

clutter free

K A T H I L I P P



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For Dad

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Introduction

Clutter's Last Stand



Cheri Gregory is one of my best friends.

We are both authors and speakers. Beyond that, we have almost nothing in common.

She is working toward her doctorate in leadership. My parents wanted to throw a big party for me when I graduated from high school (I think they knew early on that was the only graduation they were ever going to see out of me).

Cheri could be happy writing all day long. I love writing. But only when I have a brilliant idea and the words to express it with (so about every three months).

Cheri doesn't watch TV. I don't understand that concept. Some of my best friends are reality stars. We haven't met, but I can tell you deep and personal stories about most of the winners of *Top Chef* and *So You Think You Can Dance*...

Cheri loves research. Enough said.

But the one other thing Cheri and I have in common, are “sisters-from-another-mister” soul mates on, is our constant battle over clutter. As we've worked together on books and speaking projects, blog posts and consulting, somehow our conversation always, always circles back to clutter.

While Cheri tends toward being a historian of clutter (she wants to keep everything that her children have ever doodled on), I am more of an overall curator of stuff. I labor under the illusion that if I just had the right pair of cream wedge sandals, all my outfits would suddenly look amazing, the right color Post-it note will help me finally become organized, and the right eye cream will change my life.

But we've both discovered that we do better with less stuff.

The good news? We are so much better off than even five years ago.

The other news? It is still something we work on every single day.

So whenever we make a new step in our personal clutter-free journey, any time there is an aha!, we share it with each other. We discuss it and dissect it and figure out how to not let a poor decision happen again (or at least not as often). And in the past several years, as our understanding of the root causes of clutter increases, the piles decrease.

As we've discussed the clutter, talked about the reasons and feelings buried underneath all that stuff, we have come to some surprising (to us) understandings of why we have allowed all these things into our lives, and more importantly, how to deal with all that clutter so it no longer rules our lives.

Our findings have fallen into three areas:

1. *The Why of Clutter*—So often, we buy in order to become, and this state of our heart has led to collecting clutter.
2. *The What of Clutter*—Our so-called logical thinking gets in the way of us getting rid of all the stuff we've collected over the years.
3. *The How of Clutter*—This is where we get to the nitty-gritty of what to do about all the clutter.

Now if you're anything like me, your temptation will be to skip to the "how" part. "Just tell me what to do with all this stuff!" you cry.

I get it. You're desperate.

But unless you deal with the heart and head issues behind your clutter, you will not be prepared to make the hard decisions to get yourself out of the mountain of things weighing you down.

And here's the secret no one ever told me—once you deal with the why, once you get to the core of why you buy and keep things you do not love and do not need, the how part becomes much easier.

Once you get the why figured out, getting rid of clutter will not only become easy, it will become joyful. I'm not kidding. When you start to see things leave your house, you will feel lighter and will want that feeling to go on and on. You will develop a disdain for anything that is not loved or needed. You will walk through a store and not want anything on the shelves because, really, you are satisfied. Yes, you may go shopping to purchase a new pair of sandals because yours are worn out, but you won't buy them in every color, and you won't come home with a shirt and skirt to match—because you are satisfied.

This is where I live now.

Yes, I still have my clutter battles, but they've been downgraded from clutter wars. And I want you to join me on the less cluttered side of life.

I am here to tell you my stories, along with a few from Cheri and other friends, and to play the good cop/bad cop of your clutter crimes.

Cheri tells me that I'm the cheerleader who says, "You can do it!" and "Look at how awesome your life could be if you did this one simple thing!" and she's the one who says, "Here's what you need to stop doing," and "Here's a truth that's going to hurt, but you'll be better for it."

Both of these are useful approaches when it comes to dealing with clutter. Sometimes you need the tricks and tips that will get you up and motivated. You need someone to tell you that yes, this is possible, others have gone before you, and you will survive. You need someone to give you a vision for what your life can be after the clutter is cleared.

I don't want to overlook the fact that clearing out stuff is hard work—both physically and emotionally. You need someone who is going to remind you of all the benefits of living in a clutter-free home. "Wow—look at all the peace that's waiting for you on the other side of that stack of *Oprah* magazines! Look how much better life is when you can find clean underwear every day. Isn't it amazing when you don't have to move piles of mail in order to fix a sandwich?"

But we need balance. We need to be reminded of the things we need to stop doing.

One of Cheri's favorite video clips is a MADtv skit where Bob Newhart is a therapist and his only piece of advice consists of two words: "Stop it." Cheri has spent a lot of time in self-reflection and God-reflection figuring out the things she just had to stop doing. Sadly, having Bob Newhart yelling "Stop it!" at you is not all that is required.

Cheri is also, with a lot of love, a truth-teller. (Someone who tells you the truth with love? That's a friend. Someone who just tells you the truth? That's a jerk.) She discovers hard truths about herself and then changes old behaviors. And because she and I are seeking the same answers, she shares them with me. It's the hard work of change, but it's the lasting work of change.

I've also asked my author friend Erin MacPherson to jump in on the discussion to talk about the reality of clutter in the midst of family life. She's living the clutter battle as she raises three kids, all preschool and elementary ages, and she has real advice to share in the midst of Legos and Barbie accessories.

So realize that the advice in this book is not coming from women who have never struggled. We will be open and candid with you about our clutter journeys, not to show you how far we've come but to show you how close you are to the good stuff that lies beyond the piles.

And we'll also give you the honest, this-will-work truth and advice you need to cut the clutter and regain a foothold into a simple, meaningful, and less-stressed life.

And the one thing that all of us would tell you? When it comes to dealing with your stuff, peace is possible.

You can do this.

Part 1

Uncovering the Costs of Clutter

Why Your Home Is Cluttered



Yes, there are lazy people out there who simply watch TV instead of dealing with the clutter around them. But I'm guessing that's not you. If you've picked up a book to help you deal with your clutter, I can pretty much guarantee your issue is not laziness.

But knowing we aren't lazy about the situation and fixing the situation are two different things.

By *clutter* I mean anything that is in your house that hasn't earned the right to be there, or it has earned the right, but hasn't found its permanent home.

As I drilled down on my own clutter issues, and discussed it with others who have struggled with the same, I began to recognize patterns that emerge in most of us. Some of these I was totally unconscious of until I started to not just work on my clutter but to look more closely at the real reasons behind my clutter.

What I discovered are nine everyday actions that were causing my clutter. If you recognize these in yourself (and I suspect you will), be encouraged that I offer solutions for each of these throughout the book. Once you're aware of the problem, it is so much easier to deal with it.

And so much more productive than walking around your house muttering, “Why can’t I just get my life together?”

Everyday Actions that Cause Clutter

You rearrange clutter instead of dealing with it.

Whenever you store something, pile it up, put it down “just for a minute,” buy a tub to put it in, or shove it into a closet or drawer to deal with it “when there’s more time,” you are simply playing musical chairs with your stuff instead of really dealing with it.

And who can blame you? Life is busy and you have so much stuff to deal with.

But when you do take the time to really deal with your stuff, by either putting it where it needs to go or giving it away, it frees up space on all the surfaces in your home and brings peace.

You don’t have an easy way to put away the things that matter.

When every time you want to put your yoga pants away in your drawer, but first you have to squeeze down the piles of unworn sweats, concert T-shirts from the nineties, and the bicycle shorts you wore exactly once, it suddenly becomes physically painful to put away laundry.

When all your “put away places” are bursting at the seams, you will stop putting things away. It’s just too much hassle. Herein lies the reason most people don’t mind doing laundry until it comes to putting it away. Putting it away is the painful part because it requires an overhaul on every drawer you open.

You have no routine.

Are you reinventing your systems every time you come into the house? For those of us who are prone to clutter, routine is hard. It feels boring and stifling, and if you’re like me, it’s hard to stick to because it always feels like there must be a better way.

But if you can start to incorporate even a little routine into your life, it will get you so much closer to the clutter-free existence you long for. A routine might be as simple as, “Every time I bring in the mail, I put

it in the box next to my computer,” or “Every time I buy a new piece of clothing, I donate two until there’s space in my closet.”

Start to take note of your clutter trail each day. Probably you are doing productive things, but not in a productive way:

- You wash, dry, and fold laundry, but then don’t put it away.
- School papers go in a new place each day.
- You don’t know what to do with a receipt, so you put it on the fridge with a magnet.

You are not aware—until a crisis hits.

It may be that we have friends coming over for dinner. Suddenly, everywhere I look it’s as if wild hyenas ran through my house and left destruction in their wake. Sadly, there are no hyenas. Only me and my people.

For some of us who struggle with organization, we can truly appreciate the mess only when outside forces poke on our world. Then we start to see what a pit we’ve created for ourselves.

You have no reliable way of finding the things you put away.

If you are anything like me, you are reluctant to put things away because for you, “Out of sight is out of mind.” So you leave everything important on your desk or on the kitchen counter. The problem with that? When everything is important, nothing stands out, so nothing is important.

This is why Reliable Retrieval Systems are so important. Some of my Reliable Retrieval Systems are:

- My tickler file for all my papers, instead of just piling them on my desk. I explain this in *The Get Yourself Organized Project*, and I also describe that system here in appendix 2.
- My email filing system for any correspondence I need to get back to (instead of all my email being in my inbox overwhelming me).

- A bookshelf dedicated to books I need to read (instead of stacking them up on my nightstand and desk).
- One binder for all the recipes I've printed off the Internet and have actually tried and liked (instead of all of them being stuck to my refrigerator by a dozen magnets).

You don't know where things should go.

You grew up in a house that was in constant chaos, so you never learned where things should go. Your mother-in-law's house is the picture of order, but when you try to duplicate her methods in your home, it doesn't seem to translate. You may not have enough confidence in yourself to make the decisions that need to be made about where things go.

You don't know the value of what you have.

When you're overwhelmed, it's easy to shove things into a bag or a box to sort through later. So you shove everything on the desk into a shoebox and hide that box out of sight. The problem comes when you're looking for the receipt you need to turn in, and it may be in that box, but who knows? It's mixed up with a week's (or a month's) worth of junk mail, bills, and a Happy Meal toy. It's so much to go through, it's just easier to put it off.

When you save everything, you can find nothing.

You are stuck in indecision.

You don't know where something goes, so instead of forcing yourself into a decision, you put off deciding. This leads to piles of decisions that need to be made. And when is a good time to deal with that? Never.

You punish yourself with your past mistakes.

Sometimes, instead of getting rid of something that turned out to be a not-so-great purchase (maybe the protein shake that tastes like someone took a handful of chalk and some pencil shavings and ground them up in your smoothie maker?), you hold on to them because it

cost so much or it took so long to find, you think you need to just suck it up and use it. Why are you punishing yourself keeping what you don't need?

Each of these nine reasons is addressed in the pages of this book. Was it frustrating to see how many of these are why you are constantly dealing with clutter? Well, take heart. These aren't just your clutter causes—they are everyone's. And they can be overcome.

Yes, they still rear their ugly heads in my life. But I have a plan to deal with all of them. And I'm sharing that plan with you in the pages to come.