



In my study of happiness,
I've realized that for most
of us, *outer order contributes
to inner calm.*

More than it should.

In the context of a happy life, a messy desk or a crowded coat closet is a trivial problem—yet getting control of the *stuff* of life often makes it easier to feel more in control of our lives generally.

When I'm surrounded by a mess, I feel restless and unsettled. When I clean up that mess, I'm always surprised by the disproportionate energy and cheer I gain, plus I'm able to find my keys. A friend once told me, "I finally cleaned out my fridge and now I know I can switch careers." I knew *exactly* what she meant.

By getting rid of the things I don't use, don't need, or don't love, as well as the things that don't work, don't fit,

or don't suit, I free my mind—and my shelves—for what I truly value. And that's true for most people.

Often, when disorder starts to creep in, I think, I don't have time to fight my way through all this stuff! I'm too busy to deal with it! But I've learned that by managing my possessions, I can improve my emotional attitude, my physical health, my intellectual vigor, and even my social life.

Now, no matter how busy I am, I force myself to take at least a few minutes each day to impose some order. If I'm feeling overwhelmed by multiple writing deadlines, I spend twenty minutes cleaning my office, because I know that clearing my papers clears my mind.

I've also found that once I start, it's easier to keep going. True, sometimes it feels auspicious to do a big clutter-clearing on New Year's Day, or as spring cleaning, or as pre-Labor Day prep—but *now* is always the best time to begin. A friend told me, "I woke up one morning and on impulse decided to tackle my basement. I spent my entire Sunday down there, and I was so pumped by the end that I wanted to keep going all night. I got up early on Monday morning just to sit there and gloat. It gave me such a lift at the start of a tough workweek."

We want to cherish our possessions and we also want to feel free of them. I want to keep every toy that my

children ever loved, but I also want to have plenty of space in our apartment.

With outer order, we achieve that balance.

We all must face clutter in the way that's right for us. We're all different—in what possessions we value, in the kinds of surroundings that we find pleasurable, in the kinds of habits that come naturally to us, in the dynamics of our household or workplace. There's no one “right” or “best” way to create a better life.

In fact, we should work to create outer order only if it makes us happier. There's no magic in making a bed, or filing papers, or emptying an in-box each night. These efforts are worthwhile only if they bring us more happiness. We've achieved the right level of order when we can find what we need, feel good in our space, and don't feel hindered by stuff. For some people, what looks like disorder works just fine.

Why, then, do so many experts insist that they've found the one true and right way? It's a fact about human nature: when getting advice, we love to receive a precise, standardized template for success, and when giving advice, we love to insist that the strategy that works so well for us will surely work for others. But each of us must find our own way.

Some people want to clear a little clutter each day; some people want to work for fourteen hours straight. Some people struggle with overbuying; some people (like me) struggle with underbuying. Some people feel a strong emotional or mystical attachment to possessions; others don't feel much connection to objects. Some people curate their possessions with great care; others put little thought into what they buy and where they put it. Some people are powerfully attracted by the promise of minimalism—and some people aren't.

Nevertheless, while each of us might define and achieve outer order in different ways, it's clear that for most people, outer order does indeed contribute to inner calm.

ALLOW TECHNOLOGY TO CLEAR CLUTTER.

Often we hang on to possessions that have been replaced by technology.

Do you consult the print manuals for your devices or appliances—or do you just look up the information online?

Do you maintain a library of books, DVDs, or CDs even though you don't use them anymore?

Do you have a fax machine, even though you never send or receive faxes?

Maybe you still need an alarm clock, calculator, scanner, dictionary, thesaurus, etiquette guide, maps, or copier—but perhaps you use a tech solution instead, so you don't need to keep those things.

If you have the current version of an item, don't keep the outdated version. If you use a new Keurig to make your coffee every day, you don't need your French press.

Unless you actually use these items, there's no need to hang on to them any longer. (Though it does seem like a sacrilege not to own a physical copy of a dictionary.)

DON'T AIM FOR “MINIMALISM.”

Outer order isn't a matter of having less or having more; it's a matter of wanting what we have.

For some people, owning a minimal amount of possessions makes them feel freer and happier. That's absolutely true. But it's not true for everyone.

Declaring that we'd all be happier with less (or with more) is like saying that every movie should be 120 minutes long. Every movie has a right length, and people differ in the number of possessions, and the types of possessions, with which they can meaningfully engage. One person is happy with a bare shelf that holds a single vase; another is happy with a shelf lined with books, photographs, and mementos. We must decide what's right for *us*.

Rather than striving for a particular level of possessions—minimal or otherwise—it's helpful to think about getting rid of what's *superfluous*. Even people who prefer to own many possessions enjoy their surroundings more when they've purged everything that's not needed, used, or loved.

Purchase a copy of
OUTER ORDER, INNER CALM
at one of these retailers:

