clothes, kids' clothes, schoolwork, kids' artwork," the majority of which is never going to be used or looked at again. She's worked with clients in the workplace, too, (at major law and insurance firms in the area) where executives were drowning under piles of paperwork.

Before any true organizing can happen, Leist and Thomas agree, the clutter must be removed. "It's all about letting go," says Leist, who's been organizing professionally for five years and conducts classes on the topic for IKEA and Discover U. With a soothing voice and the patience of a saint, she helps her clients come to grips with tossing (or recycling) five, 10, even 30 or more years' worth of accumulated stuff.

Neither of these women finds it possible to work with a client who is not willing and able to allow the mess to be cleared out. "Some people just can't be helped," says Thomas. "Occasionally a spouse will call and want to buy a gift certificate, but I'd rather they not waste their money." She says the pack rat in question must

first be emotionally able to tackle the task at hand.

It's not unusual for personal organizers to encounter clients with shopping addictions or some degree of obsessive-compulsive disorder. "So much of what I do is psychological," Leist says. "I tell people that if I ever go back to school, I'd get a degree in counseling." Her most daunting job to date took three months, with three to four associates working with her each day, and cost the client \$36,000. That house had 3,000 plastic bags cluttering up the place.

A therapist or other mental-health professional will often refer a client. Noting that shopping addictions are common, Thomas says: "I get a lot of clients who've bought so many things they don't even remember what they have in their closet." "I find that people who shop at consignment stores and Goodwill tend to buy more stuff and keep it, even if they never use it," she adds. "They think they're getting a great deal, but they never use (half of it). It's more about the thrill of the hunt than needing the item," she says. Leist and Thomas say it's not unusual to encounter a closet filled with clothing with the tags still on.

What to Keep, What to Toss

While too many retail-therapy trips are responsible for some of the household messes that professional organizers encounter, it's more often just plain paper that's the true culprit. "So much for ours being a 'paperless' society," says Thomas. "Everyone seems to have mounds of paper."

People may hold on to too many years' worth of tax records for fear of being audited (chances are you won't need them if they're over seven years old). But 80 percent of the other items

that we stubbornly hold onto is never used. Although a personal organizer can help start a filing system for keeping future tax receipts, a more important job is to teach a client how to maintain the system so paper stops piling up. Many cite the OHIO rule for keeping paper at bay: Only Handle It Once. That means paying bills when they show up in the mail, and immediately filing or recycling everything else.

Leist says that some of her favorite office-organizing supplies come from Target, Home Depot, or online at www.thecontainerstore.com. Thomas says that once the smoke clears, so to speak, she usually finds plenty of filing supplies already hiding out in the homes she's straightening up.

Maintaining the Order

"Organizing isn't something they teach in school," says Leist. "A lot of parents call because they want their children to be organized, but if the parents aren't setting a good example for their children, I tell them I won't work with the kids until I work with the parents. I can go in and organize a house, but if they can't maintain it, I've done them a disservice." She also encounters a lot of artsy types who believe that being organized will stifle their creative process. "They say, 'Oh I'm creative, I'm right-brained,'" and that they just can't function in an organized, orderly environment. "That's just not true," says Leist.

Once a house is put in order, she, like many organizers, likes to follow up by phone occasionally to ensure that the system she's developed for that household is kept in working order and the "sense of peace" is maintained. As Martha might say, that's a very good thing. ■

– Erica Jorgensen