

## *The Tao of an Uncluttered Life - Karen Hicks*

### **Principle One: Imagine**

If you don't know what you want, you'll never get it. If you don't know where you're going, you'll never get there. You were created to be and do anything you can imagine. The more details you envision, the more closely you'll achieve your ideal. Being organized means reaching your objective by the most direct route. Imagination can show you *The Way* in everything you wish to accomplish, from the big picture of your life's goals to the minutia of your daily tasks.

#### **Life Goals**

To visualize (imagine) a personal/career goal, sit down in a quiet place and daydream about where you would like to be and what you would be doing if you were living the perfect life. Write out your schedule for a typical day spent completely happy, answering the standard reporter questions of *Who, What, Where, When, and How*. \*What will you look like? What will you wear? Where will you get out of bed? What is your view of the outside world—physically, spiritually and financially?

\*What is the first thing you will do in the morning? How does that shower feel streaming down upon your body? How does your breakfast taste? \*Who will be in your day? How will you spend your work time? How will you spend your playtime? How will you feed your spiritual self? If you're writing a letter, memo, or instruction, imagine you are the recipient. Play out the role: What is your first impression of the document? Is it neat? Is it easy to read? Is it broken into short paragraphs? Do you understand the message? How do you feel while reading it? What response will the document elicit?

### **Principle Two: Plan Ahead**

Planning ahead is important for several reasons: It gives value to one's actions; instills confidence to act boldly; increases the motivation to complete the necessary work; and, most importantly, relieves the stress of day-to-day life. Additionally, if you plan ahead, you will generally be more apt to do things right the first time and thereby avoid the extra moments and effort to do them over. This all adds up to a fun, smooth running day where things get accomplished and success is born. Imagining is the first step to planning ahead, but there are also more pragmatic actions that fall into this category that will help you complete a task more quickly and easily—more efficiently.

#### **Develop Your Database**

One way to plan ahead for life in general is to create a database in your brain. This is because, as every schoolchild knows, the more information you are given to solve a problem, the faster and easier it is to solve it. There are many ways to expand overall knowledge: taking classes, attending seminars and workshops, reading, using audio and visual aids, surfing the net, and conversing with others, to name a few.

But it takes more than just having the know-how. We must also have common sense. We must learn how to think. There are several good books and tapes available on the process of reasoning, including Steve.

#### **Make the most of Downtime**

Use slow times to prepare for the busy times. For instance, if you're a food server, do your side work. Restock glasses and dishes, backup supplies, make coffee, fill condiment holders, etc. even if those things are not your assigned tasks. Would you rather hope someone else does it, or have the items available when you get slammed? In an office, restock the supplies at your desk, delete computer files no longer needed, make forms to streamline tasks, clean out your files, contemplate ways to arrange your work area more efficiently. In a factory, clean your workspace. At home, keep extra batteries, candles, staple food items, etc. on hand.

#### **Use Lists**

An easy way to plan ahead for your shopping tasks is to compile a list as you go. I use a piece of scratch paper held to my refrigerator by a colorful magnet (HINT: Use the back sides of paper cut into uniform pieces for scratch paper. It helps the pocketbook and the planet.) When I first notice something is getting low, or when I open the last item in my supply, I immediately make a note on the paper, which is then used as my shopping list. You may keep your list in a drawer, or on a bulletin board. The important thing is to keep it handy for use. You can use lists in many other areas as well. List your stops in order on a Post-it note before you leave to run errands and you can plan them so you can make a big circle, saving time, stress and money. This also helps you not to forget an important stop. The next step before beginning to assemble something is to visualize the finished project, holding up the various parts as they will fit together to be sure you have the finished fronts all facing front, the predrilled holes in the right spots, that sort of thing. If you have ever goofed on this, as I have, you know the importance of this. If you're preparing a report, essay, or other written material, do an outline of the document, noting points to be covered in each section. This will keep you on track. Even better, you can kick back with a glass of wine or soda while you prepare the outline. As your creative juices flow, the outline will capture every insightful point you want to make so you won't forget to make it.

#### **Plan for Obstacles**

The universe seems to have a cosmic sense of humor and occasionally allows even the best-laid plans to hit an obstacle. The Tao of dealing with obstacles is much like that of a river that encounters land in its path. If it can't flow around the obstacle, it moves off in another direction. If that is impossible, the river pauses, gathers its strength, and with gentle but firm persistence, eventually erodes away the land that blocks it.

In the same way, don't let obstacles to your goal throw you. Try to see them as opportunities to test your mettle and build your desire for your chosen dream. Have a plan B. But if, after exploring all your alternatives, no forward movement is possible, pause and enjoy the moment of rest as you gather your strength for a new assault.

### **Principle Three: Keep Things Simple**

The most essential element of any system you set up is simplicity. If a procedure is easy to remember and

execute, you'll be more apt to use it. Therefore it's important that you take every suggestion offered on these pages-or anywhere else for that matter-and adapt them to work for you.

### **Use Three-Ring Binders**

A simple place to store paperwork you want available for use is the common three-ring binder. Plastic-tabbed index pages make it possible to divide items chronologically, alphabetically, or by subject matter. Using identical, solid-colored binders gives a neat and professional look. Color coding the binders for visual identification works well, too, and sets a livelier mood. Try to break your materials down to fit into the two-inch size binders for easy handling with one hand. Be sure to label the spine of each binder for quick identification.

If you have access to a transcriber and typewriter or word processor, using three-ring binders is a great way to keep a diary or journal. Carry a recorder with you and dictate ideas that occur to you, or reactions to daily events. Keep the recorder at your bedside for easy capture of your dreams (see Principle #9). Transcribe the tapes and file the pages in the binder. By getting everything down on tape while it's still a fresh experience, you'll probably and you have a more accurate, complete—and emotionally exciting—account of your life.

If you attend classes or seminars, use loose-leaf notebook paper in a ring binder to take notes, then hole-punch any handouts received and add them to the binder. Odd-sized handouts can be photocopied to the proper size or folded and filed either in the pockets on the front and back cover of many ring binders or in one of the three-hole pocket pages obtainable wherever office supplies are sold. Now, long after the class is completed, you will have a concise reference manual of the material.

Look over your filing system for ways to simplify it. Can large files be broken down into smaller, more precise topics? Would different, more descriptive categories work better? Are there any duplicate categories that can be combined or eliminated?

### **Break Large Tasks into Small, Orderly Steps**

Any major task is easier to accomplish if you break it into smaller segments. Say you want to clean the garage, attic, or storage room that currently looks like a twister hit it. The clutter eats at you, but you are too overwhelmed by the chore of organizing it to know where to start. If you can afford it, you can hire someone who specializes in organizing and cleaning to get you on top of things. The only problem with bringing in outside help is that you will hopefully be discarding a lot of the accumulation and only you can make the decision on which items to keep and which to let go. So why not do the task yourself and spend the money on a vacation? The suggestions below should help simplify the project.

Learn the first rule for large projects: Don't be afraid to make a mess. Start in one corner and pull everything out of the room-or at least into a pile in the middle of the floor. Then pick up one item at a time and do something with it. If it can be discarded, have a large trash bag handy and put it in there. If it is to be kept, decide where you want to store it and put it there. (HINT: When storing boxes of items, label the box on all sides so you can easily see what's in it.) If something can be recycled, start a bag or box for that. If you find one piece of paper to be filed, file it. If there are several papers to file, put them in a box to be sorted and filed later (a good task to do while watching television, see Principle #9).

### **Take a Fresh Look**

Occasionally, a seemingly simple procedure suddenly becomes difficult. If you're getting bogged down in a task, take another look at it. Examine the project from all angles; maybe a completely different approach from the one you are using will work better. Don't be afraid to start over.

Use lists to get you back on track (see Principle #2). Somehow, boiling problems down into numbered notes makes them seem less formidable. If you're confused about where you are and where you're going on a project, take a break. Put your feet up and have a cup of tea. With pen and paper in hand, imagine completing the task, step-by-step, writing each step down in a numbered list as if you are writing an instruction booklet or recipe even a child could follow. Once you get the list made, just do each numbered item in order until you are done.

### **Principle Four: Write Things Down**

The written record frees our brains of distractions that hamper our efficiency. Just as a computer takes longer to operate on a large file than on a small one, so your brain will work more slowly if it is cluttered with thoughts and ideas unrelated to the task at hand. The best way to remove such clutter from the working memory of your brain is to write things down. Carry a small notebook or a tape recorder with you at all times and jot down any intruding idea of value. Once you know these thoughts are preserved for when you want them, you can forget about them for the time being and concentrate on your current project.

### **Life Goals**

Writing down our goals is something most of us would go to the dentist to avoid doing. But it is important because when you write something down you give it energy. That alone helps you reach your goal. The good news is that this is really an ongoing process that can be easily accomplished with a few basic tools and tips.

### **Things-to-Do Diary**

I use a 6-x-9-inch spiral-bound notebook for my daily tasks, a page for each day. It's easy to carry in my briefcase, has just the right amount of room on each page, and by keeping it intact, I have an excellent record of exactly when I did one thing or another. Depending on how many different things you have to do each day, you may want to use a larger spiral-bound notebook, or a smaller one. Whichever you select, this notebook will be the notepad for your life. Here's how it works.

Now, as you go about your day, jot down notes on anything you come across during your day that might be helpful to remember: a phone number or address received; an idea to follow up on at a later date. I doodle notes during phone conversations to refresh my memory later on what was discussed and carry the notebook to meetings to jot down details settled on during the discussions. If your schedule is complex and takes up the whole page, make these notes on the back side of the previous day's page so that when the notebook is opened flat, your notes will be on the left sheet, your things-to-do on the right. As you accomplish each listed

task, check it off At the end of the day, if something did not get done, don't beat yourself up about it, just move it to the next day.

The notebook comes in handy when corresponding with friends. You can look up the last time you wrote and then flip forward to see what news or activities can be shared in a new letter This is especially helpful if n write to many people and can't always remember who you told what to id don't want to appear senile by repeating yourself.

### **Principle Five: Use Assembly Line Principles**

There is a reason why factories use assembly-line principles: They are the most efficient way to get a routine job accomplished. Assembly lines recognize and incorporate two important traits of the human brain. The first is that our brains can only effectively concentrate on one thing at a time. Secondly, if the brain sends out the same signal for action more than a few times in a row, it remembers, and will begin to accomplish the task automatically—and thus faster.

Anything that is done more than once a week should have some kind of system, form, or form letter. Assembly-line principles can be used to streamline every area of our lives. Below are a few specific examples. *Attending to Incoming Mail*

If your job includes processing incoming mail, first, pull out any mail you do not open and start a pile or folder for the recipient. Next, turn the remaining envelopes over and slit them open. Now go back and pull out the papers, date-stamp them, and sort them for distribution.

Don't waste time on junk mail. In fact, the ecological alternative is to get your name removed from junk mail lists. To do this, notify one of the companies you can find by searching the Internet by keywords "stop junk mail." Or you can tear the label off unwanted mail and return it with a brief note to the sender, asking to be removed from future mailings. You n also specify, when buying from mail-order catalogs, that the company not put your name on any mailing lists to begin with.

Once you have dealt with the unnecessary sections, arrange the others in the order you will read them. It's a good idea to put the ones that can be read most quickly on top. By putting the more time-consuming sections toward the end, you'll be less likely to dawdle over them.

Skim the headlines and then focus on only those items that interest you. Most newspapers provide convenient summary sections that will keep you well-enough informed on most news. Longer articles or ones you want to digest fully can be cut out and read during a future waiting period (see Principle #9).

### **At the office**

Some of the ways you can use assembly-line principles on the job include: use form letters or paragraphs as much as possible; do all of your correspondence (or other like duties) at one time; schedule blocks of time to make all your telephone calls at once, when you are fresh; keep items to be photocopied in a folder and make fewer trips to the copy room each day; hold your mail and add postage at the end of the day; learn how to use computer macros and other timesaving features of your software programs.

Assembly-line principles not only save you time, but they alleviate a lot of stress. Assess your routine chores to see which can be done more efficiently in an assembly-line manner.

### **Principle Six: Use Time Saving Devices**

From discovering fire, to making tools, to taming the horse, humans have continually journeyed toward efficient living. We have invented so many timesaving devices it would take pages to list them all. Aren't you glad you no longer have to wind up your car to start it? Or your phonograph? I can't imagine having to type and revise manuscripts in the days of manual typewriters and carbon paper. Microwaves and dishwashers have freed many from the kitchen. Computers have taken over the world.

Inventions are the result of someone getting so tired of doing something the slow, hard, manual way that they created a tool to alleviate the annoyance. If you want to be organized, you should invest in as many of these tools as you can afford. If there isn't a mechanical aid available to help with a task that annoys you, remember that anyone can be an inventor. Business cards are a much easier way to give your contact information to a new friend or business acquaintance than digging for pen and scratch paper. Business cards don't have to be fancy or costly. You can even make your own on the computer using preformatted paper found at office supply stores. If you have a bad sense of direction, carry a compass. I have one that looks like a pocket watch, complete with a flip-up lid. That trusty little tool has many times saved me from driving miles in the wrong direction. When I was working in offices and also writing, I wrote in the mornings, setting the timer for when I had to get ready for work. This left me free to concentrate and create, without having to worry about being late for my job. Use a timer to signal when to leave for an appointment or other obligation. Set it for when a favorite television show comes on, when you must attend the staff meeting or when you need to make an important conference call. Use it on coffee breaks to enjoy every minute without worrying about returning late. I've avoided parking tickets by using my timer to monitor parking meters or remind me to move my car on street-cleaning days. In fact, a timer can be a powerful tool for teaching responsibility and setting limits in many areas. Allow children free playtime until the timer goes off to signal study time must begin. Tell them they must spend ten minutes cleaning their room or doing some other dreaded chore. If they work steadily until the timer goes off, they will get a reward. Use it to monitor your child's television-watching time. Want to call your favorite friend who lives on the other side of the world but you're afraid you'll talk for hours and your budget can't stand another \$300 phone bill? Set the timer and make the call. When it goes off, say goodbye. Surfing the web is another activity that can eat up hours and may require a timer to regulate.

One of the best uses for a timer, though, I think, is the power nap. Fifteen minutes of total relaxation can effectively rejuvenate even the most exhausted person, especially if you use a sleep mask to block all light from your eyes. Setting a timer frees you from keeping one eye on the clock, or worrying about missing an important obligation, and thereby provides that total relaxation.

*Office Kit.* In addition to some type of filing cabinet, drawer, or box for organizing papers and receipts, your office kit should include an inexpensive, preferably battery-operated calculator, extra batteries, writing paper, pens and pencils, # 10 business envelopes, mailing labels, Scotch tape and mailing tape, a few large manila envelopes, highlighter pens, magic markers in several colors, scissors, stapler and staple-remover, pencil sharpener or lead for mechanical pencils, paper clips, rubber bands, and phone books. If you carry a supply of these items in your briefcase, you have a ready office-on-the-road (see Principle #8).

*Car Kit.* To alleviate travel worries, keep such items in your trunk as a first aid kit, a basic set of tools, flashlight, flares, lighter (the long nosed butane kind can be purchased inexpensively in the sporting goods department of your local discount department store), moist towelettes, canned tire inflator, extra hoses and belts, black electrical tape, city and state maps, antifreeze and windshield cleaner, a quart of oil, jumper cables, emergency information, and coins for the phone or toll charges.

In winter climates, carry a blanket, scarf, gloves and a warm coat and boots, as well as tire chains. These items may save your life if a sudden blizzard strands you.

#### **Hardware Kit. Include a flashlight, hammer, flathead and Phillips**

screwdrivers, a variety pack of nails and screws, glue, yardstick, measuring tape, staple gun with staples, candles, tape (electrical and masking), a can of WD-40, light bulbs, pliers, ball of string, lighter or matches, a utility knife, and a good adjustable wrench. Add drills and other power tools you have frequent use for.

*Documents Kit.* Even if you have a safety deposit box at your local bank, you should still keep certain papers and information in a locked, fireproof box in your home for easy reference and in case access to your bank is impossible. Papers to be included are insurance policies, wills, birth certificates, diplomas, passports, lease or mortgage papers, loan documents, and perhaps legal documents.

#### **Principle Seven: Develop teamwork**

Teamwork helps you be more organized in several ways. You can enlist the help of others to complete a task more quickly by splitting the workload. You can use the creative powers or experiences of others to find a better way to complete a task more efficiently yourself. If you have the authority, you can delegate time-consuming obligations and not have to do them at all, which can also be more cost-efficient. You can swap duties and errands with others to make better use of your time and theirs. For example, maybe one neighbor can make dry cleaning runs, one can drive children to school or other activities, and another one can pick them up. Spot-check your actions toward others. Visualize your roles reversed, and adjust your actions accordingly. Ask yourself if you are reacting from love—or from fear. It's my philosophy that these are the only two reasons we do anything. Go with the flow of others' moods. Every human being has good days and bad days. Most of the time the reasons have nothing to do with those around us. If the problem does lie with you, try to correct it. If there's nothing you can do about the situation, then don't take it personally. It's only your ego that feels it must defend itself against a perceived attack. Anger and bitterness are two factors that do nothing but get in the way of efficient action. If you think about it, you can probably recall a time when you acted in the same manner as the person who is irritating you now. Have you ever been in a hurry and inadvertently cut someone off in traffic? Maybe once? Or missed a chance to make a left turn because you were daydreaming? Well, maybe this is the only time in the life that the offending driver has ever done the same thing. Do you know? Ultimately, "road rage" hurts you the most.

#### **Understand Cultures**

As technology and trade make the world an ever smaller place, it is becoming increasingly important to understand the different cultures that make up our cities in order to understand the people we now encounter on a daily basis. We often hear about melting pots, but what if we instead consider ethnically diverse environments as tossed salads? Instead of expecting everyone to blend together, why not see each person as a separate, tasteful ingredient that retains her uniqueness while creating a perfect whole?

#### **Don't Over commit**

There are times when you shouldn't go with the flow if you want to be organized. By accepting or volunteering for every job offered, you overwhelm yourself and stymie efficient action. You must learn to say no. If someone continually comes to you for solutions to problems, don't just automatically give them the answer. Instead, encourage them to solve the dilemma themselves. Ask them questions to steer them toward a viable alternative. If you do offer a solution, explain how you arrived at it. If they understand the rationale behind the suggested action, they will be able to apply it to future problems without involving you. And remember, people respond better if you point out what's right rather than what's wrong. If you must correct or criticize, word it positively.

Another time you must tactfully call a halt is when someone is wasting your time with idle chatter. This happens frequently on the job. You may be rushing to get a report done and Jack wants to tell you—for the third time—every detail of the house he's made an offer on. Or Mary is upset because her latest lover has just told her he's getting married next week to someone else! Be firm but not rude. Calmly explain you can't talk right now. Smile. Suggest lunch. Or listen for a minute, express your sympathy, then go about your task, letting your body language say that you are no longer available to listen. Once the person realizes they have lost your full attention, they will usually stop talking. A little small talk is necessary for maintaining effective working relations, but you must know when to cut it off.

#### **Make Meetings Efficient**

As already mentioned, meetings are good places to set departmental and company goals, foster teamwork, and review progress. But they must be run efficiently.

If you are in charge, keep meetings short and organized. Prepare a written agenda and distribute it a day or two before the meeting. This allows employees to consider what questions they have or what input they want to offer. Set time limits on discussions (use the handy kitchen timer introduced under Principle #6). Start the

meetings on time. It amazes me how our society punishes the people who are prompt to meetings by making them wait for those who are late. I've attended several meetings recently where the doors were shut and no one was allowed to enter after the scheduled start time. That may be too drastic a measure, since we all sometimes have unavoidable reasons for arriving late, but meetings should definitely begin on time and should not be interrupted to acknowledge latecomers or catch them up on what they've missed.

If your meetings are not handled in this manner, volunteer to help run them. If that's not possible, then don't waste your waiting time. Read a book, organize your day, proof a report, discuss a problem with a coworker, or take a mini-mind-trip to Cozumel or to your ideal day as envisioned under Principle # 1. Do something constructive with the time.

#### **Create a Think Tank**

Successful businesspersons have discovered the value of think tanks. These are groups of people who combine their creative abilities to solve problems or find better ways to do things. They can be set up in almost any size, for almost any endeavor Evaluate the benefits of a think tank in your organization.

#### **Solicit a Mentor**

Along the same lines, find a person you respect and admire—someone who is successful (materially and/or spiritually) in whatever area you want to succeed in. Make an appointment to meet with them to solicit their advice. Even the busiest executive will usually find time to share his knowledge with an individual who sincerely and considerately seeks it. (HINT: Be sure to send a thank you.)

#### **Principle Eight: Develop harmonious habits**

Habits have gotten a bad rap. Our first thoughts when we hear the word habits seem to be of bad things: smoking, drinking, drugs, biting our fingernails, frowning. Hardly ever do we think of good habits like eating healthily, hanging up our bath towel, or sharing our wealth. But the word habit comes from the Latin *habere*, which means, "to have, to hold." Habits, then, are those things that we hold as our own; those practices we have found to be of value.

As mentioned at the beginning of this book, anything consciously practiced for twenty-one days becomes a habit. The wonderful thing about habits is that once you are accustomed to doing them, they become almost automatic. Not having to make decisions on how to do something speeds up the whole process of action. Most of the suggestions in this book can become habitual processes. Here are a few more harmonious habits that can help you organize your life. Again, these are offered as guidelines to be altered to individual needs and personality and to inspire you to create your own habits to remove petty time wasters from your life.

#### **Put Things Away**

Get in the habit of putting things back in their place the minute you stop using them. It may take a few seconds longer now to walk over and put the scissors away, but the next time you need them, it will take a lot less time to go straight to the drawer or pencil holder than to run around in circles looking for them.

A bonus of putting things back is neatness and neatness works psychologically to make you more organized. When everything has its place and everything is in its place, you will automatically feel that you have more control over your environment and situations that arise. Of course the effectiveness of the neatness habit is directly proportional to how many members of your household or office have developed it. But do it anyway. Every little bit helps, and your example might just inspire others to follow suit.

#### **Pack Ahead**

Have you ever arrived at a meeting out of the office and discovered you've forgotten an important paper? Have you ever been away from your home or office and realized you needed a phone number you forgot to bring? The habit needed to avoid this problem is to pack ahead.

#### **Clean As You Go**

There are several harmonious habits you can develop to make your housekeeping take less time and go more smoothly. If you have a glass shower door, keep a short-handled rubber squeegee in the shower, and as soon as you turn off the water, whisk away the drops to prevent them from drying into ugly water spots. Wipe off the sink counter each time you use it and the mirror while it is steamed over from the shower. The coffee filters mentioned in Principle #5 work great for this. Keep a supply in a drawer or under the bathroom sink. It also saves steps to keep extra bottles of glass and porcelain cleaners in the bathroom. You'll be more apt to use them regularly if you don't have to walk to the kitchen for them, and it might even encourage the rest of the family to use them as well.

Doing the dishes immediately after a meal (or at least loading them into the dishwasher) makes the task seem less burdensome because you don't have to waste time dreading doing it. I find, too, that the exercise of leisurely putting things away after a meal helps food digest better and banishes after-meal sluggishness. There are many other ways cleaning as you go makes having an orderly house a breeze. Wipe up spills on your carpet or upholstery with a spot remover as soon as they occur. Dust while you're talking on the phone. Wipe off counters, stoves, tables, and refrigerators before spills can dry. If you can't wash dishes immediately, at least rinse them off, or fill them with water to prevent food from hardening on them. If you have an especially dirty pan, soak it for a few hours, or overnight, in soapy water. While you're waiting for your morning coffee to drip through the coffeemaker, wipe off the refrigerator. While you're waiting for the water to boil for your pasta, clean the microwave. Stolen moments of cleaning are hardly noticeable and not only do they keep your house looking acceptable in case an unexpected company stops by, but they make the big cleaning day a little easier to take.

#### **Don't Hurry, Don't Worry**

Haste makes waste, and worry dissipates energy Develop the habit of keeping your attention focused on what you are doing, and maintaining a steady pace at the fastest speed you can achieve without stress. Develop a rhythm in your work, and you will find the Tao of doing it.

Worrying is a habit that can be broken when you no longer value it. I know this because I suffered from

chronic hives all through childhood developed an ulcer at the age of nineteen, all because of worry Since I have finally gotten over it, not only do I no longer suffer from either of these, but my entire life has changed to one of glorious expectation. There are several ways you can learn not to worry Visualize yourself five years the future. Will this trauma that plagues you now really matter to you then? So why let it bother you today?

Another thing you can do to banish worry is to ask yourself the question, "What is the worst thing that could happen if . . . and how would I deal with it?" You'll quickly see that no matter what happens, you will somehow find a way to cope, as you always have in the past. As long as you're still breathing, you are okay at this moment and have been okay so far.

Habits can be positive tools in our lives, but they are not learned overnight. As with everything else, practice makes perfect. If you have trouble remembering to practice the desired habit for the twenty-one days it takes to make it a part of your life, write yourself reminders on Post-it notes and stick them up everywhere. I know you'll find the rewards of having harmonious habits more than make up for the discipline required to foster them.

#### **Principle Nine: Honor time**

In one area of living—time—humankind has always been equal. We all have 86,400 seconds in every day. So why do some people seem to get more accomplished in life than others do? The answer is simple: They honor time by giving it value and using it wisely. They appreciate every moment and organize every hour There are several ways to avoid wasting time. Here are just a few.

##### **Let Your Fingers Do the Walking**

Get in the routine of using the phone book to look up addresses, plan your routes, and to call ahead to avoid needless disappointment and wasted time. Write frequently used numbers in your personal phone book or Rolodex system; include places like your child's school, your hairdresser, the freight company, or post office. Television is a spectator sport, which means you can do other things while watching it and not miss a thing. Try organizing your recipe box or toolbox. Put photos into albums. Give yourself a manicure or a pedicure. Balance your checkbook. Open your mail. Any tedious task can be combined with your television viewing.

##### **Don't Wait, Read**

As long as there are books and magazines in the world, there is no reason to waste a single minute. Reading is probably the least expensive, easiest way to educate ourselves—but certainly one of the most neglected. "I don't have time to read; you lament. Well, guess what? No one has time to do anything; they take time to do what's important to them.

Waiting is probably the most tedious activity—or non—activity we ever do. But those small pockets of time offer the perfect opportunity to read. Take a look at your day and see all the wasted moments that exist. Then pick up a book or magazine and carry it with you. Commit to reading an article or section of a book before you go to bed at night, or before you get up. Carry a book with you when traveling. Instead of stewing when traffic is at a standstill or the airplane bounces through rain, you can savor the time to devour the written word. Rather than standing in line waiting to board or disembark from public transportation, stay seated and read until the aisle has cleared.

##### **Handle Paperwork Quickly**

Handle every piece of paper only once if at all possible. Look at the document, decide what needs to be done with it, do it, and then file the paper If you file or discard each paper as you finish with it, or at least once a day, you will avoid having backlogged filing stack up so high it becomes a task you just can't face. Besides, if you need to find a copy of that paper in a hurry, it's a lot quicker to locate it in an organized file than to sift through a two-foot pile of papers for it.

##### **Just Do It**

Long before Nike made that slogan popular, I came to the conclusion that procrastination is one of the biggest time wasters that besets mankind. Banish the phrase, "Someday I'm gonna . . ." from your vocabulary Putting things off can turn a simple task into a horrible headache.

Think about this: Procrastination is fear If you are procrastinating about something, keep asking why to your every justification and eventually, if you are truly honest, you will boil your reason for procrastinating down to fear. Once you have identified the fear, you can resolve it—or at least accept it—and you will be able to move on. We all have the same number of minutes in every day How we use them determines how organized and how successful we are.

#### **Principle Ten: Relax . . . have fun**

The whole point of being organized is to be able to enjoy life more. If we don't look at life as a fun adventure, what's the point of having more time to live it? We need to organize our time to include nights out at the theater, tennis, bowling, visiting with friends and the like. We should plan quiet times at home to daydream or pamper ourselves and time for the stimulation of a good workout or walk. But this principle is more about finding enjoyment in everything we do, including those tasks we truly dread. Here are some helpful ideas to make those tasks, maybe not fun but at least more pleasant.

##### **Dress Appropriately**

If you tried to change the oil in your car in your best business suit and had to worry about grease stains, you would not be able to get the job done very quickly, right? Well, that same rule applies in everything you do. If you are going to be cleaning out files, storage areas, or the oven, dress in clothes you don't have to worry about, in clothes that are comfortable so you don't have to waste another moment of thought on your wardrobe. If you're cleaning the shower, do it naked. If you're washing the car, wear a bathing suit. If you want to be the life of the party, dress in sparkling clothes that fit your mood. If you want to make an impression of strength and professionalism, a basic suit immediately sets the tone.

Always dress to feel comfortable and confident. When you pick out your outfit, visualize doing whatever it is you're about to do. Even if you don't see the actual clothes you're wearing, at least this allows you to list in your

head the requirements of the clothes that will best fit the action. Clothes should make you so comfortable wearing them that you don't have to think about them again. Consider colors, too. Colors have been proven to affect our moods. Wear red if you want to be bold, darker colors if you want to be serious, bright colors for a party mood. Black can make you feel elegant, white will make you feel innocent, and yellow will put you in a happy childlike frame of mind. Consider purple when you want to feel classy, orange for sexy green if you're in a moneymaking mood. Pink augments healing and love, and blue inspires creativity. Use all the colors to support your mood.

### **Use Music**

I don't understand the science of it—I think it has something to do with the vibrational rates of the tones—but music sets a mood better than almost anything. If you have to clean the house, up-tempo music, as already mentioned in Principle #5, will definitely make the work go faster because your body automatically gets into the peppy rhythm. Suppose you want to focus on a complex report, do your income taxes, or complete another assignment that requires concentration. Soft instrumentals or environmental tapes (sounds of ocean waves, summer storms, babbling brooks) can help you accomplish the task more quickly by drowning out outside noises and helping you relax. For many people, classical music is inspirational. Recent studies also show that classical music actually improves mental capabilities and concentration.

### **Be Creative**

Play improvisational games to teach yourself how to think creatively, which is one of the primary keys to being organized. Watch comedians like Robin Williams and Gallagher perform, and then try it yourself. Collect some props and see how many ways you can think of to use them.

Make it a family affair. Hold up a paper plate and see who can come up with the most ways to use it. Or not to use it!

### **Remember the Child**

Have you ever noticed how children get joy out of everything they do? The next time you have an odious task to complete—cleaning the tub and shower is one of mine—try imagining how a child, encountering it for the first time, would view that activity. Make it into a game. On an episode of the TV show "The Simpsons"; Bart had to miss a school field trip because he had forgotten his permission slip. The principal gave him envelopes to lick to keep him busy and suggested that Bart make a game of it by counting how many he licked in an hour and then trying to do more in the next hour. Try something like that.

In addition to inspiring creativity, childish props are good for letting off steam. Use a rubber fish or chicken, a laugh box, Groucho glasses, or a paper noisemaker to bring a laugh and banish a bad mood. Or look in the mirror as you sing a silly childhood tune, complete with gestures. Skip around in circles as you sing. If you don't want to sing, make faces at yourself in the mirror. If you want to feel really delicious, do this someplace where you might get caught, like the office bathroom. Who knows, maybe the person who catches you is in need of a laugh and you will be doing her a favor! Visualize the results of your labors. The pride of accomplishment is something enough a bubble bath or a good bottle of champagne or chilled apple cider can never hurt.

### **Find a Hobby**

If you feel bogged down by your workload, maybe it's because you have not found a way for your creative self to express itself. When you have a rare day off, do you spend it in the same old rut of catching up with chores or sleeping? Maybe you just wander around trying to decide what to do. You need a hobby.

Think of something that gives you pleasure. A stroll in the park or the country looking for birds, bicycling, drawing with crayons, washing and waxing your car until it shines, writing your biography or obituary (now that'll make you think about what's important!), painting (even if by number), gardening, photography, doing needlepoint, cooking a gourmet meal. How about putting together model airplanes or building elaborate structures with Legos? It doesn't matter if you're good at this hobby. It only matters if it makes you happy.

### **Eliminate Stress**

Calmness is crucial to being organized. When we are stressed out, we spin our wheels. It's the old chicken-with-his-head-cut-off syndrome. Even if we do get everything on our list done, we're usually too wrung out to enjoy the time left in our day. Worse, continued stress can cause illness. There are many things you can do every day to break up the stress that threatens to take over. Here are just a few ideas.

Acknowledge your uniqueness. Lavish yourself with flowers. A single rose to gaze at and smell throughout the day cannot fail to bring a smile, the ultimate stress buster. Have a colorful spring bouquet or potted plant delivered to yourself at work. If you're not a flower person, try a singing telegram, or a bouquet of balloons, or mail yourself a clever card.

Use props. Remind yourself of your uniqueness. Buy a Far Side calendar, display a favorite gift from a friend or a mug purchased on your vacation, or frame a picture of the pet that gives you unconditional love. A quick glance at the object may be all you need to get relief.

Take a brisk walk. Walking frees the mind and the spirit. If the weather's bad, use the halls and stairways. Going up and down stairs is marvelous cardiovascular exercise and a real pick-me-up.

Take a break. Sit back for five minutes. If you can lie down somewhere, even better. This includes at work. Maybe you can talk your employer into providing a quiet area and a padded slant board. The increased productivity from a five-minute break under these conditions will more than repay the cost. Using a sleep mask will make five minutes feel like ten. Don't forget to use your timer (see Principle #6) for complete relaxation.

Take a mind trip. Take three deep breaths and close your eyes. Imagine yourself at the ocean, in the desert, riding a horse, climbing a mountain, in a hot spring with the person of your dreams, being a cat. Doing anything you want to do. Be careful . . . if your thoughts are X-rated, your smile may betray you!

Call your travel agent or get on the Internet and get airline information to anywhere you'd like to go. You don't have to buy the ticket; just pretending you're going is usually enough to lift you from the doldrums.

If you can't close your eyes or get on the Internet, just stare at your computer screen or your textbook or whatever, and see the vision play out in your mind's eye. Your trusty timer will remind you to go back to work.

Use scents to cheer you up. There's a reason why aromatherapy is so popular: It works. Try burning some of the following herbs with incense, using them in sachet form in your drawers or linens, or even in your bath. (HINT: Putting herbs into a ball-type tea strainer makes for easy cleanup of the tub.) Try rosemary for mental stimulation; red clover for calmness; thyme for good health; alfalfa to prevent poverty or help arthritis; lavender for love; and marjoram for nervousness. This is just a short list, but it can get you started. There are many books on the subject if you want to investigate aromatherapy further.

Grab a book. When the day starts to jangle, read a page from a poetry book or book of inspirational sayings. Fairy tales and Greek mythology are also good for taking your mind beyond problems to that space of peace.

Get the kinks out. Close your eyes. Bend your head slowly downward until your chin touches your chest. Hold for a count of ten. Return your head to the upright position. Lean your head back as far as it will go for the count of ten. Return. Now slowly attempt to touch your right ear to your right shoulder. If it helps, place your right hand on top of your head, and gently pull toward your shoulder. Don't strain. Hold for ten. Left ear to left shoulder for ten.

Keeping your eyes level, turn your head, slowly, to look as far behind your right shoulder as you can. Now face slowly forward. Now, slowly look over your left shoulder. Return.

Raise your arms in the air, clasping your hands together. Stretch them as far upward as you can. Now slowly bend your right elbow and bring it down to your side so that your left arm rests across the top of your head. Hold for 10, then do it in the opposite direction. Courtesy counts. Smile at five people you don't know. Notice how many times this brings a return smile. Notice how it makes you feel, even if the other person doesn't respond. Say "please" and "thank you" to everyone. Help someone out, if at all possible. Smile at someone across the room at a party—yes, even your spouse. Marvel at life's mysteries. "Why?" and "How?" are two favorite questions of toddlers that we somehow forget to ask ourselves as we grow older. For a great stress buster, put them back into active service in your life. Stare out the window and ask yourself things like: Why does the sky change color? What do clouds feel like? Why is that mountain shaped just the way it is? How in the world does a seed know how to grow? How did that hole get in that tree? How do birds know when to fly north and south? How do dogs find their way back home over thousands of miles? Count your blessings. Visit a hospital emergency room; children's burn unit, cancer or AIDS patient areas, or a home for the elderly. Does your own situation still seem so problematic?

Eat, drink and be merry. Sip a cup of chamomile or dandelion tea. Eat some chocolate. Splurge at lunch.

Breathe. Learn yoga breathing techniques, which are opposite of how the Western world breathes. Extend your stomach as you inhale, slowly letting it cave in as your lungs fill. Now, contract your stomach muscles as you exhale through your mouth. It is one of the fastest and, once you've retrained yourself, easiest way to allow stress to float away on a cloud of nothingness. Daydream. Look out a window. Focus on a tree, cloud, pigeon, squirrel, butterfly, or other wild creature until you almost seem to become one with it and nature. Imagine being whatever you see. What are you thinking? How does it feel to float across space like a bird? To wave in the wind like a branch? To have elevators cruise up and down your side like that skyscraper? To hammer your beak into a tree? Nature is so incredible, just contemplating it banishes stress. Pat yourself on the back. Sit back and relish the feeling of accomplishment for a job well done, or even for living and learning as many years as you have. Congratulate yourself for doing something even so commonplace as getting out of bed this morning or not burning the toast. Love yourself. You are perfect just the way you are because any Being who can hang the stars and start the planets rotating cannot make junk.

Be grateful. After hearing Oprah rave about the benefits of keeping a gratitude journal (from Sarah Ban Breathnach's inspirational book *Simple Abundance*, Warner Books, 1995), I decided to give it a try. Oprah is right. It is life-changing!. A gratitude journal is nothing more than a small notebook in which you write down five things daily for which you are grateful. Keeping such a journal opens one up to the incredible blessing of every moment we are given. Even on bad days most of us can at least put down having a roof over our heads, nourishing food on our.

### **Get Excited**

Every successful person knows the value of the adage: "If you act as if, then you will be." Try looking at a mundane task as the most exciting thing you've ever tackled. Laugh about it. Talk about how much fun it will be to delve into the project. Anticipate it as you do an upcoming party. Start doing this a couple of days before you actually have to begin the assignment so that by the time you undertake it, you're already convinced it'll be a snap. You'll be amazed at how fast you'll breeze through even the most ponderous job.

### **Learn to Laugh**

Studies show that a four-year-old child laughs up to 500 times a day compared to the average adult who laughs about fifteen times a day. We need to change those statistics. Laughter is the most precious gift we have been given for coping with life. If you don't believe me, try this experiment.