

## Hope for the 'Organizationally Challenged'

from Susan Richman

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Yep, I'm a recovering disorganized person.... still in process of learning to keep my desk neater and my bed made daily. And that says nothing about my kids' desks and their beds. But I'm improving, and I hope I can help you see some directions to help make your homeschooling life go more smoothly by working towards better organizational habits.

Imagine this -- you are out at some sort of public meeting and get talking to a very nice mom, who doesn't homeschool. At some point she says to you, with great admiration for your abilities, "Oh, how great that you can homeschool -- I could never do that because I just wouldn't be organized enough. It's such a big responsibility!"

Do you squirm a bit inside, knowing you're not exactly the paragon of organization either? Maybe you see in your mind's eye your school room (or maybe your dining room table), piled high with various projects in various stages of completion or abandonment. That is, the spelling book is stirred in with the math books and papers and a few manipulatives and calculators, along with the recent attempt at the science experiment that flopped because you really didn't have all the needed 'simple household ingredients' right on hand. Maybe even a little papier mache paste is added for a touch of class. Seven library books are lost (hopefully only temporarily), three educational videos are now overdue at the local Blockbuster's because your kids didn't put them in their boxes after viewing and they are now mixed in with all the other videos you own that aren't in boxes either. And did you miss getting to the recent free symphony concert recently with the support group because you forgot to write the date on your calendar? Did at least one of your kids lose their log or a major textbook at some point this past year? Are sharpened pencils in short supply, and planned dinners even more rare?

Or did any of you do like I did this year -- I turned in my two girls' portfolios properly on June 30th, but got a call from our local administrator a week and a half later asking (politely) if I'd forgotten to send in our logs? I had -- there they were on the shelf at home (lucky I could find them....). If some of these things ring true, welcome to Homeschool Organization 101 -- for those of us who continue to deal with clutter, mismanagement, and scheduling difficulties way beyond when we thought we might finally have it all together.

I've been rededicating myself to learning better time management and organizational skills this summer -- which hasn't been so easy, as our daughter Molly needed ACL knee surgery in early July for a torn ligament. This means follow-up physical therapy for months, 3 days a week -- and guess who gets to drive her -- plus it meant at first lots more movie viewing than we typically do around here, as she was spending lots of time on the couch, and of course I wanted to keep her company.... And a week and a half later, right as Molly was starting to get, literally, back on her feet, our 20-year-old son Jacob (living off in Pittsburgh for the summer with college buddies and working at a programming job) suddenly came down with mono and needed to come home to recuperate for two weeks.

And in between all this there were of course the two graduation ceremonies we were planning, several trips to Harrisburg, getting Hannah ready for French camp (and there was the day I just found out that no, our local doctor couldn't sign Hannah's camp medical form without seeing her first... and she was leaving for camp in 5 days! I could have sworn we had a real check up there last summer.... Zinged again!). And my AP online course is getting started up, mail is really heavy, lots of new homeschoolers are calling for advice on how to get started, and to top it off, we just had a tree trimming service out to cut down a few dead trees and do some 'minor' trimming, and so my yard looks rather like a tornado just hit (and my gardening and landscaping is strictly 'wildflower special' at best).

Yet through all this I'm still aiming to learn more about keeping my act together -- and I have also made a renewed pledge to keep up a more regular fitness program. And surprisingly, maybe this is the best sort of time to focus on this type of thing, as it's when I really need it. Maybe you feel the same way -- every family has all sorts of unexpected things that happen, often at pretty inconvenient times. There are always illnesses to deal with, or accidents, or job changes, or moving, or sports schedules, or older grandparents moving in, or any of life's many other curve balls and surprises. It's life, and if we can learn to cope, and not only cope, but thrive and even feel grateful when the going gets rough, then we've really got something. Waiting for the 'lull' to hit to start getting organized will mean we just never ever do it -- because we all really do know that the 'lull' will never come.

Just facing a new school year can be the spur many of us need to work harder at getting our act together. We're ready to avoid old mistakes, aim high with new goals, and plan for our best homeschooling year yet. So what has helped me, especially when faced at the same time with all these other important demands on my time?

**First, getting myself motivated.** Or re-motivated. I've gone on I don't know how many 'organize myself' binges in the past -- in fact, I feel at times a bit like a yo-yo dieter when it comes to getting organized. This time I've been listening to a motivational set of tapes by Brian Tracy that I bought somewhat inexpensively at a speed reading seminar I attended this year, called *The Psychology of Achievement*. It's a mix of some pop psychology, some timeless wisdom, and lots of hard hitting reality and practical ideas -- once you get past the first few tapes, where the speaker seemed to mostly be saying, 'Just like yourself, and everything will be great!'. It really helped me see more and more the steps I needed to take to get more organized, and the dedicated work the project would involve. It made me realize again that I needed to rededicate myself daily to being more organized with my time -- it was not something I could read about or think about for a half hour and then drop, and expect miracles to happen. And as the nifty 'Dear Abby' quote I have posted on my upstairs hallway says, "A bad habit ever disappears miraculously; it's an undo-it-yourself project." I had to learn to examine all of my day-to-day life and how I used my time, and find better ways to manage all my many jobs and responsibilities.

This summer one of my AP students gave me a very nice gift certificate for Amazon.com, and I decided right away that I'd buy Don Aslett's new book *How to Handle 1,000 Things at Once: A Fun Guide to Mastering Home & Personal Management*. Now, usually I'm the sort of person who just loses gift certificates, or lets them go past their expiration date, so actually following through and ordering the book was a major step for me -- and the book has been super. I've read many of Don's books, especially liking all his dejunking books and his *How to Have a 48-Hour Day*. These are all quick reads, great for the spare minutes before a dental

appointment (yep, I always pack something to read whenever I know I'll be waiting somewhere.... I even read a fun O'Henry short story while sitting next to a moaning Jacob at the emergency room for an hour, waiting for his mono diagnosis). Don is hard-hitting, humorous, and incredibly energetic. You almost can't help but find yourself getting that jazzed urge to do whatever it is that you really need to start doing. Now. He makes you face the fact that no one else will do it for you. And he is also so aware of the many multiple tasks all of us need to do at once at home -- it's pretty different from the work world where jobs are more defined and limited in scope... at home we all do it all, all the time.

I also set a plan to review all the many books on organizational schemes that I'd bought over the years. Most of them were right on a nice shelf by my side of the bed, but I just hadn't been seriously reading them much lately -- as I was 'too busy' to do so. Now I made time -- it was part of my re-education.

A good friend of mine also sent me info on a helpful website on dealing with clutter and being more organized -- you'll find it at <http://organizedhome.com> and you'll probably find many good ideas there just like I did. There is a lot to encourage and motivate and inspire you online now in time management and home organization. And many of these sites get lots of participation from homeschooling parents -- we all certainly need organizational helps more than the average person.

**Make myself dejunk something everyday**, even if it's only something comparatively minor, like one small shelf in my office, or even just tossing out the dried up pens and broken nubs of pencils cluttering up my desk cup. I felt really pleased the other day when I reorganized all the hundreds of US history books I have (since I lead an AP US History course on line, you see, I really need all these many books.... but where is the one I actually need right now??). Clearing out the art supply shelf near Hannah's desk really made my day last week -- including gathering together all the computer cords my husband had stashed there on top of the oil pastels and magic markers and Prismacolor pencils. And I finally ditched the nifty plastic turn-table 'organizer' I'd bought years ago at an art store for keeping markers and pens 'handy'. I finally admitted that the contraption was never used by the kids, took up much more room than the simple boxes they preferred, and gathered dust and only old worn out markers without lids. It went in the trash. The task barely took 15 minutes, but it was something that I had moaned over inwardly for months. There is something so wonderful about just doing those tasks you've been berating yourself for not doing for so long -- and it usually takes much less time that you expected.

**Hire out when possible.** I had a family out for evaluations one day this past spring, and we'd agreed that the kids would help work around my house in partial payment for their evaluations. I assigned the young son various yardwork tasks I never get to, and set the daughter to work with my daughter Hannah -- they alphabetized a whole big bookshelf of fiction titles by author! They even put our huge collection of Shakespeare plays in order, with the titles alphabetized. Every time I look at this shelf -- and especially when I can easily and quickly find any book I want there -- I feel so organized and on top of things.... and so grateful to this homeschooler for helping me out! I also got motivated by the girls -- later that week I rearranged several other shelves, putting all the Charles Dickens' books together, all the Mark Twain's in one spot, and more. Now when I find an errant book out of place (a frequent occurrence), I actually have a place to put it. I still have many shelves yet to go, but I've made progress.

**Appreciate the help of my family.** I was reading in my new Don Aslett book about how beneficial it is to have family around to help us out in the really tough times -- and then I reflected on all the many, many ways my family have pitched in during this tricky last month, when so many things were beyond my control. My wonderful daughter-in-law Patricia (and in case you haven't heard via the grapevine, yes, baby #1 is due in late December!) helped get Hannah out to her certified nurse midwife with that camp medical form (there's always a creative solution when one door is slammed shut!). She made all the needed phone calls, too. I was unable to do any of this myself, as I needed to head into Pittsburgh with Molly all day after her morning physical therapy out at the hospital. And Howard's parents were ready and willing to come out to the farm to help take care of Jacob while he was so sick with mono during the two days we needed to be gone for the High School at Home Conference. And Howard is clearing up that huge tangle of branches out in the yard bit by bit -- he's made it his daily fitness routine instead of his usual morning jog. And the girls will use many of the branches in a big bonfire for a party they're planning for this month -- should be one of the best campfires we've ever had for a sing-along! What would any of us do without our families! Those of you with very young kids, do know that with patient guidance (and lots of appreciation!) even these little ones will soon be doing whatever they can to help you out to their best abilities.

**Make myself get up early.** Well, I don't meet this goal every day, but I'm lots better than I have been. My alarm now goes off at (don't gasp!) 5:30am every morning -- and so even if I let myself sleep in an extra luxurious hour, like I did today.... it's still only 6:30am when I pile out. That achievement power audio tape helped me learn a good trick for getting up right away -- I just start saying to myself, after the alarm goes off, "I am right now getting up, I am right now getting up out of bed ...". Within a minute, almost in spite of all longings to stay snuggled under the comforter, I find myself popping up. I used to lie in bed for over an hour or more after the alarm, absently listening to the radio, hitting the snooze button endless times, and sort of wondering just when I might actually find myself getting myself up.

I also have a pretty set morning routine -- and although I know I still need some fine-tuning, I'm improving. I always do about 20 minutes of 'aerobic chores' right away -- really helps me feel alert, and also helps me begin to meet those new fitness goals. I jump about vigorously while sorting out laundry into everyone's nearby bin, and then head down for 'kitchen aerobics' while I put away the clean dishes I did the previous night. I might race about (literally!) picking up this or that in the livingroom and diningroom -- doesn't take long, gets me some exercise, and helps me not feel too overwhelmed by a messy house. I then shower, eat breakfast on my own (my family hasn't yet joined me in my early morning escapades), and read or listen to an inspirational audio tape while eating. Because I don't need to talk to anyone else during this whole time, and the jobs themselves don't take much brain power, I also spend time focusing on my gratefulness for all the blessings of our life -- I'm sure you all know how much this helps all days go more smoothly and peacefully. Then I head up to the office to see what my email has for me today. I also am trying to remember to always look in my planning book -- great for refreshing myself on goals set for the week, deadlines and appointments (oops! piano tuner coming at 9:00am -- clear off the top of the piano, and clear a path to the piano as well!). By the time I'm ready to remind the kids to get up (they might put it more like, "by the time I'm ready to come yell at the kids for the third time to get up" -- but the girls both have new alarms clocks too, and they are getting more responsible about this...), I've already made a great start on my day.

**Write out 'to do' lists.** Oh, I know -- this is so basic. Also so typically ignored by me when the going gets busy. Whenever I have a good specific list of jobs and tasks (update Hannah's objectives for the new school year, pay bills, design pages for new school year planner, find the misplaced Adobe Pagemaker program to give to the new Excelsior art editor, work on newsletter issue #72 articles, call my mother, send in Jacob's health form to the university, etc.), I definitely get much more completed. I never (or only very rarely!) complete everything on any of these lists -- but I always know that when I don't have a list at all I tend to drift and laze about and spend way too much time on email or browsing through frivolous catalogs. I also recognize that I do lots more than is on any list -- some things have become automatic pilot for me, and that's a real step up.

**Make another list of possible good things to do, that I might do sometime.** This is much different from my list of things to do today. This is what Don Aslett calls a backlog or longterm list. These are the nifty things that you'd love to do if you only had time. But when the time clears up, the problem is that you've forgotten just what those things were -- I tend to stare around absently for a while when these times hit, or just waste time puttering.... But now I have some of these good ideas on a list and when these moments hit, I'm training myself to look at the list. This helped me reorganize a very messy pile in my desk area recently -- the place where I keep copies of recent back issues of our newsletter, our Guides, and a few other items I use frequently when doing phone counseling work. Here's what usually happens: rather than route through my slippery pile, I just grab another guide or newsletter off the shelf.... and another. Finally, I realize I have almost a dozen Guides to the PA Homeschool Law falling on the floor, six copies of the last newsletter, and even more Diploma Guides. One day -- when I didn't have time to tackle this task -- I wrote on my longterm list that I wanted to put one copy of each item into a 1" binder, and just keep the binder in that bin. I realized this would really help my efficiency and cut down on some real eyesore clutter, not to mention leaving more copies of these materials to actually sell to customers. Now, this is just the sort of good idea I get frequently, but because I actually wrote it down in a place where I could find it, I actually did it this time. Great feeling -- and three weeks later the bin is still neat. I now keep this longterm list on a blank monthly page in my planner -- so it's easy to update by month, and easy to find.

**Don't keep five calendars on the wall -- keep a planning book.** We used to mark things on wall calendars -- in fact, we had several in the house, all with some important dates, appointments, and more on them. And some with less on them. The problem? We had so many calendars, they were never coordinated. We needed a 'command center' that had everything. I turned to developing my own planning book, photocopying it each summer to get just what I really needed and wanted -- I've just never been able to find any other book with everything that I require.... and I've spent more than my share of time studying over the possible offerings in all the office supply stores and catalogs. I needed unique things -- space dedicated to planning for the kids, or mapping out my schedule for the week, for weekly planning for our business (what to order, planning conferences, setting up our newsletter goals, etc.), our homeschooling group activities and academic competitions, my AP online class, keeping in touch with the kids off at college, and more. I needed sheet protectors that I could use to pop in important things like directions to the play we were attending that week, or the letter from the University of Pittsburgh that gives me Molly's new address in the dorm and her roommate's name and home address, or the directions to the seminar on speed reading I'd be attending soon. I had to make all this for myself -- and it's on my list this week to create my one for this new school year (just finished it up!). The next trick (and this is still in process...) is learning more and more about how to use this tool to

help me be more effective. I'm currently working on making myself take the needed five minutes before bed to look it over, jot down more 'things to do' on my list for tomorrow, and see what's coming up.

**Use those little moments.** Just now I went down to microwave a cup of tea (I could feel my alertness was slipping, and if not caffeine, I at least needed a quick break....). The needed two minutes of micro zapping was just enough time for me to sweep our stairs up to the second floor, which seem to always act as extremely powerful cat hair magnets. There have been other times when I've spent that two minutes just staring at the microwave timer, moaning inwardly over all the little meaningless waits in life. Today I did something useful instead. Other times I've made myself do a couple of minutes of focused stretching (I'm getting stiff pretty quickly without regular exercise -- age fifty is looming!). Or I've emptied the dish racks and put the silverware away. Or wiped up a counter or cleared up the table from lunch. Almost makes you want to look forward to these microwave minutes, once you start seeing them as little opportunities.

**Post inspirational quotes all around my desk area.** Or you might want to post some in your kitchen, or in your homeschooling area -- and one of my very favorite homeschool families even posted inspirational Bible verses and Proverbs in the family bathroom. I make these postings permanent -- they are sealed in with clear packaging tape, right on my desk, the photocopier, my file cabinets, and more (maybe it's fortunate that I don't have high quality furnishings in the office!).

I especially look now for ones that encourage me to keep at hard tasks. Things like this quote from Margaret Thatcher: "Look at a day when you are supremely satisfied at the end. It's not a day when you lounge around doing nothing; it's when you've had everything to do, and you've done it." Or this anonymous quote sent out through my daily email Inspire quote service (write to: [subscribe@inspirelist.com](mailto:subscribe@inspirelist.com)) : "Persistence: That which you persist in doing becomes easy to do -- not that the nature of the thing has changed, but your power and ability to do has increased." And another from Inspire: "Preparation: You don't run 26 miles, at five minutes a mile, on good looks and a secret recipe -- Frank Shorter." And over by our photocopy machine I'm greeted daily by this one: "Achievement: Those at the top of the mountain didn't fall there -- Marcus Washling." And one of my favorites to get me over the sense of passivity that can sometimes grab hold of us all, "Action: Man who stand on hill with mouth open will wait long time for roast duck to drop in -- Confucius."

And this one I've even used as part of my signature on outgoing email: "Continuation: All great masters are chiefly distinguished by the power of adding a second, a third, and perhaps a fourth step in a continuous line. Many a man has taken the first step. With every additional step you enhance immensely the value of your first. - Ralph Waldo Emerson." And it really made my day when someone wrote back after a series of emails back and forth regarding some homeschooling question, that re-reading this one quote with each new email received from me had really had a positive impact. Steeping ourselves in important truths is so important -- it begins to change our hearts and minds and our actions follow, catching up with our new visions.

**Learn to think positively, and visualize success.** Now think how different it would be to continually see little neatly printed out quotes taped in our main work areas saying things like, "Give up! You'll never do it! It's useless! You'll never make it! You'll muck up again -- just

wait and see!" Now think how often we unconsciously do this to ourselves with negative self-talk -- some of us can do this all day long, if we don't watch ourselves. We defeat our goals for better self-management before we even get started. We tell ourselves instantly that we'll never improve, that no matter what we do the problem will just get worse, that we might as well never even start. I'm learning to focus on the little and little-bit-bigger successes I'm having in this time management and organization area -- and learning, too, that I'll never arrive and wake up one day and find I no longer have to keep doing these things to keep on top of life. Just like once I get myself in much better shape, that doesn't mean that then in a month I can just forget about it and go back to being a couch potato (or should that be 'computer potato'?). I'll always need to find positive ways to work fitness activities into my life, if I want to have a long and productive life. Same with organization plans and goals -- the on-going work will never be done, but is always worth doing.

Hope you're feeling more hopeful about getting yourself organized for the upcoming homeschool year -- your kids and family will really benefit! And you'll be happier too.