**Practical Approaches to Order from Chaos**

I guess the very first thing to ask when faced with a stack of stuff is ‘what’s it for’ – ‘why do you want it’. Take someone’s large collection of books, for example, does the owner collect certain types of books? Are some of more interest to her than others? Given a moment to reflect, would she decide that one part of her collection is of more interest to her than another? Perhaps, she’s been thinking for some time about focusing on just a subset of types of books or authors or topics, and this is an opportunity to make that change of direction. Sometimes it’s helpful to have a prompt which encourages one to review what one’s doing. Take another example - a large pile of boxes - the same applies. Do you really want this material? What are you going to do with it? Stuff sitting unused in boxes is just a waste of space. If it IS of use to you, you could start thinking of how you can use it – how you can bring it life! That in turn may help you towards a greater understanding of why you want to keep it. Of course, there may be several different categories of material, for each of which the answer may be different. Understanding what those different categories are is also an essential part of figuring out why you want to keep things. Writing down what those categories are and why you are keeping items in each category will probably be helpful.

Once you’re clear on what you’re keeping and why, you can turn to the space in which it is being kept. Is this REALLY where you want the different types of stuff to be kept? When deciding where to store stuff, it’s worth considering both what space is available and where you want to use the material. Clearly, if you are only ever going to use particular items in one part of your house then it makes sense to store them in that part of the house. Likewise, If you are only ever going to use an item at a desk it makes sense to store it in or next to the desk. Of course, sometimes it’s not possible to locate the material in the most appropriate place - but at least if one understands the most desirable place, then the most effective compromises can be made.

When you have established the space you are going to use for storage, it’s important to make the best use of that space. This often requires exploring all sorts of possible configurations to ensure that you make the best use of the space. Some principles you can use when doing this are:

* Ensure there is easy access wide enough to walk through and to get the largest objects in and out.
* Avoid piling things one on top of another – piles make it very hard to remove things and put them back. If it is absolutely necessary, then make it just two or three or four large things like boxes which can be easily lifted off of one another rather than lots of little things. Try to avoid piles of books and papers at all cost. This also applies when you put things into boxes.
* Avoid putting things one in front of the other unless the one behind is much taller than the one in front – it’s important to be able to see what is there and to be able to get things in and out easily.
* Make full use of all the space – including the height. This may entail installing shelving. It may also require some experimentation to put the right shaped things into the most appropriate spaces – it’s rare to come up with the most effective arrangement at your first shot. A particular instance of this is when using adjustable height shelving; there will be an optimum – but rarely an obvious - height for each of the shelf spaces, but it may take a little trial and error to establish what they are.
* Finally, if possible, put things into enclosed spaces to avoid the dust accumulating. For books I am a total convert to glass fronted bookcases – particularly the IKEA BILLY range. Documents can go in filing cabinets (bit clunky though) or desk hanging folders (but they always seem to fall apart and get stuffed too full), or briefcase type filing boxes (small but pretty handy) or display folders with transparent pockets (you can get ones with 40 pockets from Wilko for about £3 – they will take 80 different A4 size documents if you use both sides, and they will sit neatly on a bookshelf – this is one of my favourite types of storage containers). For other items, I always try to put things in boxes or suitcases or plastic bags. Of course, there is also the option of digitising things (by scanning documents and photographing objects) and then getting rid of the physical item.

Once you’ve decided broadly what you’re going to keep and why, and you’ve earmarked the storage space and containers, the next thing to do is to actually sort through each category of material and put it in place. A very useful technique for this is to do a quick sort through of everything, placing different sub-categories of things into different piles, and, at the same time, setting aside anything that needs throwing away or that you know definitely that you don’t want to keep. If the sub-categories aren’t obvious when you start, that’s no problem – they’ll soon start to emerge as you continue to sort through the material. After this initial sort it will be clearer what different types of things you have and what different types of storage you’ll need for different sub-categories. For example, if your boxes contain lots of documents and various artefacts, then one approach would be to put the documents into display folders and the objects into a wall display cabinet (IKEA has a good selection of these as well). Having done the initial sort through, you can then tackle each sub-category pile and do a more detailed sort, perhaps putting like with like or sorting things by date – or whatever’s appropriate. Things can be put into their storage locations/containers as you go through this process or after you’ve dealt with each sub-category pile. As you may have gathered already, this whole process is designed to gradually turn a disordered set of material into more coherent organised groups of things. The further you get through this exercise, the less daunting the task becomes as Order starts to appear from Chaos. Right from the beginning of the quick sort, you will, little by little, have a better handle on what you have and what you need to do with it.

So, to summarise:

1. Be clear about what specific categories of stuff you want to deal with.
2. Figure out why you want to keep each category.
3. Take the opportunity to reassess what you really want to keep/collect going forward.
4. Decide where the best place is to store each category.
5. Be clear about the specific space you are going to use for storage.
6. Decide how you will set out, equip and organise the storage space.
7. Do a quick sort of each category into sub-categories.
8. As you do the quick sort, set aside the stuff you want to throw away or dispose of.
9. Decide exactly how you will store each sub-category.
10. Go through each sub-category in detail, organising as required.
11. Set up the storage space/containers/equipment and store the sorted sub-categories.

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