

# Real Value

New Ways to Think About  
Your Time, Your Space & Your Stuff



By John Odalen

# More Praise for *Real Value*

“John nailed it. He has taken the overwhelming task of organizing and made it simple by providing formulas for motivation and organization. It is a step by step process that he walks you through by holding your hand all the way. Whether you just can't find your keys or whether you can no longer see your floor because of all the clutter, I highly recommend you reading John's book.”

*Dr Dan Cruoglio  
Life Adjustments Coaching, Inc*

“John Odalen uses his personal and professional experience to illustrate his strategies for organizing our spaces. His plan is useful for people of all ages.

John's recommendations for finding the right place for everything are useful strategies for people starting to experience memory loss.

Older adults face particular challenges. Some find it harder to make decisions about what to keep and what to toss. Some find it more daunting to put things away, especially if they are in low or high places or down steep stairs. Clutter presents tripping hazards. Others find that they have inherited the family heirlooms and an obligation to keep them or they associate some of their things with people they have lost. Many are considering downsizing to smaller homes, so having strategies for decision making and using space well are especially helpful.”

*Susan Hoskins, Executive Director  
Princeton Senior Resource Center*

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Open Door Publications

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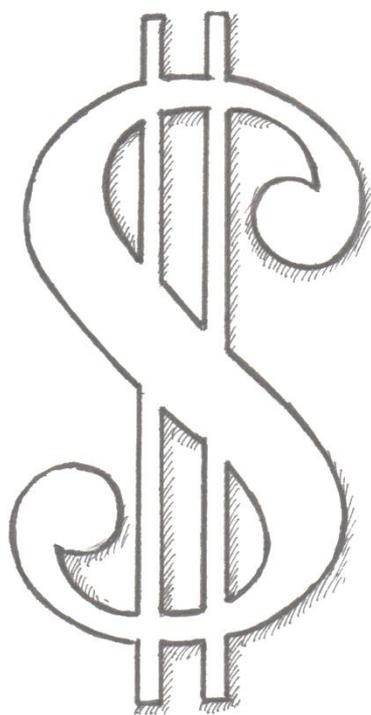
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*To my wonderful parents, Bill and Chris  
Odalen, for their encouragement and  
unconditional love and support.*

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# Introduction

Overwhelmed.

At some point in our lives, we have all felt overwhelmed by something: work responsibilities, family commitments, social obligations, health challenges, financial problems, the list goes on. Some things we cannot control and must do our best to cope with. And we do.

What *can* we control? Do you feel overwhelmed by all the stuff in your home? Is your home office a messy file drawer of papers? Do you want to get organized, but you do not know where to start?

This book will help you look at your stuff differently and put you on the right track to get organized and stay organized, so you can better

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enjoy life. We will consider the real value of our possessions. Is “real value” a dollar amount? Or the usefulness of the item? Or how it makes you feel? There are many ways to consider an item’s value, none of them right or wrong. Everything is relative in terms of what is really important to you, whether it be your time, your space, or your stuff.

I wasn’t always in the organizing business helping people think about their time, their space, and their stuff differently. Looking back I see how all of my previous experiences led me to my current profession as an organizer.

I started out as a computer programmer. Sounds like a very different job than an organizer, right? If you had asked me twenty years ago, I would not have seen it coming. The question is how does a computer programmer become a professional organizer?

I have always been organized. I like to have things a certain way. I find it soothing to have things in order. I sort my hanging shirts by color. If I see a bunch of shopping carts just thrown haphazardly in the corral in the grocery store parking lot, I line them all up neatly. I’ve been known to not just clean up the dishes after being invited to dinner, but to also straighten the pantry.

I think it must run in my family. I remember my grandfather’s workshop. Every type and size of nail, screw, nut, bolt, and washer was proudly

displayed in glass jars on shelves over his workbench. All of his tools were sorted and stored in foam-lined drawers. His workspace was always neat and tidy. That made sense to me. It was normal.

As a child I was very creative, always building things. In school, my favorite subject was math. It came naturally to me. I preferred facts and rules over interpretation, and hated writing—although that has since changed. I always thought I'd become an architect, but I ended up majoring in math, discovered computer science, and spent twenty years working in the research and development department of a software company. I started as a technical support representative offering telephone support to customers. I think that's where I realized I really enjoy helping people.

After the support position, I was promoted to programmer and eventually became a team leader, then manager, and eventually director. I had found my niche developing tools and defining processes to improve how the company and customers handled software maintenance. That's what it read on my resume, anyway. To the average person I fixed "software bugs." I thought of my focus as being on customer success, quality assurance, and project management. I like solving problems and working with customers; I learned to ask lots of

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questions, to look at the big picture, and not just the specific issue the customer was complaining about.

And then I got laid off.

I spent a summer regrouping and relaxing before beginning my corporate job search. It did not go well. I had very few interviews and no job offers. I quickly learned while I was doing whatever it took to be successful with my former employer, I had not kept up with skills needed to stay competitive. My recent job experience was primarily managerial. Employers wanted managers who were also highly technical with specific industry experience I did not have. I wanted a job, but I was not excited about returning to corporate life with its pros and cons.

Meanwhile I was taking courses at my local community college in Project Management. One of my instructors told me about the Entrepreneurship class he would be teaching. I decided to enroll.

During the class I realized starting my own business might be the answer as to what I should do in the next phase of my life. The coursework helped me write my business plan and eventually launch my business.

Organizing is more than arranging items to look neat, orderly, and pretty. Any organizational system is worthless if it doesn't meet the client's needs, and if the client cannot maintain the system.

I am careful not to project any strict standards on my clients. Sometimes good enough is good enough.

Perfectionism is often the downfall of organization. I know. I understand the feeling of being overwhelmed. In wanting something to be perfect, I may find myself leaving a project unfinished until I can devote enough time to doing it right. But isn't that just another way to justify procrastination? It can be. And when that happens, not only am I upset with myself, the work doesn't get done.

I have learned to counter my inclination to put things off until I can do them perfectly by breaking projects down into smaller steps. I tell myself today I will just do the first step. For instance, if I am working on organizing my kitchen cabinets, I will plan to just gather all the materials the first day. Once that is done, I may feel motivated to go on to the next step. Or not. It's okay. I know I will schedule a time to finish this project at a later date.

*Sometimes  
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enough.*

I use the same trick when I don't feel like exercising. I tell myself I will go to the gym and just do some cardio. Once I am there and get started, I often feel like doing a full workout.

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Writing this book has been the same way. Overwhelming is an understatement. I broke it down, starting with an outline. In the beginning, working on one chapter at a time did not sound like a bad idea. However, I found writing the first chapter daunting. I changed gears and started writing notes, and fleshed out the outline until I shifted into writing mode. I started by writing this introduction about me.

Breaking projects down into small steps makes them seem less overwhelming. Scheduling specific times to finish each step is an excellent way to make a big job more manageable.

When I work with a client, I have learned the key is to listen first. I don't make assumptions. I don't jump right in with suggestions or solutions. I apply the skills I honed in my years in the software industry to organizing. First, I gather all the facts. Then I brainstorm with the client. Next we develop a project plan together. Finally, we execute it. A written plan, broken up into categories and steps, is much less overwhelming than no plan at all.

The most important piece of the puzzle is listening. As I work with the client I continue to listen. And if you are organizing your home by yourself, I urge you to keep listening, too.

Do not be so stuck on your original plan you cannot change it. Something may not be working,

which means you will have to change course. You may discover doubts or concerns you did not address with the original plan. Adjust along the way.

A key tenet in the software industry is a bug is easier and cheaper to fix in the design phase than it is in the coding phase, or in the testing phase, or once it is released to customers. The same is true with your organization system. The earlier the problem is found and resolved, the better it will be in the long run.

Another benefit of listening first to yourself or your client is you have time to “get it all out.” I learned this while working with my software customers. When do you call the software help desk? When you have a problem. If you have a problem, you are not happy. Instead you are frustrated, angry, defensive, argumentative, and rude, or even all of the above.

Allowing someone to vent about the problem diffuses the situation, bringing them back to a normal emotional level so you can calmly discuss the problem. While not exactly the same with my organizing clients, they often feel overwhelmed by the job ahead of them and don’t know where to start. Letting clients first talk about it for a while calms them down while building a relationship between us. It builds trust, which is key in organizing.

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Becoming a professional organizer was the only path I seriously considered during my transition from employee to business owner. I knew I had the skills, and it would be a job I would love. What could be better? It has been a lot of work becoming my own boss, but it is worth it. I enjoy helping people solve their problems and achieve their goals. I am more than an organizer. I am also a teacher and coach. I help my clients get organized and also show them how to look at their time, their space, and their stuff differently. A change in thinking about what is important, and the real value our stuff has, aids us in getting organized and staying organized so we can better enjoy life.

## How to use this book

This book is a guide for clearing the clutter in your home and becoming organized by offering new ways to think about your time, your space, and your stuff, in terms of what is of real value to you. While the book was written to take the reader on a logical journey to organization, chapter by chapter, you may read individual chapters according to your specific interests. Below I provide some suggestions if you plan to skip around.

I share my personal background and path to becoming a professional organizer in the *Introduction*. Definitely read Chapter 1 *Change your thinking* before any subsequent chapters. This chapter provides the foundation for the remaining

chapters. Here you will begin to learn new ways to look at your possessions and determine their value as compared to your time and living space.

Chapter 2 *Change your doing* gives some insight as to why we are resistant to change and offers tips on how to overcome this. If you are strongly motivated to make some changes, feel free to skip this chapter.

Chapters 3 and 4 are short chapters on how to *Define the problem* and *Make a plan*, respectively. If you are feeling overwhelmed and do not know where to start, be sure to read these chapters.

If you want to dive right into organizing, jump to Chapter 5 *Start organizing*. Here I provide my basic techniques on how to get organized in a way that will help you stay organized over time.

Chapter 6 *Specific tips* will lead you through the rooms of your home and specific hotspots for clutter and disorganization. Read the chapters that apply to your home and current situation as needed.

Chapter 7 *What comes next?* provides solutions for what to do with all the stuff you have decided to purge from your home, and direction on what to do next now that you have started to get organized.

Lastly, the Appendix provides a list of resources and websites to further help you throughout the organizing process.

# Chapter 1

## Change your thinking

How did we end up this way? We live in a materialistic, disposable society that values possessions. I have worked with clients in one bedroom apartments and five bedroom homes, and I find they all have the same complaint: There is not enough storage. We fill the space we have, no matter how big or small. In other words, no matter how much space you have to fill, you will fill it. In most cases, though, we are not effectively using our spaces.

We bring things into our homes on a regular basis, but we rarely take the time to look at what we have and remove the unneeded items. We lead busy lives, moving quickly from one activity to the

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next. We schedule our lives twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There is never enough time to do all we want to do, or deal with all we have. We barely have time to relax and enjoy life—so where would we find time to get organized?

To get organized and stay organized, we need to change how we think about our stuff and what is important in our lives, and realize an upfront investment of time and energy will pay off tenfold in the long run.

## Why do we stay disorganized?

To be blunt, we stay disorganized because it is easy: easy to do nothing and keep the status quo. By not organizing we don't need to make an effort or make hard decisions. Sometimes we use excuses to justify our decisions to stay disorganized.

“I like my mess.” I hear that often from my clients, or from client's spouses who are resistant to change. Fine, you like your mess. But wouldn't you like an organized space better? You know that needed piece of paper is somewhere on your desk, but how much time would you save if the paper was in a specific folder or basket?

“I know where everything is.” That is another reason I often hear people give for not getting organized. It may be true. Knowing where it is and finding it quickly and easily can be two different

things. Isn't there a better way?

## The value of organizing

You may be thinking getting organized will be a lot of work and isn't worth the effort. That depends. It depends on what value you place on saving time and money. Or increasing productivity. Nothing in life is free. Benefits do have a cost. You know you could be better organized, but don't really see the benefit.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Can you park your car in your garage?
- Do you have a cabinet or closet that is so full you cannot really add or remove anything?
- Are you paying for an off-site, external storage unit?

Fill in the blanks:

- I can never find my \_\_\_\_\_.
- I am always running out of \_\_\_\_\_.
- I keep buying \_\_\_\_\_ to find I already had some at home.
- I dread having to do \_\_\_\_\_ because that space makes me feel anxious, frustrated, or overwhelmed.
- I can always find my \_\_\_\_\_.
- I never run out of \_\_\_\_\_.

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- I enjoy doing \_\_\_\_\_.

Getting organized can save you time and money.

- The Small Business Administration estimates eighty percent of filed papers are never looked at again.
- The National Soap and Detergent Association believes getting rid of clutter would eliminate forty percent of the housework in the average home.
- A Harris Interactive study found twenty-three percent of adults say they pay bills late (and incur late fees) because they lose them.
- The Self-Storage Association statistics (there are almost 50,000 self-storage facilities in the US) show that about 9.5 percent of all American households currently rent a self-storage unit, and that has increased from six percent in 1995.<sup>1</sup>

How much time do you waste searching for a specific item? Maybe it's your keys or your glasses. Or a working pen on a desk piled with papers. Or stamps and your checkbook to pay the bills.

Have you ever not paid a bill because you

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<sup>1</sup> 2015-2016 Self Storage Industry Fact Sheet (as of July 1 2015)  
Self Storage Association  
<http://www.selfstorage.org/Library/Public-Library>

misplaced it? Did you incur a late fee?

Are your kitchen cabinets packed with cans and jars and bottles and boxes of food?

Do you know what items are in the back of your cabinets or pantry?

How many of the items in your refrigerator have past expiration dates on them?

The National Resource Defense Council estimates American families throw away twenty-five percent of the food and beverages they buy, costing the average family of four anywhere from \$1,300 to \$2,300 a year.

Think about your current home, and all of your possessions—not only in the living spaces, but everything in the closets, basement, attic, and garage. What if you had to move? Does the thought of packing up all your belongings overwhelm you? What if you needed to sell your home

before you can move? Is your home in a condition to show to potential buyers?

In business, time is money, and taking too much time can mean lost business. The business lead that is lost in a pile of papers, the customer you forgot to call back, the time-sensitive

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promotion that expired—little things, such as these, lead to lost business and lost money.

Do you collect something? Artwork, coins, porcelain dolls, vintage beer cans: The variety of items people collect are endless. How is your collection stored and displayed? Is the collection safe and secure? Have items become damaged and as a result lost value? Can you easily enjoy your collection? By organizing your home and your collection you can enjoy what you have and treasure.

What is your favorite room in your home? Why? What is your least favorite? Why? Do your answers have anything to do with the amount of stuff in those rooms? You may love to cook, but if your kitchen is overflowing with pots and pans and gadgets and unopened mail and kid's homework, there probably isn't much room for cooking. How enjoyable can cooking be in such a space? Enjoy the space you have.

One of my clients needed help organizing the workbench in his garage. He is very creative, hard-working, and resourceful, but his workbench was a disaster. Like all of us, he has many responsibilities and not much spare time. While working on projects he did not worry about keeping his workbench neat and tidy. As a result, he suffered from three related symptoms of disorganization: don't know what I have, can't find

what I want, and I need it now so let me buy another.

As we sorted his tools together I found four different ratchet sets, three sets of screw drivers, and many open half-full boxes of screws and nails of the same size. The workbench was covered with tools, and hardware and project parts, leaving no room to actually do any work. He would start a new project by moving piles of stuff to one side, clearing just enough space to work.

Organizing his workbench saved him both time and money. He will no longer buy unnecessary duplicate materials. He will not waste time looking for supplies, or clearing his workspace. The upfront investment of a few hours, along with a small amount of regular maintenance, will pay off tenfold as he works on projects in the years to come. It is all about setting up the right systems and developing new habits.

Think about your own home and how organizing specific rooms and clearing clutter would allow you to be more productive. Would an organized kitchen make preparing meals easier? If your desk was clear of paper and supplies, could you be more productive? If the laundry room was neat and orderly, could you do your laundry more efficiently?