

It's Hard to Make a Difference When You Can't Find Your Keys *by Marilyn Paul, Ph.D.*

Book Review by Luiza Holtzberg

This book is very powerful, interesting and extremely helpful. When I first saw the title of the book, I thought "Wow, I have that problem (finding my keys) all the time. Maybe this book might help me find a way (a system that would work for me) that I can always find my keys". As I read the book, I realized it was much more than just a self help book on how to find one's keys. It is a book about the need to look and search inside ourselves in order to find what we are looking for and that getting organized is a path to freedom. It is a journey of engaging 4 levels of the self (physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual) in order to enter a new way of living and be "in the flow with oneself".

The book is structured into a Seven-Step Change Cycle. The 7 steps (p. 12) are summarized as follows:

- 1) Establish your purpose – Why do I want to get organized?
- 2) Create your vision – How would I like my home or work space to be? How will I feel there? What will I see?
- 3) Take stock of the current reality – How do I organize myself now? What choices am I currently making?
- 4) Choose support – What kind of support do I need? Who can support me? How can I build more support? Draw on organizing wisdom – How can I create new habits, clear up spaces, and build systems? What organizing principles will work for me, at home and at work?
- 5) Draw on organizing wisdom – How can I create new habits, clear up spaces, and build systems? What organizing principles will work for me, at home and at work?
- 6) Take effective action – How will I overcome my blocks to change? What are the specific steps I plan to take to accomplish my purpose? When will I schedule time for getting organized?
- 7) Go deeper to keep going – How can I learn about the cycle of change? How can I change my thinking? What hidden shadows can I surface and learn from?

The book had so many great ideas and great information, that it would almost be like writing the book over again to cover everything, so I have chosen to pick out those aspects of the book that have been extremely helpful to me.

- 1) Identifying one's purpose for organizing. In order to bring more mindfulness to one's existence, it is important to identify a strong purpose or reason(s) for why it is important to be organized and making a commitment to follow through. Purpose is about who and how we want to be and thus our purpose for organizing will support our life purpose. She describes an exercise (p. 19) in which she recommends taking a moment to write down a few qualities that describe what one is longing for: self-esteem, security, relaxation, more energy, freedom, creativity, focus, spaciousness.... (just to name a few) In another exercise, she asks one to answer the question, "What is your disorganization preventing you from having or experiencing in your life? What is it costing you?"
- 2) Visioning helps the impossible become possible. I used to envision myself doing something or thinking something in the present tense that I wanted to be real. I used to feel really guilty about doing this, until I learned that this is okay and actually beneficial. Dr. Paul describes an exercise (p. 45) in which she recommends writing one's affirmations on a piece of paper and posting them where one will see them. Affirmations are statements in the present tense that describe a reality

that one would like to experience as if it is happening now. Affirmations can energize you and the challenge is to keep them going.

- 3) Taking stock of my disorganization was really difficult for me. My father, now deceased, would always tell me “think about what you are doing each moment of your day.” I resisted him on this concept with the argument that how can I always be thinking about what I am doing all the time. Well, now I understand and wish that I would have taken his advice more seriously and put it into practice much sooner. Dr. Paul recommends an exercise (p. 51) of imagining that you are a visitor from another planet and that you are observing how this person (you) goes about their day with fresh eyes. What do you see? What patterns do you observe? It took a lot of courage for me to stop and do this on a physical, emotional, mental and spiritual level. Furthermore, keeping a journal of one’s current reality can help one to keep looking and feeling for one’s truth (p. 71).
- 4) Getting help and finding support with one’s disorganization can be really helpful. I hired a professional organizer to come and help us get started on our mission to get more organized. I found that it helped, but that the challenge was keeping up with what the organizer did. We needed to create a system that would work for all of us as a family. Sources of support can be friends, peer coach, family, work colleagues, organizing support groups, and sometimes a therapist can help sort through the emotional challenges that emerge.
- 5) Section 2 – “Drawing on organizing wisdom” contained the nuts and bolts of organizing principles. There was a lot of information in this section, so I picked those aspects which I found most helpful.
 - Dr. Paul describes being “organized” as “a dynamic between a state of readiness for action and taking action. It is a rhythm of taking action, creating the natural disorder that comes with taking action, restoring order with helpful habits and useful systems, and thus returning to readiness for action.”
 - On p. 103, she has a picture of a trash can and the caption reads “Every time I save things I don’t need or make plans that I don’t really want...I TRASH MY FUTURE! Every time I let go of things and activities I don’t really need, I create space for a new future.”
 - On p. 105-106 she describes ten steps for creating a new habit as follows:
 - 1) Pick one small bad habit that you would like to really change
 - 2) Estimate what it costs to keep this old habit
 - 3) Become aware of the thoughts that accompany it
 - 4) Check one’s deeply held beliefs for validity
 - 5) Create a picture of a new and better habit and actually act it out
 - 6) Remind oneself of how this new habit will nurture one’s vision and purpose
 - 7) Interrupt the old habit with shouting or “NO”
 - 8) Reinforce the new behavior with new and positive thoughts
 - 9) Reward oneself for the new behavior
 - 10) Get lots of support
 - Create simple systems
 - Complete the “whole” task. When you complete it, you are back to ready. You need to be aware of the full scope of the task and learn to feel finished only when the whole task is truly done-down to the last loose end. All tasks have 3 phases – preparation, implementation, and completion.

- Allow for transition time. “At the core of transition time is checking in with oneself: Where am I? What did I just experience? What’s next? What do I need right now to be present with this situation?” p. 141.
 - Make sure that you do what you say you will do and learn to say NO. Say YES to those activities that enhance your values.
 - Keep your focus! Lack of focus → Poor quality of work → Errors → →
More work → Stress
 - Take care of the physical needs: rest, get enough sleep, eat right, exercise
 - Be mindful with each activity
- 6) Take effective action. Create a plan with SMART goals. Work together with one’s family to create systems that work. On p. 258, Dr. Paul shares the following principles for self-responsibility that everyone should be expected to follow: *If you take it out, put it back. If you open it, close it. If you throw it down, pick it up. If you take it off, hang it up. If you use it, clean it up.* I took this and made a copy of it and posted it on our refrigerator.

In summary, this book was very valuable to me personally. I have been battling getting organized for the last 20+ years and I feel like this book was the “key” to help me find a way to overcome by organizational issues. I have put to practice many aspects of the book.

Book Review by Sally Burgess

In my case, it’s hard to do a book review when you can’t find the book. And I have two copies! (Don’t ask). Needless to say Dr. Paul’s book was highly relevant to many of the issues I have struggled with over the years. My colleague Luiza provided a deeply comprehensive overview already so I am going to hit on some of the highlights that I enjoyed without reiterating the structure of the book.

As part of identifying your “strong, meaningful purpose” for getting organized Dr. Paul suggests taking some time to write down a few of the qualities you want to express in your life. Perhaps you wish to be serene under pressure or to possess more open-heartedness. The qualities I listed were: autonomy, free time, no financial worries, deeper connections with others and space—uncluttered, open, room to breathe.

Through this exercise I realized that the thing I really long for is truly free, unstructured time with no demands—even one day a week would be great. But due to my current disorganization and procrastination, any time I am not working is devoted to cleaning up messes or catching up on chores. This book is very user friendly and is chockfull of exercises and clear explanations of how one small change can get you started in the right direction.

Organizing as a spiritual practice offers helpful quotes from spiritual leaders such as this from Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh: “Washing the dishes and cooking are themselves the path to Buddhahood...Only a person who has grasped the art of cooking, washing dishes, sweeping and chopping wood, someone who is able to laugh at the world’s weapons of money, fame and power, can hope to transcend the mountain as a hero”.

Creating your “metaphorical vision” was another useful exercise. On page 38 we are encouraged to play with metaphors by choosing an image that speaks to how we would like to feel in relation to organizing.

One of Dr. Paul's clients chose a lake—deep, quiet, and extremely tranquil. “At times the lake was blue, other times a green, but it was always extremely life-giving”. As you make your way through this book you realize you are getting a lot more than advice on how to get organized. It is in fact a dynamic tool for deepening how you experience life on many levels.

I certainly was surprised to read about all of the other people out there who are battling the same issues I deal with. Dr. Paul gives example after example of clients who were putting their careers and relationships in jeopardy because of their “messes”. She very gently addresses the issue of shame and encourages us to find people we trust to confide in and who can support us. That was immeasurably helpful to me—now that I realize it is not a deficiency on my part but in fact; how life is lived by a number of people in our culture I feel a freeing sense of relief and hope!

On page 66 Dr. Paul lists the signs of ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) and indicates that research proves it is hard-wired—in other words if you are ADD you were likely born with it. This is where I would like to see more discussion about how to distinguish ADD from simply the vagaries of living in modern day society. We have plenty of disposable income so we buy more and more stuff. The stuff we bought last year is out of style this year so we buy more stuff. Even in the field of coaching there is always another book or DVD or, and these are killers for me, e-books that come with hundreds of dollars of free “stuff” which you then need to download and sort through. Technology is constantly changing so even when we vow to really learn how to use our new cell phone it can be such a chore that we either can't find the time or give up in frustration. How much of what we face is because of a diagnosable medical condition, and how much is attributable to a culture that rewards busy-ness and consumption?

Having gone on that rant I do give Dr. Paul credit for acknowledging that many people are buried in stuff and many of the clients she refers to are making the conscious decision to get rid of what they don't love and be more judicious in bringing fewer items into their household. But these days much of what leads us to overwhelm, in my opinion, has to do with the extremely complicated culture we have created. This book can help us on many levels but the underlying condition will still be there. (Chapter 7 addresses our consumer-driven society and does offer guidance on how to rise above it).

So now I'll just touch on some of the gems I found in the later chapters.

- “Small steps actually taken lead to more progress than great steps that never happen”.
- “Talk back to your disorganizing gremlin. Remember that this voice has no sense of its own limits—it will insist that you need to keep all of those articles you have stacked in the corner—you will need to set limits and keep only what will truly be valuable”.
- And finally: “Our material excess can induce a kind of stupor, as if we had eaten too much. The sense of bloat is tangible. Since we spend so much time just managing our possessions, we have little energy or inclination remaining to appreciate the sense that we are part of a larger universe”.

This book would be a valuable resource to just about anyone who is trying to get a handle on the long list of issues we deal with these days. I have had conversations with two young women this week about their anxiety over what they fear is global warming. Here in the Midwest our grass is brown and dying and the corn crops are wilting in the fields. The last two storms we had provided some moisture but also wreaked havoc—trees snapped in half, power lines down, electricity out for more than 400,000 people for days. It may sound like a stretch to suggest that settling down with Dr. Paul's book could provide relief from the anxiety we are feeling over our future, but it has for me. She encourages us to focus on what we can control and to do it together. She encourages us to connect with something more powerful than

ourselves which frees up energy and helps us find meaning. She states, "Healthy energy is at once vital and peaceful, bigger than we are yet very personal, sustaining and steady as well as flowing".

The more of that healthy energy I can create for myself and encourage in others, the better we will be able to deal with whatever exigencies lie ahead.

Book Review by Susan Strickland

Being a very organized person, it is hard to relate to a "messy" house/space. Trying to keep organized has been challenging with 4 children. I have learned to let a few things go, but one thing for certain, I can't allow clutter on my kitchen counter or table.

This book is a very good resource to use as a guide for people who want to or need to reduce the stress caused by the mess in their lives. I couldn't help but to try to parallel this book to lifestyle and change. Adherence to lifestyle changes has been the major reason so many diet and exercise programs have failed people. The programs themselves don't fail. They are in place, but compliance is not. Lack of motivation for lifestyle change, forgetting things and disorganization are problems related to compliance.

People become overwhelmed by too many projects, piles and piles of "stuff" everywhere. This book could be a useful tool to those who have health habits to change but have been unsuccessful. It could be related to the disorganization in their life. To get to the midst of the problem, the layers of the "onion" need to be peeled away. How one can expect to make health habit changes through disorganized "eyes" and efforts is unimaginable. Maybe lifestyle changes are overwhelming because their home or workspace is overwhelming.

How can we expect someone to change eating habits for instance, if the kitchen is a mess? The food preparation area may be in clutter, too many high sugar/fat foods in the cabinets. If mess and clutter is a chronic problem, how can someone be motivated to change eating habits? Organizing the kitchen, making shopping lists may be what is in order for someone to make lasting change.

So, one's purpose may be to: eat healthier. Their vision: to have clutter free counters in order to make food preparation pleasurable. This could be the springboard for those having difficulty making lasting lifestyle changes by following the seven step change cycle to organize an area, which then can lead to healthy habit changes.

How orderly your space appears, whether it is your home or office, is a reflection of a persons' physical, mental and spiritual health. It would nearly be impossible to reach health goals if your environment is not supportive of you. By changing and organizing the right things in your space, it may become easier to change habits and improve health.

Marilyn Paul's book much parallel's what we as coaches are trying to achieve. Her seven step system designed to bring relief form the pain and stress of disorganization can actually provide insight to why a habit may be incredibly hard to change. Making change is overwhelming, and for those who are disorganized even greater. By reorganizing and restructuring space, it will change the way you perhaps shop and cook. The client can then begin to take control of their lives once the space/mess stops controlling them.

Book Review by Sharon Chausow

Seeing the title of this book was the spark or impetus that led me to volunteer to read and review this book because of my belief that I am here to make a difference for those that I work with and for my family and friends. While I am able to find my keys; I know that there are cluttered areas in my home, office and my life that are not well organized and this has caused ongoing personal and family stress. I have read many organization type books and magazine articles and used systems, colors, file folders and lists, etc. I have success in scheduling and keeping calendars. I have received offers of help from family and friends for my clutter issues, but never understood why I failed to maintain order until I started reading this book. The seven steps overview clarified my past failures.

Combined with the Wellcoaches training and work with various clients on their visions, goals, obstacles and successes, the seven steps in the path referred to in this book gives the reader the various “whys” of clutter and disorganization in addition to the process of behavior change necessary to be successful. Reading this book and following the exercises and examples provided paralleled the coaching process for wellness behavior change and success we practice with our clients.

The exercises and examples given are one area that makes this book more useful than others as it helps the reader get to the root cause/s of their disorganization as well as encouraging small changes in the logical order presented. Another unique aspect of this book are the seven steps and in particular it is the first step: defining your purpose for organizing and what organization means to you. Visioning is used to help define what your organized life would look like or be like. It is a unique approach, one of self discovery in the areas of responsibility, integrity and dignity.

The reader will also learn motivational techniques to stay on the path of organization through exercises that help reveal emotional and spiritual support that are the keys to changing behavior and also maintaining this behavior through setbacks or adversity. Support systems of family, colleagues and friends are an important part of the process as well.

The core of the book is how to establish and maintain a rhythm of organizing, building new systems and habits as a “new” norm in one’s life. Taking the time, setting reasonable goals and getting help are part of the “taking action” step. Finally, the reader learns that taking care of one’s self physically and emotionally helps to remove destructive habits and pain in order to truly understand how you want to live and maintain a healthy sense of organization internally and externally.

The seven step path is presented as a change cycle, where one step is dependent on the preceding step and the final step leads us back to the purpose of getting organized. This step mirrors the establishment of the wellness vision in the wellness coaching process; the steps/goals in coaching have the wellness vision as a starting point or purpose for our clients.

Reading this book was an eye opener, a lot of “aha” moments occurred and it was a step towards my personal wellness vision. It was humorous, and energizing for me, I wanted to get going after the first section. I enjoyed the process of reading it as well as working through the exercises. I did read it twice, once as a read through and the second time as a workbook, doing the exercises. I have changed several behaviors and am currently on the path to true organization. I would highly recommend this book and have shared it with my family, friends and two of my clients. My family is has a better understanding of what I am doing and it has been useful as they support my efforts to stay on this path.

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