

News-Record
Feb. 4, 2016

SMARTEN UP
@ The South Orange-Maplewood Adult School

OUT, OUT, #*%! CLUTTER! TIPS FROM A PRO

If the Collyer Brothers had only been blessed with a sister like Diane Thomson, they'd never have become the famous New York hoarders whose name is forever linked with extreme clutter.

Excavating the Collyers' upper Madison Ave townhouse in 1947, work crews found 100 tons of papers and trash, an old Model T chassis, 14 pianos, 25,000 books, and, no surprise, the bodies of both brothers, hopelessly lost under their accretions.

Could it happen here? Not on Diane's watch! A professional organizer and coach who grew up in a family with five kids ("Our mother had to think strategically"), Diane holds a masters of science in dance/movement therapy (Hunter College) and worked in mental health and substance abuse programs before launching her firm, Creative Organizing, LLC, based in Maplewood.

Extreme clutter *can* occur here, she reveals. For example, there was the cry for her help from the family of a local teacher who had died, leaving a garage packed with enough old files to fill a pick-up truck. Not so unusual, Diane reports. And not necessarily a sign of neurosis: "We all live such busy lives it's hard to get around to de-cluttering."

She knows from busy: Diane also teaches at the South Orange-Maplewood Adult School ("Get Organized" is set for Mar. 16; "A 5th Grader's Guide to Staying Organized" takes place on Apr. 24; *the Apr. 6th session is already sold out*). And for recovering clutter addicts, Diane manages a Clutter-Cleansing Support Group.

Whence cometh today's obsession with clutter? we asked the expert. The culprits are varied, she answers: "Capitalism. So much more stuff being produced. Trade with China putting the stuff at our fingertips. The massive avalanche of marketing messages that hits our mailboxes and online. Our own desire to always have the *next best thing*. 'I can afford this so why not?' Finding a sense of security in so many possessions...."

That was all fun for a while, Diane says, "But we've hit the tipping point. We are feeling the *weight* of all these things in our lives. We have to manage our stuff. We have to clean it. Stuff takes up space and energy. Objects hold energy, some of it negative -- we feel guilty because we're not using things." Creative Organizing clients often describe having "a rush of thoughts (about their cluttered condition) that...overwhelm and paralyze them," Diane relates.

She likes to quote A.A. Milne in a *Winnie the Pooh* book: 'Organizing is what you do, before you do something, so that when you do it, it's not all mixed up.' In other words, she explains, "In order to have order, we need first to plan, establish systems, and determine routines for managing our stuff, time, and tasks."

Oh, please, tell us how! Diane shares her five top tips for overcoming clutter:

1. Resist in advance. Only bring into your home what you really need or will use. Ask yourself: 'Where will this live? Do I really need or want this? Or is it an impulse buy?'

2. Learn to purge. "Understand that everything has a life span. Let go of the things that are no longer relevant. Clear old textbooks out of the attic. Pull very old papers from your files. Let go of the clothes you grew out of 10 years ago. Recycle those inexpensive glass vases taking up space in your pantry...."

3. When to take action? 'When your life no longer works. When you feel frustrated, overwhelmed, held back by your disorganization.'

4. How to begin? "The first step is to make sense of what is happening in your physical environment. Start in a room or area that causes the most distress, or will have the most positive impact on functioning when it's cleaned up. Sort, categorize, and pass along what you no longer want. Then redesign the cleared space so it works for whatever activity occurs there."

5. How to keep clutter from recurring? "Establish daily, weekly, monthly routines for bringing your home and life back into balance," Diane advises. And keep chanting her mantra: "Love it, use it, or lose it!"

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