

1 DECLARING WAR AGAINST CLUTTER



FROM my great-grandmother to my mother, I observed each generation accumulate more stuff. My great-grandmother kept a beautiful home, but the clutter hid in the basement, in closets, and in drawers. Everyone battles clutter to some extent—even neat-freaks. Many can relate to my great-grandmother, who kept the visible areas under control so that the rest of the world didn't know the secret. I can tell who these people are in my de-cluttering workshops. Their faces turn red as they try to hold back their snickers.

My grandmother kept a nice home, but the clutter crept into the perimeter of her living areas and expanded into the bedrooms and the garage. A lot of people relate to my gram. She's who I identify with most.

After my grandmother came my mother. Mom's clutter engulfed the entire house, leaving only pathways to travel from one room to another. The laughter turns to silence as I watch a sea of eyes well up with water. I can guess the hoarders. Their tears look different. I see the pain in their faces—a familiar look that I used to see in my mom. Sometimes they share their stories with me.

Whether junk drawers or junk rooms, we all battle clutter. You see, there is always something needing to be cleaned or tossed. Everybody deals with that. Stuff invades our homes on a daily basis. No matter what your battle looks like, I hope my story will help you.

MY STORY

Some people say you are born with it—that ability to be tidy housekeepers. I don't believe that we're born with an innate talent to clean or that there are "neat-freak" and "messy" genes and everyone has one or the other. So where does it all begin? I can only tell you where it started with me.

It's true that children learn more by what is caught than what is taught. Although my parents taught me how to clean, I caught the behaviors that invited clutter. I embraced behaviors such as saving all kinds of stuff and buying more than I needed. I became inclined to stockpile items for future use and place emotional attachments on trivial things. I can also see how some childhood games may have developed into adult habits.

GAMES KIDS PLAY

Consider the baby who likes to play "drop it." You know the game. Baby drops the food or toys on the floor. Mommy (or any adult or sibling) picks it up and gives it back to baby. Tiny hands drop it again for Mommy to pick up. I imagine this was my favorite game as a baby, but I'm not so fond of it now that I'm a mom.

Envision the toddler who enjoys playing "empty it." Little hands explore junk drawers and fling pencils, screws, plastic thing-a-ma-jigs, old mail, and every last piece of whatever is jammed in there. I was that adorable toddler making this not-so-cute mess. And how about those bookshelves? There's no better fun than emptying all those shelves of books, videos, knick-knacks, and décor. My parents' home had a lot of shelves. Need I say more? Oh, and don't forget about the clothes in the laundry basket. Whether the clothes are clean or dirty, what a fun mess-making game. Small hands enjoy testing boundaries with these and other versions of "empty it." (My toddler mastered this game quickly, but it took a little longer to learn "put it back.")

Preschoolers graduate to what I call “leave it.” Children this age like to play with their own toys. They make a mess and leave it for someone else to deal with.

My nieces invited me to play this game, but they stopped enjoying it when I changed the rules. I told them that if they care so little about their toys to leave them lying around, then Aunt Katie will throw them out. The astonished looks on their faces were priceless. This may sound mean, but please understand they owned nearly enough playthings to fill a Toys-R-Us store.

As my nieces grew older and still wanted to play “leave it,” I took a kinder, gentler approach. I taught them that the more toys they had, the more they had to pick up. I shared that more toys meant more cleaning. Suddenly, they were eager to find toys they no longer loved and donate them to charity. I wish I had been given this lesson when I was a child.

Without setting boundaries on the amount of toys and expectations to pick them up, endearing preschoolers may very well play “leave it” long into their teenage years. Worse yet, this could be ingrained as a character trait that will follow them into adulthood. Combine the lack of boundaries, the proclivity to accumulate more stuff, and failure to teach children to let go of some of the things they already own. That’s a recipe for disaster.

A GROWN-UP STRUGGLE

In the past, I left dirty dishes in the sink. More than I would like to admit, I ignored piles of laundry pleading to be washed. If books, boxes, or bags littered the floor, “leave it” was my motto.

But not putting things away was only part of the problem. The older I got, the more stuff I attained. And I seldom parted with any of it.

I had every intention of going through everything and putting it all in order. But there was too much stuff to organize. I was trapped by the behaviors I caught growing up: amassing scads of hobby items,

clothing, linens, and dishes; accumulating junk mail, old bills, cards, and coupons; boxing and storing old clutter to make room for the new.

Subsequently, I lacked confidence in my cleaning skills. It wasn't that I didn't know how to wipe down a counter. The problem was that I couldn't find the counter. I knew how to clear the floor to vacuum, but I was clueless about how to keep all that stuff from creeping back.

I didn't want to be like that. I didn't want to live that way. But I didn't know how to change. Why did it appear so easy for others to keep beautiful homes? What was I doing wrong?

Having a presentable home seemed like an impossible dream, yet I knew it was possible because others did it. I read every book I could get my hands on about organizing and cleaning. I enlisted the help of friends and family whenever possible. I tried several different cleaning systems: index cards, timers, charts, incentives, schedules, and just about every other method out there. But for all my efforts, my best achievements were only temporary fixes.

A LITTLE BIT OF PRAYER

Initially, I didn't think about seeking God in my struggle. I thought, *What does God have to do with cleaning a house?* It wasn't as if He would snap His fingers to miraculously transform my messy living quarters into a sparkling, clutter-free home. Sure, I offered some half-hearted prayer attempts. You know the kind, when you're approaching a traffic light while driving to work and you say *Please, Lord, make the light stay green*. But I tried everything else, so I figured it couldn't hurt if I started to seriously pray about it.

I prayed. And prayed. And prayed some more. All the while, the clutter just kept breeding. Then I waited. And continued waiting while praying, wondering why my prayers weren't being answered.

God heard my cry for help with housekeeping skills but responded in His timing. Though He didn't answer me overnight, He did answer me. And it was not the answer I expected.

PERSEVERANCE PAYS OFF

I met Holly and Jan at church. They had reputations for keeping beautiful homes, so I asked for their help. When they came to my house, I saw that it was difficult for them to understand how I could not know how to keep it clean. Holly made a comment about all the clutter. Clutter? What clutter? It was my stuff. And my things just needed a home. The issue was my cleaning and organizing, not my stuff, right?

Wrong.

I decided to take a new approach. These women seemed to know about clutter, so I asked them to teach me as if they were teaching a child. I told them to think of me as a four-year-old who didn't know anything about housekeeping. Somewhat startled by my request, they complied. So there I was, a college-educated professional being taught the fundamentals of cleaning as one would teach a preschooler. I earned a master's degree in special education, and now Jan and Holly were giving me one.

YOU CAN'T KEEP IT ALL!

"You can't keep everything and keep a clean house." Those words, spoken ever-so-casually, changed my life.

Jan helped me clean the bathroom closet. She stared at the shelves packed with soaps, lotions, candles, picture frames, and knick-knacks. "Why are you keeping all this?" she asked.

"A lot of these were gifts. I don't know what to do with them," I said.

"If you are not using them, then why are you keeping them?"

"I don't know. I guess because they were given to me. I can't just throw all these things out. It would be rude. If people found out I threw away their gifts, it might hurt their feelings." I replied to Jan's question, and then wondered if it might be okay to toss away presents.

Continuing to find more unused, unopened items, she gently prodded, "Well, what are you saving all this stuff for?"

"I don't know. I thought I'd find a use for it someday. I might meet someone who could use some of it. Maybe someday I will actually use some of it."

"Well, can we either throw these out or give them to charity? You can't keep everything and keep a clean house."

It was like hearing the magic words. *You can't keep everything and keep a clean house.* I never thought of it that way. These words made my elusive dream suddenly reachable. It was the answer I prayed for.

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, AND MORE QUESTIONS

It didn't occur to me that it was permissible to get rid of nice gift items. After all, I watched my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother save everything—including gifts they did not use—along with the boxes, the wrapping paper, the ribbon, and the tissue.

My curiosity took over. What else could I get rid of? How do I decide what to keep? What other things have I been holding on to that I really don't need?

I talked to my friends who kept nice homes. Instead of asking for help with cleaning or organizing, I asked them about their methods of handling clutter. How do they keep their homes free of too much stuff? What do they do with possessions they used to love but have outgrown? What happens to expensive items they no longer use?

I compared my habits to theirs. Do they keep duplicates? How many bath towels do they own? How many sets of sheets do they own for each bed? What about extra blankets? Are there items they stock up on? What types of keepsakes do they save?

I thought about all the clothes stuffed in dresser drawers and crammed in closets. I always had piles of laundry—clean or dirty—because I didn't have enough room for it all.

How many pairs of jeans does one person really need? And what about T-shirts and sweatshirts? Do I need all I have? What don't I wear anymore? Are there clothes that don't fit well or don't suit my figure? What do I have that I just don't like? Am I hanging on to

clothes that are torn, faded, or missing buttons? If so, why am I keeping them?

You can't keep everything and keep a clean house. Although this common sense statement is a simple, obvious fact, it was not obvious to me. No matter how many books I read, how many people tried to help me, or how many cleaning strategies I attempted, the clutter was always in the way. I simply had too much stuff. To learn it, I had to hear it: *You can't keep everything and keep a clean house.*

How did I miss realizing that having too much stuff prevented me from having the home I desired? Until Jan and Holly pointed it out to me, I never knew so much of what I pictured as valuable amounted to nothing more than clutter.

ABOUT HOARDING

You've read my story, but there are other stories out there. Different stories. Hoarding stories. You hear about them in the news. You watch them on reality television shows. Perhaps you know someone who has or is living that story. Maybe that's even your story.

Or maybe your situation isn't as extreme as those of the hoarders you've seen on television or in the news. But those stories had their beginnings somewhere. You might be an earlier version of who the hoarders are today.

My mom wasn't always a hoarder. It started out just being messy. If I hadn't made changes in my life, that could have been my story too. Could you be a hoarder or on the road to becoming one? See if you relate to any of the following.

Hoarders feel such strong emotional attachment to things that letting go of their possessions—even things like an old pair of socks with holes—is like amputating a part of themselves. They feel intense pain, even fear.

People who hoard take clutter to a new level. Rooms in their homes no longer function according to their original purposes; they become storage facilities for stuff. In extreme cases, *everything* holds value, including broken toys and open, crusty ketchup packets.

Obsessive compulsive tendencies also play a role in hoarding and the ability to part with clutter. For example, hoarders may insist that items belonging to a set need to be re-united before letting them go. Or they might insist on washing and folding all of the articles of clothing they're willing to give up rather than just putting them in a bag for charity pickup and being done with it. That is, if you can convince them to part with any of it in the first place.

Sometimes there is an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) diagnosis and sometimes there's not. Though my mother did not meet the criteria for the OCD diagnosis, she exhibited some OCD characteristics. While going through old shoes with Mom, she agreed to get rid of a bunch of them, but only if they were mated. She refused to place one shoe in the charity box because we couldn't find its mate. She was sure she would find it once she sorted through the other hundred boxes of junk.

What seems irrational to the typical person is reasonable to the hoarder in their justification to keep things. Everything has a use, though little of it gets used.

Hoarders give many reasons for holding on to things. Sometimes they want to keep items for informational purposes or because they like the way it looks. Other times, they refuse to throw stuff away because they don't want to be wasteful. Not bad reasons in and of themselves, but hoarders take this to an extreme.

I remember helping my mom clean. She insisted on keeping stacks of old magazines, even though she'd never have the time to read them all. A stained towel with frayed ends still had life in it. Brand new drapes that sat in storage for decades might get hung someday. Chipped plates could still be used to serve food. Most every time I asked her if we could throw something away, the answer was, "No, I like that." Even broken knickknacks.

Hoarders often refuse to get rid of things such as old papers—it doesn't matter if the content is outdated or if they can access the articles online. They like the way everything looks. They want to

be good stewards of every little piece of junk while the conditions of their homes deteriorate.

STUFF VS. RELATIONSHIPS

Hoarding causes rifts in relationships. It's one of the markers for a hoarding disorder. Your spouse and kids don't understand why you have to keep everything, and you don't understand why your family thinks you don't love them. But this is why: when you cling to your possessions, you hoard your heart from others. You bury it in the stuff around you. Loved ones believe the stuff is more important to you than they are. They wish you could love them as much as you love the clutter.

Cluttered Homes, Cluttered Hearts

If you hoard, it might be to cover your own hurting heart. You bury your brokenness in stuff. Your grief is so painful that you cope by surrounding yourself with possessions.

I saw this with my mother. After the unexpected death of her baby brother, whom she saw every day at work, followed by the death of her mother the same year, Mom's fragile heart couldn't take any more pain. What once was just a messy home became a hoard of junk. From inherited items to recent purchases, the clutter took over.

A clean home won't heal a heart in agony, but don't settle for a cluttered home that only numbs the pain. It might not feel like it now, but you can find joy again.

As a Christian, you don't get a free pass from bad things happening. But you do have God with you to get you through them. God won't make you go through the dark times alone. He will give you the people and resources you need.

If you suffer from severe grief or trauma-related depression, seek out a Christian counselor trained in hoarding issues. You might need extra help to deal with the inner clutter in order to make headway on the clutter in your home.

You Are More than Your Stuff

People who hoard—along with their families—often view themselves as organizationally challenged, messy, or lazy. They use terms such as *too busy* or *too tired*, then blame the mess on lack of help from other family members. They deny a problem exists because hoarder sounds like such an ugly, bad word.

But hoarders are not bad people. They have some of the biggest hearts in the world. Who they are is more than the stuff that clutters their homes.

My mother may have missed the mark when it came to house-keeping—as so many of us do in one way or another—but she was a wonderful person. When I was a child, she read to me, did arts and crafts with me, walked me to the park, played cards with me, took me to the beach, and cheered me on at my softball games. Mom made sure my siblings and I received a solid religious foundation. When it came time for IEP meetings for my brother, she did her research, came prepared with advocates, and knew more than most special education teachers. Mother put her life on hold for months as she and her sisters cared for my grandma in her fight against lung cancer. She did it so Gram could spend her final days in the comfort of her own home with loved ones at her side rather than being cared for by strangers in a hospice. Mom loved that much.

You don't have to let a messy home or hoarding disorder define you. There's more to you than the stuff. That's why I encourage you to let go of it.

THE ROAD TO CHANGE

So what about you? Why do you have too much stuff? What's your story? Whatever your answers, there's no judgment here—only grace.

If you hoard, you will probably need more than this book to defeat the clutter. Check the appendix for a list of Web sites you can visit where you can find organizing help, connect with support groups, or

get information about seeking treatment. You can also visit my Web site at clutterwise.com for additional resources.

Do you want to make changes in your life? Start with the way you view yourself.

You don't have to wonder if you should call yourself messy, chronically disorganized, or organizationally challenged. You don't have to choose between being messy, being a clutterbug, or being a hoarder. I am giving you a new title. You are a *clutter warrior*. Say it out loud and then say it again. Let me hear you: "I am a *clutter warrior*!"

Whether you struggle with a few junk drawers, a messy home, or a hoard of stuff, it's time to declare war on clutter. And with that, your new story begins today.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

- Do you still play "drop it" and "leave it"? What childhood habits do you need to change? What behaviors can you replace them with?
- Are you open to paring down any of your collections? What items are you willing to consider letting go?
- Which do you desire more—to keep everything you own or to keep a clean house? How do your behaviors align with your answer?
- How do you feel when de-cluttering items from your home? Do you enjoy letting go of things you no longer use or need? Why is it easy or hard for you?
- If you were to write your story, would it be a hoarding story? If yes, what measures will you take to get help? If no, what supports do you need so that you can keep a presentable home?



HOMEBUILDING

By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures. —Proverbs 24:3-4

The first step in maintaining a clean house is obtaining the wisdom in how to do it. Nearly anyone can keep a clean house for a day. But *every* day is a different matter. We must seek understanding in how to permanently transform our cluttered rooms into blessing rooms.

Consider that the most beautiful treasures filling our homes are not our possessions, but the people who live with us.