

**Sorting Through Stuff And Finding Myself:
Organizing Lessons Learned Along The Way**
Susan Gannon, Momentum For Growth, LLC

This is a story of how, in the process of trying to help my daughter, my own life was profoundly changed. One day, as I was asking my daughter for the 99th time to pick up her stuff and clear out her clutter, the words of Gandhi came to me: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." It was one of those Eureka moments. How could I expect my daughter to be organized when my own "stuff" was all over the place? My office, in particular, was in need of improvement. I resolved, then and there, to become the positive role model my daughter needed and, starting with my office, sort through the stuff that had accumulated and organize it in a way that was not only neat and tidy but reflected my current needs and interests.

As an AD/HD Coach, I work with people with attentional issues. Everyday I ask myself, "How can I be the change I wish to see in them?" I decided to look at myself impartially, as if I were the client. I found there was a lot to improve upon! Pushing myself to engage in tasks that are not enjoyable and require sustained effort gave me the chance to help myself and, hopefully, others to organize their lives. Along the way I learned some valuable lessons that I share here, hoping my Eureka moment may inspire others.

LESSON #1: ORGANIZATION COMES NATURALLY TO SOME PEOPLE WHILE OTHERS NEED A POWERFUL MOTIVATOR

Having made the decision to clean up and organize my office, I was immediately stopped by the chaos before me. I was tempted to give up before I even began, as I had so many times before. But the image of my daughter's face arose before me, and I knew I had to proceed with my resolution for her sake. Helping her was my main concern-- and her need to have a role model for order and structure motivated me to continue.

The struggles of my AD/HD clients were also powerful motivators for me. In my practice I work with many people struggling to conquer their chaos. Although we all have different reasons to organize, it is helpful to have a big picture goal in mind or an overwhelming reason for getting our lives in order.

LESSON #2: IF YOU DON'T LET GO OF THE OLD, THERE WILL BE NO PLACE FOR THE NEW.

I had started my own AD/HD coaching business after years of working for others. My home office was crammed with 10 year old file folders that had lost their meaning. They were obviously outdated and, on some, the labels gave me no clue to what lay within. I knew that I should probably toss them all, but I was stopped by the fear that I might need them "someday."

So I began the laborious process of going through each folder. The process brought me smack dab in touch with missed opportunities, activities that had been in my control that I hadn't pursued. Other folders brought back memories of my youth and those exciting times when I

worked on teams with smart people toward a common goal. At some point, however, I suddenly realized that I was comparing myself to my former self and idealizing the past. The truth was that I was no longer the woman reflected in those folders. I knew I had to take a leap of faith and say goodbye to the old. This was a real risk for me. Letting go of the old memories and mementos made me feel anxious and sad, but also relieved and happy. I realized that if I didn't let go of the old, there wouldn't be enough space for the new.

LESSON #3: ORDER CAN EVOLVE OUT OF CHAOS

There was a real advantage to having my files strewn all over the floor. Not only did it help weed out those parts of my life that were no longer relevant, but it revealed a fuller picture of who I am now and who I want to be. Out of the chaos, order began to emerge. The "stuff" no longer appeared threatening or insurmountable. Instead, it presented a clearer picture of who I was and how I had gotten to this point in my life. The emerging portrait allowed me to sort out the parts of my life that were no longer relevant and begin to build a strong foundation for the person I wanted to become.

The real trick was learning to live in the present moment with discomfort. I was out of my comfort zone, not knowing how things would turn out. For all of us, there are no guarantees of a "promised land." During this period of uncertainty, I often ask my clients, "What is the payoff for staying where you are?" or "What is it going to take for you to change?" or "How much do you really want it and what are you willing to give up to get it?" Staying in the moment and listening to the answers to these questions helps us move out of our comfort zone.

As I stayed in the present moment, creating order out of chaos, I developed a new filing system that reflected my current interests. I put my personal files on the right side of my desk and my business files on the left, dividing them into three simple categories: clients, administration and resources. Clients' faces and the names of professional development organizations popped into mind. Articles collected over the years finally had a home, a place to go where I could actually use them to spark or reinforce an idea for a client.

This simple structure provided me with a backdrop to create themes and new names for my files. Naming files is like naming potential. When potential is named, the energy bounces from it and it comes alive. This naming process, then, is circular and continuous. By naming potential, we give it energy which, in turn, gives us energy. In short, the naming process can be energizing.

LESSON #4: YOUR NATURAL STYLE FINDS YOU

The simple tasks of naming, of sorting and of labeling brought me in touch with my own natural style. It helped me find me. I realized that I was an "inductive thinker." In other words, I reach conclusions from seeing how all the separate and unique parts fit together to make a whole rather than, say, starting with a general principle and then making the parts fit that general principle. Each of us has our own unique personal style. It is useful to look at our past attempts to get organized and to discover which style works best for us. Here are some questions I asked myself:

– Do I need a general principle to get myself organized or do I get organized and then learn a general principle from the process?

– Do I forget things if they're not right in front of me? Or do the piles in front of me distract me from my goal or do I get to a point where I no longer see them?

– Do I work better with pictures and images or words and letters?

– Do I organize myself around people, personal relationships, and values? Or do I organize around events or situations?

– Do I need order and linear solutions? (i.e. A-Z) or I am comfortable with random order with symbols or pictures?

My files and the stuff on my desk revealed some interesting stories about myself. I learned that there was an underlying organization that the world couldn't see. There were several piles on my desk. I had an intimate understanding of those piles. If somebody asked me for something, I could easily find it even though I wasn't going to win any awards for neatness. I was much more "in control" than met the eye. I believe that my clients with AD/HD issues are more engaged and in control, than their teachers or colleagues might realize.

Another one of my stories suggested inefficiency on the surface, but when the surface was peeled away, a very productive approach was revealed. Sometimes, I would start down one track and then realize there was a better way to go and start down another track. What was an important category at first glance would turn out to be too narrow or limiting. But exploring or fumbling was an important step towards coming up with "the answer." I was in search of a theme or a name that encompassed the widest berth. The unexpected detours and distractions turned out to be useful guideposts. In time, I learned to value my nonlinear, inductive and creative way of solving problems. I also learned to value the contributions from my linear friends.

With my coaching clients, they often want to be "normal" and mobilize their efforts in that direction. They feel inadequate and ill-disciplined because they zigzag all over the place, focusing on irrelevant stimuli, and having difficulty maintaining concentration. Distractibility is often a sign that their brains are different but it does **not** mean they are flawed, stupid or lazy. Sometimes the detours prove quite beneficial. Where would we be if some scientist didn't get distracted by extraneous stimuli and accidentally discover a new medicine? Yet there are other times when we may need help in containing and resisting the many distractions so we can finish an important project.

LESSON #5: SOMETIMES IT IS IMPORTANT TO CALL IN ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE WHICH TAKES YOUR STYLE INTO CONSIDERATION

At one point, I decided to call in a professional organizer who helped me identify trouble spots, gave me suggestions, and assisted me with the details. It was very important that the organizer honor my "inductive style" and let me develop my own way of creating my files. If she had

proceeded with a deductive, cookie cutter process with prepared labels, it wouldn't have worked. I needed an overall framework, but within that structure, I needed to be able to create my own substructure.

Although I can't prove it, I feel sure that my daughter's willingness to organize her room and possessions has improved since I took the step of organizing my own life. She has a place for her things and has grown fond of using my labeler to name her boxes. Her schoolwork is neater and more structured. I would venture to guess that the structure has enabled her to be freer and more creative.

As an AD/HD Coach, my clients frequently resist structure. I came face-to-face with this resistance in myself and had to learn to meet it and overcome it. This, in turn, helped me to understand and listen to my clients in a more real way. Although I do not physically organize people's files, I work with a wide variety of clients (college students to executives) to sort through their intentions and identify what is truly important to them. Together, we try to promote their top priorities and better understand "what is worth the pursuit." Containing the many random and creative ideas is often the most fascinating challenge as clients decide what to let go and what to keep. Their keepsakes, their "golden nuggets" begin to define their unique personal style. For some of us, order doesn't come easily so external controls such as deadlines, planning, strategies, and support, combined with accountability are needed to ensure consistent follow-through. I have learned, not without pain, that creativity and structure are meant to be great friends.

For me, the simple desire to help my daughter evolved into a subtle, but profound life-changing event. I now see that I can control the chaos in my life. It's not controlling me! I see order that has emerged from the chaos. I've let go of the past and have a place for the new. I value my own personal style yet honor other perspectives that are offered me. Last but not least, I can find anything in a millisecond. May my clients also benefit from my new growth.