

# Imperfectly happy

Lessons in Life and Business

I recently celebrated the fourth anniversary of the founding of my company and the start of my career as a professional organizer. When people ask how I got into this line of work, my response is like that of most other organizers. I fell backwards into the job I'd been unconsciously preparing to do my entire life. And it's a job that continues to give me more stimulation and satisfaction than I ever expected when I tentatively began four years ago.

On February 14, 2010 my husband (then-fiancé) Daniel and I attended our engagement party in his native Puerto Rico. It was a joyful, raucous event with a live salsa band, a pig roasting on a spit and many guests that were, apparently, family members in some form or another. The next day we returned home to Washington, DC and I found myself unemployed.



**I gave up on perfection and chose happiness instead.**

Daniel encouraged me to pause before taking a new job. Although my experience up to that point—four years in communications and



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marketing at the American Red Cross headquarters and four more in government contracting—had taught me a lot, it had also caused me a lot of anxiety. I'd lie awake most nights anticipating what would go wrong, feeling out of my depth and always intimidated by the challenges at work. Rather than rush into more of the same, Daniel said, I should take some time to determine a happier path.

I agreed. For about 24 hours I was content to ponder and not to act. But by mid-week I was impatient and dashed off a Craigslist ad offering a variety of services, including de-cluttering, organizing, redecorating, wardrobe consultation, bill paying...whatever ordinary task someone didn't want to face, I would happily take on at a bargain hourly rate.

The impulse to post this ad wasn't entirely unfounded. In my prior

disillusionment, I had often considered what career would better suit me than the roles I'd inhabited. So when I took a chance on Craigslist, it was a small stab at a vision I had of maximizing my true strengths — my communication skills and innate ability to take on a mess, and create order and beauty—the two key skills of a successful organizer.

In a cultural landscape that's overrun with media shouting, "Be perfect!," I tell my clients to be happy. Though it sounds surprising at first, these days happiness is actually a harder goal to meet than perfection. Like most Americans, the individuals I assist—professionals, working parents, students and even small children—have learned to value outward success over personal satisfaction. Organization itself has taken on an imposing role in contemporary society. Too often the profusion of organizing tips, tricks and nifty products in magazines, TV shows and social media venues impinge on our time and freedom rather than doing their intended opposite. Arranging cleaning supplies according to size, color, purpose or frequency of use, for instance, makes laundry rooms more attractive and cleaning less of a drudge. Pouring them into matching glass containers—a practice I see promoted regularly across all media types—to create the illu-

sion that you live on a television commercial set requires a lot of effort for little to no return. So as frequently as I tout the importance of order and habit, I just as often encourage my clients to simply let go.

There's a line for every person between useful organizational practices and unnecessary stressors, a sweet spot where discipline meets freedom. I think of this place as the efficiency point and I believe it's my job to help my clients find theirs, wherever it may fall on the spectrum. Ultimately, people hire me to enrich their lives and, for most, a little order is all that's needed to improve quality of life —freeing up time, space, money and other resources to focus on the important stuff. At some point any extra effort is a waste of those resources. Why pour your detergent into a glass container when you could do something—anything—else more worthwhile?

For most clients these additional efforts are unnecessary. I hate to see my clients, especially those with perfectionistic tendencies who are so susceptible to emotional paralysis, feeling pressure to make them, especially from an industry supposedly dedicated to simplicity. I advocate for the true essence of organized living, rooting for my clients to buy less and enjoy more,

and to set their own priorities in life, rather than measuring themselves by any one else's standards.

I knew immediately that I'd hit upon the right job for myself. It satisfied every professional desire—I felt competent, engaged, physically challenged and independent. However in the beginning, I feared that my job, though fun for me, was unimpressive. What would others think when they learned I left the corporate world in order to sort through strangers' houses for a living? It sounded unglamorous and I worried that others would think I wasted my credentials. But what I realize more and more is how vastly my past experience—my business education, my communication and marketing job, my management role—helps me as an organizer and a business owner. And I no longer underestimate the profound influence my work can have on people's lives. More than just filing and decluttering, I promote a way of life. I lead by example. I let go of the ideal—the standard that I felt society expected of me—and embraced this job that I absolutely love.

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