

Saying Yes to Mess



Edward Koren

By PENELOPE GREEN Published: December 21, 2006

IT is a truism of American life that we're too darn messy, or we think we are, and we feel really bad about it. Our desks and dining room tables are awash with paper; our closets are bursting with clothes and sports equipment and old files; our laundry areas boil; our basements and garages seethe. And so do our partners — or our parents, if we happen to be teenagers.

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How messy is your desk or closet? What do you think that says about you?

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The Secret Order of Disorder (December 21, 2006)

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This is why sales of home-organizing products, like accordion files and labelmakers and plastic tubs, keep going up and up, from \$5.9 billion last year to a projected \$7.6 billion by 2009, as do the revenues of companies that make closet organizing systems, an industry that is pulling in \$3 billion a year, according to Closets magazine.

This is why January is now Get Organized Month, thanks also to the efforts of the National Association of Professional Organizers, whose 4,000 clutter-busting members will be poised, clipboards and trash bags at the ready, to minister to the 10,000 clutter victims the association estimates will be calling for its members' services just after the new year.

But contrarian voices can be heard in the wilderness. An anti-anticlutter movement is afoot, one that says yes to mess and urges you to embrace your disorder. Studies are piling up that show that messy desks are the vivid signatures of people with creative, limber minds (who reap higher salaries than those with neat "office landscapes") and that messy closet owners are probably better parents and nicer and cooler than their tidier counterparts. It's a movement that confirms what you have known, deep down, all along: really neat people are

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CLUTTER KING Don Springer won a company's contest for worst "clutter nightmare," but he insists he can find anything in his home office blindfolded.

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Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

POETS OF PILES David H. Freedman is a co-author of "A Perfect Mess."

not avatars of the good life; they are humorless and inflexible prigs, and have way too much time on their hands.

"It's chasing an illusion to think that any organization — be it a family unit or a corporation — can be completely rid of disorder on any consistent basis," said Jerrold Pollak, a neuropsychologist at Seacoast Mental Health Center in Portsmouth, N.H., whose work involves helping people tolerate the inherent disorder in their lives. "And if it could, should it be? Total organization is a futile attempt to deny and control the unpredictability of life. I live in a world of total clutter, advising on cases where you'd think from all the paper it's the [F.B.I.](#) files on the Unabomber," when, in fact, he said, it's only "a person with a stiff neck."

"My wife has threatened divorce over all the piles," continued Dr. Pollack, who has an office at home, too. "If we had kids the health department would have to be alerted. But what can I do?"

Stop feeling bad, say the mess apologists. There are more urgent things to worry about. Irwin Kula is a rabbi based in Manhattan and author of "Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life," which was published by Hyperion in September. "Order can be profane and life-diminishing," he said the other day. "It's a flippant remark, but if you've never had a messy kitchen, you've probably never had a home-cooked meal. Real life is very messy, but we need to have models about how that messiness works."

His favorite example? His 15-year-old daughter Talia's bedroom, a picture of utter disorder — and individuality, he said.

"One day I'm standing in front of the door," he said, "and it's out of control and my wife, Dana, is freaking out, and suddenly I see in all the piles the dress she wore to her first dance and an earring she wore to her bat mitzvah. She's so trusting her journal is wide open on the floor, and there are photo-booth pictures of her friends strewn everywhere. I said, 'Omigod, her cup overflows!' And we started to laugh."

The room was an invitation, he said, to search for a deeper meaning under the scurf.

Last week David H. Freedman, another amiable mess analyst (and science journalist), stood bemused in front of the heathery tweed collapsible storage boxes with clear panels (\$29.99) at the Container Store in Natick, Mass., and suggested that the main thing most people's closets are brimming with is unused organizing equipment. "This is another wonderful trend," Mr. Freedman said dryly, referring to the clear panels. "We're going to lose the ability to put clutter *away*. Inside your storage box, you'd better be organized."

Mr. Freedman is co-author, with Eric Abrahamson, of "A Perfect Mess: The Hidden Benefits of Disorder," out in two weeks from Little, Brown & Company. The book is a meandering, engaging tour of beneficial mess and the systems and individuals reaping those benefits, like Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#), whose mess-for-success tips include never making a daily schedule.

As a corollary, the book's authors examine the high cost of neatness — measured in shame, mostly, and family fights, as well as wasted dollars — and generally have a fine time tipping over orthodoxies and poking fun at clutter busters and their ilk, and at the self-help tips they live or die by. They wonder: Why is it better to pack more activities into one day? By whose standards are procrastinators less effective than their well-scheduled peers? Why should children have to do chores to earn back their possessions if they leave them on the floor, as many professional organizers suggest?

In their book Mr. Freedman and Mr. Abrahamson describe the properties of mess in loving terms. Mess has resonance, they write, which means it can vibrate beyond its own confines and connect to the larger world. It was the overall scumminess of Alexander

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Fleming's laboratory that led to his discovery of penicillin, from a moldy bloom in a petri dish he had forgotten on his desk.

Mess is robust and adaptable, like Mr. Schwarzenegger's open calendar, as opposed to brittle, like a parent's rigid schedule that doesn't allow for a small child's wool-gathering or balkiness. Mess is complete, in that it embraces all sorts of random elements. Mess tells a story: you can learn a lot about people from their detritus, whereas neat — well, neat is a closed book. Neat has no narrative and no personality (as any cover of *Real Simple* magazine will demonstrate). Mess is also natural, as Mr. Freedman and Mr. Abrahamson point out, and a real time-saver. "It takes extra effort to neaten up a system," they write. "Things don't generally neaten themselves."

Indeed, the most valuable dividend of living with mess may be time. Mr. Freedman, who has three children and a hard-working spouse, Laurie Tobey-Freedman, a preschool special-needs coordinator, is studying Mandarin in his precious spare moments. Perusing a four-door stainless steel shoe cabinet (\$149) at the Container Store, and imagining gussying up a shoe collection, he shook his head and said, "I don't get the appeal of this, which may be a huge defect on my part in terms of higher forms of entertainment."

The success of the Container Store notwithstanding, there is indeed something messy — and not in a good way — about so many organizing options. "When I think about this urge to organize, it reminds me of how it was when Americans began to take more and more control of their weight: they got fatter," said Marian Salzman, chief marketing officer of J. Walter Thompson and co-author, with Ira Matathia, of "Next Now: Trends for the Future," which is about to be published by Palgrave Macmillan. "I never gained weight until I went on a [diet](#)," she said, adding that she has a room in which she hides a treadmill and, now, two bags of organizing supplies.

"I got sick of looking at them so I bought plastic tubs and stuffed the bags in the tubs and put the tubs in the room." Right now, she said, "we are emotionally overloaded, and so what this is about is that we are getting better and better at living superficially."

"Superficial is the new intimate," Ms. Salzman said, gaining steam, "and these boxes, these organizing supplies, are the containers for all our superficial selves. 'I will be a neater mom, a hipper mom, a mom that gets more done.' Do I sound cynical?"

Nah.

In the semiotics of mess, desks may be the richest texts. Messy-desk research borrows from cognitive ergonomics, a field of study dealing with how a work environment supports productivity. Consider that desks, our work landscapes, are stand-ins for our brains, and so the piles we array on them are "cognitive artifacts," or data cues, of our thoughts as we work.

To a professional organizer brandishing colored files and stackable trays, cluttered horizontal surfaces are a horror; to cognitive psychologists like Jay Brand, who works in the Ideation Group of Haworth Inc., the huge office furniture company, their peaks and valleys glow with intellectual intent and showcase a mind whirring away: sorting, linking, *producing*. (By extension, a clean desk can be seen as a dormant area, an indication that no thought or work is being undertaken.)

His studies and others, like a survey conducted last year by Ajilon Professional Staffing, in Saddle Brook, N.J., which linked messy desks to higher salaries (and neat ones to salaries under \$35,000), answer Einstein's oft-quoted remark, "If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk?"

Don Springer, 61, is an information technology project manager and the winner of the Type O-No! contest sponsored by Dymo, the labelmaker manufacturer, in October. The contest offered \$5,000 worth of clutter management — for the tools (the boxes, the bins and the systems, as well as a labelmaker) and the services of a professional organizer — to the best example of a "clutter nightmare," as expressed by contestants in a photograph and a 100-word essay. "Type O-Nos," reads a definition on the Dymo Web site, are "outlaws on the tidy trail, clutter criminals twice over."

Mr. Springer, who in a phone interview spoke softly, precisely and with great humor,

professed deep shame over the contents of what he calls his oh-by-the-way room, a library/junk room that his wife would like cleaned to make a nursery for a new grandchild. With a full-time job and membership in various clubs and organizations, and a desire to spend his free time seeing a movie with his wife instead of “expending the emotional energy it would take to sort through all the stuff,” Mr. Springer said, he is unable to prune the piles to his wife’s satisfaction. “There are emotional treasures buried in there, and I don’t want to part with them,” he said.

So, why bother?

“Because I love my wife and I want to make her happy,” he said.

According to a small survey that Mr. Freedman and Mr. Abrahamson conducted for their book — 160 adults representing a cross section of genders, races and incomes, Mr. Freedman said — of those who had split up with a partner, one in 12 had done so over a struggle involving one partner’s idea of mess. Happy partnerships turn out not necessarily to be those in which products from Staples figure largely. Mr. Freedman and his wife, for example, have been married for over two decades, and live in an offhandedly messy house with a violently messy basement — the latter area, where their three children hang out, decorated (though that’s not quite the right word) in a pre-1990s Tompkins Square Park lean-to style.

The room’s chaos is an example of one of Mr. Freedman and Mr. Abrahamson’s mess strategies, which is to create a mess-free DMZ (in this case, the basement stairs) and acknowledge areas of complementary mess. Cherish your mess management strategies, suggested Mr. Freedman, speaking approvingly of the pile builders and the under-the-bed stuffers; of those who let their messes wax and wane — the cyclers, he called them; and those who create satellite messes (in storage units off-site). “Most people don’t realize their own efficiency or effectiveness,” he said with a grin.

It’s also nice to remember, as Mr. Freedman pointed out, that almost anything looks pretty neat if it’s shuffled into a pile.

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