

## CHAPTER ONE

### There Must Be a Desk in Here Somewhere...

My desk was piled high with papers, empty coffee cups, and unopened mail. Perhaps there was even an outdated check lurking in there somewhere. I couldn't tell. The floor served as my filing cabinet. I didn't put papers into files because I was afraid I wouldn't find them again. I still couldn't find them easily, but at least I thought I knew their general whereabouts.

I was a management consultant at a demanding firm. My clients and colleagues counted on me to deliver excellent, timely work. I did deliver, most of the time, but at great cost—recurring late-night work sessions; anguished preparation time; and frequent, frantic searches for missing information, my hair standing on end because I couldn't find the folder with the critical data. Some of the intensity stemmed from the very nature of my work, but much of the pressure came from me.

Even though I tried to focus and to feel balanced and self-confident—I had practiced meditation for years—my life and work grew ever more stressful because I was usually running late. Rushing to the airport for business trips, I'd skid into the jetway, my heart pounding, just before the crew closed the door. Sometimes it was a high, sometimes I hated it.

Running late for meetings, forgetting something yet again, submitting invoices way past deadline, I was creating havoc around me. I valued integrity, but I often broke agreements because I double-booked myself. In addition, I had several years of unfiled taxes. I would lie there, sleepless, worrying about the size of the debt (\$1,000? \$50,000?), but I still couldn't get my tax returns in the mail. And despite my M.B.A., I had no clue what I owed on my credit cards, because I couldn't find the last set of bills (or any set of bills, for that matter).

My personal space was also very messy. When I invited people over, I would swoop through my apartment and throw the clutter into a closet or stash extra belongings under the bed or in the tub, and hope that people didn't peek behind the shower curtain. Things would stay in the closet, only to be buried by the next sweep through. I rarely hung up my clothes. My sink was piled with dirty dishes. I would often lose phone messages. I longed to live in a peaceful, beautiful space. I wanted a sanctuary, but I created chaos.

Embarrassing? Very. Could I tell anyone what my life was like? No. I wanted to change, but I got little help from the many books on organizing. To organized people, and in most of the organizing books, the obvious answer is: Pull yourself together, create a plan, and “just do it” or “do it now.” Put the keys in one place. File or throw out the mess on the desk and the clutter on the floor. Get rid of the excess stuff in the closets. Put everything in its place. Decide to be on time. That made sense to me, too, so I would try to “do it now.” I'd sort the papers on my desk, finally get the dishes done, and then frustratingly I'd be disorganized all over again. What was my problem? How could I fix it? I had accomplished a lot in life. How come I couldn't master the ordinary tasks of every day?

What is challenging is that chronic disorganization—like a chronic weight problem—feels as if it has a life of its own. I truly wanted to be different; I wanted to live without chaos and lateness. I just couldn't seem to do it. I would get completely fed up with the mess, the frenzy, and the panic. I would say, “Okay. This is it. This weekend I am throwing everything away. I'm clearing off the desk and the floor, hanging up all the clothes and doing all the dishes. I am creating some peace in this place. And, from now on, I'm arriving on time.”

But that declaration never worked. After many, many wasted weekends of failing to clean up and failing to have any fun or relaxation, I hired a professional organizer—I'll call her Jane. We sat at my desk in my home office and after several painstaking hours, we had cleared it off. She even gave me a system to stay on top of things. I put everything in a logical place. What a relief! Success! I was organized!

Or was I? By the end of the next day, there was a fine spray of clutter on the desk. By the end of the week, the desk looked as if we hadn't touched it. With dismay, I called Jane back. She arrived with a little scowl (such a mess? so soon?) and we cleared the desk again. After another week, not surprisingly, the mess was back once again. How did the desk and papers do that? I wondered. Where was the clutter coming from?

I was too mortified to call her back once again, and realized that I was on my own with a mountain of papers. These papers were not just on my desk, though—they littered my office floor, filled my closets, and spilled across the kitchen counters. I had a chaotic office, a disorganized kitchen, a messy car, an unlivable home. Since I had been meditating for a long time, I had developed a small capacity to observe myself with compassion. As I mulled over this discouraging situation, I came to a key realization: I (me?, not me!) was the one creating the mess.

I began to see that I created my own mess through the choices I made and my unconscious habits. Becoming aware of this was hard for me, but the more I looked, the more I could see that I was taking actions that led to chaos. A simple example was my very messy car. At the end of the day, I could bring everything in, or leave things in the car. If I left things in the car, it became an ugly, unpleasant mobile storage unit.

I was the agent of this mess. I was the source of this chaos. I was very effective at creating it. I was taking actions every day that amplified my inner and outer disorder. It followed that if I created it, I could uncreate it.

It was not so easy, though. It took a while to find a way out. Step by step, I discovered a new approach. I decided to apply my extensive experience in change management to this profound challenge and change myself. I established my purpose for organizing, created my vision for where I wanted to go, took stock of my current situation, got good support, and put into practice a few simple strategies. I worked through frightening feelings. Incredibly, I began to experience changes in myself and my life. The frantic, chaotic messy life I was living became less frantic, less chaotic, and much more satisfying. I discovered that order was possible and valuable and didn't ruin my creativity. Oddly enough, some order helped me be more creative.

It was clear to me that simply deciding to change doesn't produce change by itself. Deep personal change requires fundamentally shifting how we think about things. It asks us for the courage to face our difficult feelings. It demands a more profound understanding of what motivates us. We then must use every tool available to help us shift our typical ways of behaving. Habits are strong, but they can be altered. The method described in this book takes the focus off the external chaos and gives us a chance to look at our contribution to it. The principle is that when we change our thinking, process our feelings, and build new habits, our environment will change. In the end, and you may not believe this now, you may come to see your disorganization as a great gift, because it has launched you on a path to deeper personal discovery. This is a very human, practical path. Your healing will be very tangible. You'll not only discover a deeper love for yourself, but you'll also be able to find your keys in the morning. The nightmare will start receding. The terror of lost checks or lost jobs will decrease. The panic attacks will be less frequent. And why? Because your healing is holistic. Your inner healing will be matched by your outer healing. Your inner fragmentation will lessen and so will your outer fragmentation. Your greater inner coherence will be matched by your outer coherence.

Using the approach described in this book, I have changed the way I live my life. Today my taxes are paid, my closets are free of clutter, and my kitchen sink is free of the accumulation of dishes. I can get to meetings on time, and the general level of havoc has died down. I deepened my relationships (and finally found my husband). Along with that, I have moved farther toward the goals that I had been trying to accomplish through meditation. I have more peace of mind, less frenzy, and a much deeper awareness of the power of spirituality in my life.

Other people who have undertaken this journey also have altered their lives dramatically. Mary is a highly successful training director at a large pharmaceutical company. Her success derives from her enthusiasm, her command of her work, and her creative approach to problem-solving. She wanted composure, yet often came into meetings with

“folders flying.” When she came to see me, she was working late at the office most nights—catching up from the day’s work, sorting through the piles of paper on her desk and trying to get some of the reading material off her office floor. She genuinely wanted to create some order, yet she felt exhausted, and ineffective. She couldn’t think straight. She was fed up with being disorganized because it was eating up precious time with her family. She could barely stand the rush in the mornings, looking for socks and boots, making lunch at the last minute, getting the kids out the door late again. She also knew that her stress was taking a profound toll on her body, soul, and marriage.

As a training director, she had taken several courses on professional effectiveness and stress management. They hadn’t helped her much, however, because she couldn’t implement the many tips: “I get lots of good ideas from these courses, and I do try them out, but I often slip right back into my old ways of doing things.” She had reached a point where she was open to deeper change.

As she followed the seven steps on this path, she observed, “This method helped me change a few key habits. I feel like I found a path out of what looked like a trackless jungle. I no longer have to sit in my office late, spinning my wheels. I can get home much earlier, without guilt. I’ve learned how to get ready the night before so that we can all leave the house in good shape the next morning. I feel much more connected with myself and my family. I am much clearer about what is important to me—both my priorities and my sense of deeper purpose. I feel like I am back on track in my life.”

Charles, a lawyer in solo practice, has an impressive office downtown. He didn’t meet with clients there because, in his words, “it was a zoo.” There were books open on the desk and the floor, and piles of folders in disarray. All surfaces were covered with clutter, even the chairs. Yet, he was reluctant to try to clear it up because it would ruin the delicate order that he had created. At any given time, he knew—sort of—where everything was.

Often, he felt completely unproductive. He sat, numb, panicking, but unable to take action. His behavior reminded him of a quote he once heard: “Hell is when things freeze.” He lived that hell often until a deadline was close, and he would be galvanized to act. But the pain he felt was enormous.

For him, his lateness was what finally brought things to a head. He was a single dad, and his teenagers were also always late to activities. At work, he, his colleagues, and his clients all knew that he couldn’t be counted on to meet deadlines. He tried to arrive at appointments on time, but something always got in the way. He was tired of breaking agreements and being unreliable, and he sensed that his chronic tardiness was damaging his business. He was good at what he did, but other people didn’t want to hang around waiting for him. He had difficulty building the deep trust he wanted with his clients. Trust was an important part of his spiritual growth and his deep desire was to be fully present for others and to bring a sense of presence to his work.

As he worked through the steps of this approach he said, “The first few occasions I arrived on time, no one else was there, because they expected me to be at least a half an hour late. I now realize that I can be on time to every appointment. It does take some planning and awareness of my thought patterns. However, I like knowing that I can keep my agreements. I can be present. I am developing real integrity. My clients are learning to trust me in much more profound ways. I feel the presence of a much deeper trust in my life.”

Helen, a counselor in a city youth agency, also has some administrative responsibilities and counsels at least fifteen kids a week. She had so much paper piled on her desk, floor, and chairs that she could not use her office for counseling. She and the kids were always looking for a spare room or office where they could meet. She is single and has no children, yet her home did not feel welcoming—even to her. There was no place to eat, since the kitchen table was piled with newspapers, magazines, and mail. She ate most of her meals standing up. It was time to create some space for herself.

Now she says, “It was a nightmare. There was no place for me, neither at home nor at work. I was always running. Now, I feel much more confident about handling it all. I’m more calm and deliberate in my approach. I’ve gotten my house back under control. There is a place for me to sit. Stuff is no longer scattered on the floor and piled on the kitchen table. Now I know how to keep it that way. It’s much easier to think clearly! My home is a sanctuary for me, not just an extension of the nightmare. I feel so much more centered, joyful, and powerful.”

What helped these people change is that they saw what you probably see, that being disorganized depletes your energy and that making change is worth the effort. You expend far too much energy hunting for lost objects, making unrealistic plans, scrambling to meet deadlines, and apologizing for being late. You end up running on empty because you exhaust your reserves as you deal with the impact of your own chaos. This is one of the many paradoxes of organizing: you don’t organize because it feels as if it’s a waste of time, yet you then waste a lot of time contending with the mess. Clearing up your messes gives you a chance to encounter the physical world and recraft your sense of mastery in it, to redirect your energy toward what has the most personal meaning for you. You begin to see the importance of personal growth in this area. As an ancient teacher once said, “Who is master of the world? He who masters himself.”

Organizing is deeper and more powerful than I once thought. It’s not only about freeing ourselves from clutter or putting “everything in its place.” It’s about expanding our sense of personal efficacy. It’s also about discovering courage and dignity, and living our true life purpose. Organizing allows you to listen much more carefully to your inner voice, because you are quiet enough to hear. Being organized means:

- You can find what you want when you need it.
- You can keep track of important information and lay your hands on it when you want to.
- You can complete your tasks in a timely way.
- You can arrive at your destination when you choose.
- You can keep agreements and make agreements that you can keep.
- You can take action when you want and seize new opportunities as they arise.
- You can focus on what is important to you.
- You can do all of this with a great degree of presence of mind. You are able to pay attention to what you decide is important. This presence of mind also allows you to live with more awareness of a greater Presence, if that is what you are seeking.

As you can see, this is an action-oriented definition. It is not about achieving surface neatness or compulsive timeliness. Being organized means you can live your life fully and move full steam ahead. This is the deep order that is possible when you connect with your true intent and your sense of dignity and self-worth.

### How Do I Get Off This Merry-Go-Round?

Freeing up energy involves seven steps. These steps build on each other. For clarity’s sake, I list them in order, and this order is a useful way to begin. Over time, you will find yourself working a few steps at a time, in your own way, in your own order. Don’t be overwhelmed by these steps—I’m just giving you the overview here. This is the map for the rest of the book. In the seven steps, you:

**1. Establish Your Purpose.** In the first step, you have an opportunity to explore your deeper purpose for getting organized. You look at how disorganization is a stumbling block for you. You identify what being organized can do for you and you make a deep commitment to change.

**2. Envision What You Want.** Now you create your vision for how you want to live your life. You visualize the details of how being organized can contribute to your life vision. You imagine how much better your life will be and you find some role models to help you see that you can change.

3. **Take Stock.** You take a very realistic look at what you are doing to create chaos and frenzy in your life. And you examine the thinking, beliefs, emotional attachments, and spiritual orientation that lead you to disorganization.

4. **Choose Support.** Support, lots of it, is crucial to make this kind of change. You identify all kinds of support for yourself in this process.

5. **Identify Strategies for Change.** You learn what it takes to become organized—how to clear up the backlog successfully, how to build new systems and new habits. Then you incorporate the basics of time management, handling purchases and possessions well, learning to focus, and making sure that your word is good.

6. **Take Action.** You use implementation tools to put the approach into action. You set reasonable goals, you allocate time, you energize yourself when you get stuck, and you get good help.

7. **Go Deeper to Keep Going.** You learn to take care of yourself better and you do the deep emotional work that can free you from destructive habits and emotional pain. You deepen your understanding about how you want to live and what it takes to live that way.

As you can see in the Seven-Step Change Cycle diagram (page 12), purpose is central. You start with purpose and you return to purpose. You focus on your purpose for getting organized, but, ultimately, you are getting organized so that you can do more of what you really want to do in life.

I call this a cycle because in getting organized, you go through many rounds, and you work through many layers. The blast-through-the-mess approach or the this-weekend-I-am-going-to-get-totally-organized method doesn't work for most people. Rather, you go through a cycle of working through the mess on your desk, learning to keep your desk ready for action, and then moving on to clearing the clothes off the floor. And that deepens your commitment to getting organized because you see the good results, which in turn allows you to go after what you really want in life because you are not getting in your own way so much. You get clearer about who you are. This is a cycle for life.

As you go through these steps, you'll see what really works for you. You'll get to know yourself better and you'll take more effective action. You will change. You'll find it easier to get things done. And on the nightmarish days, you'll still find ways to keep your energy moving. You'll also see that in this path is a powerful way to improve the quality of your life.

### What It Feels Like Along the Way

Using this method you will become aware of your current thoughts and choices about possessions, time, agreements, and focus. You'll begin to see trade-offs that you hadn't seen before. You'll see small changes that you can make. You'll work differently with your fear and anxiety. You will cultivate new habits slowly, one at a time, so that you can adjust to a new way of living. You will delve more deeply into the meaning of your mess, and you'll start to understand your own brain—how you think and what distracts you.

Step by step you create some order, then a little more . . . until you establish a substantially clearer space. This learning process takes time and repetition. For example, I had to tackle my desk as if it were Mount Everest. I made thirty or forty attempts. I know this sounds exaggerated, but I had to get my figurative hiking boots, pack, and ice ax, and go after my desk with determination. The "mountain" defeated me many times, but eventually I did conquer it. (I have a little flag waving at the top.)

Determination to change must be mixed with a healthy dose of compassion. You weave will and kindness together as you undertake this transformational journey. You develop self-acceptance and let go of the shaming inner voice. You see that you can't force yourself to change just by bossing yourself around. You develop a much deeper motivation to change and grow and, in so doing, you find the strength to go after more of what you want in life.

As you begin to get organized, you feel more and more confident in your ability to incorporate order into your life. You also experience a stronger sense of professional effectiveness and "presence," because you aren't wrestling with time and objects as much. This sense of presence—sometimes called "mindfulness"—signals the ability to be fully available for life and its challenges, and is a guiding principle in this method. It's hard to be "present" when you can't find your keys or when you're running half an hour late. It's also hard to be present—and connected to others—when you're spending another Sunday cleaning up the office or you're too embarrassed to welcome people into your home.

You will begin to have a sense of homecoming. When you come "home," whether to your house, your office, or even your car, you will become energized and engaged rather than depressed. Home enhances your sense of belonging. You might begin to feel that there is actually a place for you. You may experience a sense of grace and peacefulness because you are not struggling so hard to get to a place on time or to meet deadlines. Your blood pressure may go down. You will wrestle less with bills, receipts, phone calls, and e-mails. You can find a deeper sense of the sacred. For example, your office can become a sanctuary for meaningful work, and you also might find a space in your home that allows for contemplation and reverence. You might start to sense that life is short and you don't want to scatter it to the winds, doing everything and seeing everyone. Finally, as you clear a place for yourself by becoming organized, you may well begin sensing your true aspiration. It's easier to hear your calling when there is less pandemonium.

### **An Integrated Approach to Change**

Using this approach, you will work the seven steps in cycles, alternating between focusing on objects or time and working with your emotions, thoughts, and life energy. You'll engage four levels of self in order to enter a new way of living:

- The physical level—what you do day-to-day, the actions you take that produce the chaos
- The emotional level—your feelings about disorder, order, timeliness, and possessions
- The intellectual level—what you think, how you think, and what you believe
- The spiritual level—your deeper sense of meaning and purpose; your values and your sense of the sacred in time, space, and material things; your connectedness with your source of strength and courage

Most personal change efforts fail because they are limited to one or two levels. Using this process, you will draw on knowledge from all four realms so you can truly transform your life. Think of this work as clearing your path of inner and outer obstacles. Everything has energy, and freeing up energy occurs on several levels at once. As you make changes, your well-being increases, and this frees you up to live your true purpose. You experience more composure. You connect more deeply with a greater energy and vitality. Every action that you take matters. Every time you flex your inner muscles to do something different, you are building the strength for more. Athletes lift weights. You do the dishes, throw things away, file the papers, and put things back. This is your discipline. Building discipline builds your strength and power. Each action that you take towards change helps you take the next action. I will remind you often that this is a journey of small changes. Over time, small changes add up to great transformation.

You'll become more aware of how your disorganization causes anxiety and your anxiety causes disorganization. Running late often leads to panic. Losing the car keys leads to rage. Missing an important deadline can lead to despair or self-hatred. The life of a disorganized person can be a roller coaster ride of feelings. Fear, anxiety, despair, resentment, are among the many feelings that are intensified by disorganization. Moreover, emotional upsets are

disorganizing. When you are too mad to sit down and pay the bills, when you are so resentful that you can't focus on your work, when you are too depressed to remember to stop at the grocery store on the way home, your life tends to be more chaotic. If your feelings often knock you off your feet, if you are so overwhelmed by floods of emotion that you cannot take care of your daily needs, then it is time to make steadying yourself a serious practice.

In the end, much of this is about micro-changes in how we think about taking action. We see how our deepest beliefs and feelings affect our everyday actions, which in turn affect our results. We can see clearly how if we do what we have always done, we will get what we have always gotten. We will be in the same situation over and over again, unless we fundamentally change. Each time you put your keys back in their place, each evening that you clear off your desk, each time you make a promise that you can and do keep, you are growing toward more satisfaction and well-being.

Every step of the way, there are exercises so that you can put this approach into practice. These exercises won't take you a lot of time, but when used, they can be very powerful. Try these out. Try thinking of these exercises as explorations into a new way of living.

Create a habit of noting what you are learning. Keep a journal in a book or on your computer and pick a time every day to write a few sentences. For example, go directly to your journal when you open the computer and set a timer for five minutes and write. Or keep your journal by your bed and make a habit of reflecting on your day and noting what it was like for you. One pointer: Do not take notes on random pieces of paper thinking that you will copy them down someday. If you like jotting down occasional notes, make it a practice to carry a small notebook with you.

Part of the reward of this approach is that not only will you begin to uncover your floor and desk, but you will also start to create a nurturing space in which you can know and love yourself more fully. The beauty and power of this path is that you can work both outside in—clearing clutter can help you feel more serene—and inside out—as you heal your inner chaos, it may become easier to clear off your desk. You can uncover your core purpose and have the space to do something new, meet a new person, or take a risk. It's paradoxical perhaps, but as you clear up your surface messiness, you become able to enter the genuine, alive messiness of life more freely.