

Finally Done with Being Disorganized: www.FlyLady.net to the Rescue

from Susan Richman

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It hit me again -- I really needed to clean my house. Clear the piles that cluttered so many surfaces. Clear away the no-longer-needed homeschooling resources that stuffed the shelves that line almost every wall in my home. Clear some space so we could live better.

Sometimes people think I must be very, very organized, in all areas of my life. After all, I do all those homeschool evaluations every year, and I have to get things to people by deadlines. I edit this newsletter. I've kept track of hundreds and hundreds of achievement tests during our fall testing service. I've taught four kids at home (and yep, a few years we indeed had all four needing portfolios and evaluations), right through high school. I've led lots of group homeschooling activities over the years. I've written a couple of books. I've been teaching an online AP course to kids all across the country. Organized.

But then some of you have visited my home, and you may know more about the things I don't do so very well. Say, I often haven't kept up with the basics of having a clean home, and I absolutely never do any gardening.... and the clutter piles can really pile up dangerously, and our bookshelves can be full to bursting (and a few shelves have indeed collapsed -- not fun!). I've lost library books (I've always thought that was one reason I usually prefer to just buy books...), I've missed deadlines for signing my kids up for special programs, I've paid extra charges on credit card bills just because I wasn't organized enough to mail out a check on time. And I always realize that when the house is cluttered terribly, that our homeschooling suffers right along with it -- I start feeling down and discouraged, and major textbooks get lost, to say nothing of trying to find a sharpened pencil or a pen that isn't dried up. I can get snappy and irritable, and life starts looking a bit glum in general. Periodic once-a-year purges helped, and periodic bursts of reading yet one more organizational how-to book helped.... but then I'd find myself slipping again into bad habits. Piles. Clutter. Here we go again.

I'm turning myself around now.... and really enjoying the process, too. I want to let you all in on what's been helping me change both my attitudes and my daily habits.

What has really helped me is a website called www.flylady.net and the digest email reminders FlyLady sends me every day. My older sister (not known in the past for her neatness) shared this site with me and seeing how much more organized her home was while visiting her in Georgia during January, I decided I too had to begin with FlyLady. I've been so happy and amazed and I hope you will be blessed by this site too. Seems quite a few homeschoolers are already taking part, too, judging from the not infrequent mentions of homeschooling moms in the messages. I think homeschoolers especially need help like this as we are just home so much, and overwhelmingly busy so often -- and we all start collecting so much wonderful 'stuff' that we just might use one day for a very creative project.

And some of us homeschoolers even have long-engrained negative attitudes towards routines -- the very word brings images of automaton dullness and we rebel with creative

messiness.... as if the messiness were proof of creativity. But if we don't have good daily habits in place, we just get overwhelmed and don't use half of what we have, and spend many days looking guiltily at the unused and dusty boxes of fascinating curricular materials on our overstuffed shelves. And the laundry pile-ups and late or non-existent dinners can put a crimp in any homeschooling week, and even make very kind and supportive husbands wonder a bit about the whole venture.

FlyLady starts with getting us hardcore 'side-tracked home executives' developing some very simple daily routines. Her favorite is starting with polishing your kitchen sink. "Nuts to that idea," I definitely said to myself. "My sink is stainless steel, but not the shiny type. And what do I care if it's polished?" But here's the idea -- if you take the time to make sure your sink is all cleaned up before you go to bed, then you have to complete your dishes. When I just started in on my sink, even though I thought it was a pretty dumb idea, I began noticing little rust spots that I really could get rid of with a tad of elbow grease and a steelwool scrubber. I began noticing how I so often would do a new set of dishes in a sink that was welll... not quite scrubbed out from the previous day's work, to put it generously. Then I start noticing that the counter could also use a good sponging off, and the little shelf above the sink. Maybe while I'm at it, I should really toss out the shriveled dead houseplant I've been pretending to care for these last couple of years. This part of the kitchen is starting to look really nice and inviting, and the next day in my email FlyLady will remind me again to shine that sink... daily.... every day.... you start developing one small habit that just seems to automatically lead to other ones. My sink has never looked so good. It's lovely to come down in the morning and be greeted by a little island of neatness. And it's getting infectious and spreading to many, many other areas of our home. Not so much so that just anyone would notice yet... but my daughter-in-law was speechless when I showed her the number Hannah and I had pulled on the unfinished storage part of the attic the other afternoon.... and even Howard has started to realize things are changing a bit...

FLYlady keeps things fun, and keeps our attitudes positive and upbeat, and most importantly, non-whiny. She calls it 'blessing our homes' instead of 'housework'. She sends out emails with cheery no-nonsense messages like:

27 FLING BOOGIE: READY SET GO! Take a garbage bag and RUN through your home and throw away 27 items. Do not stop until you have collected all 27 items. Then close the garbage bag and pitch it. DO NOT LOOK IN IT!!! Just do it. Next grab a box and gather up 27 items to give away... Toss it out and release the clutter!

You wouldn't believe what I've tossed out in just these last couple of weeks.... and the key is that I'm doing some decluttering every single day. Baby steps taken daily really do get you somewhere!

- I found that a stuffed-to-the-gills file cabinet in my livingroom contained all the info my 25-year-old son collected when he was 13 about the problem of old waste car fires. He did a big project on this way back then, including a major paper that he entered in a Geography competition (he even won a national honorable mention award, and a free atlas). We have this paper in his portfolio.... we didn't need this now outdated info anymore. And stuffed next to that was all the info he collected two years later for the same competition about the development of the Rails-to-Trails

movement. Again, we have the paper in his portfolio, and this info is all totally outdated and not of interest to us right now. No one has ever once looked at it since we stashed it away in this file drawer. It's now gone to recycle land.

- I found catalogs for educational supplies from 1999 and even earlier hanging around in my office. Ditto for college catalogs for colleges my kids did not want to apply to, and that are now very out-of-date and of little use in counseling others -- and I'll get new ones in the mail this year anyway. Out they went to the recyclers.
- I tossed science experiment kits that I must have bought 8 years ago. I figure if I haven't used them yet, I probably just won't... and by this time most were missing crucial pieces " or crucial things like directions. Out!
- I finally admitted that my 'baby' is now 15 and in 10th grade, and that I can start to get rid of at least some of the early reading books jamming various shelves. Even when I began thinking of my little granddaughter Sarah, now almost 2 1/2, I often had to admit that she probably wouldn't care for these torn, smudged, and dusty books. Some were given to my sister for her 2nd hand bookstore, but many were not even in good enough shape to give to the library book sale. Out they went to our burnpile.
- I'm now eyeing my cassette tape collection my hundreds of nifty little slots in the cassette shelf are completely filled, with many other tapes stacked up precariously on nearby shelves. And I know we haven't listened to virtually any of these in quite a few years, as our interests in music and stories have shifted (not to mention that our CD players work better than our cassette tape players). Lots are going to be saying goodbye very soon, or finding new homes.... Anyone for some old practice National French Exam tapes?
- All my kids took part in the MathCounts competition in their junior high years -- it's a wonderful program that really encourages advanced problem solving, and I coached a homeschoolers team for years and just loved it. But Hannah is past junior high now -- and no one is going to want these old bedraggled practice workbooks, half-written in, that I still had filling shelves in our project room. We saved one or two, then recycled the rest. Anyone I might want to recommend the program to can get new materials at www.mathcounts.org.
- Ditto for the old vocabulary workbooks that Jesse (the 25 year old...) used back in 8th grade, that I somehow thought maybe the other kids would like to finish.... But Jacob (now 22, and married) didn't use them, neither did Molly (now 19 and a junior in college), and Hannah won't be either, and now those workbooks are gone, and I have a clear shelf for the books we really are using right now. Guilt gone too!
- I'd collected quite a few back sample AP exams from the College Board when helping my older kids prepare for these challenging tests.... and I now had to admit that these are for subjects Hannah probably won't be doing, and that even if she was, these old tests and guidebooks are hopelessly out of date now -- and in many cases I'd be able to print out new guideline materials from www.collegeboard.com for free anytime I really needed them.
- I have artwork from my kids on almost every wall that doesn't have shelves or wallpapered maps all over them -- and this artwork in general charms me and delights me still, everytime I look at it, and brings back delightful memories of when the kids were younger. But I've had to admit that some need to be sent on their way -- like the wonderful large collages Molly made years and years ago to illustrate two favorite books. Our local homeschool group did a display for National Book Week for a few years at our public library.... nice community service activity and created lots of goodwill with our librarians -- but these large posters aren't in such great shape

now. They are stained and ripped, with many once-glued-on pieces now fallen off and swept away (if not caught in cobwebs...). They will soon be retired from the attic stairwell walls. Again, I have photos of these in Molly's portfolios if I want to rekindle the memory of those early projects. (Are you seeing a theme here? Portfolios, used well, can keep us from hoarding all of our kids' work....)

- Hannah, who in spite of herself is kind of getting into this dejunking mindset, just wondered what was in a cardboard tube stuck in a corner by a shelf where she keeps many of her daily books. This tube had been there for years. I began telling her about the bridge-making kit we bought when Jesse was in about 9th grade, with enough little thin strips of wood for a whole class of kids to make model bridges. We never made the bridges, mind you. Jesse and Jacob had had a wonderful time making toothpick bridges the year before I bought this kit, for a fun competition a homeschooling family ran to see which bridge was the strongest.... but this kit never was actually used, as interests moved on to other things. But I'd kept the little long skinny pieces of wood, safe in this tube -- after all, we just might use them one day. So we opened up the tube -- and I was very surprised to see not wood, but a bundle of long skinny glass tubes, the ones I bought when Jesse was doing chemistry at home in 10th grade! So maybe I did indeed toss the wood.... or maybe it will turn up in some other corner. Anyway, I decided that before we tossed the glass tubes all out, I'd show Hannah how the glass could be bent to be used in chemistry experiments, to make those necessary little glass connectors between test tubes. She's been happily bending and twisting the glass for the last half hour, heating it over our gas stovetop burners, making some really fun sculptural shapes. My new motto -- use it right now, immediately, or toss it. Even if we aren't using it for its original purpose. If Hannah does a major chem lab, it will probably be through a local college, and not in my kitchen.
- And then there were the all the 1996 AAA guidebooks to different regions of the country -- and I was keeping these for some reason right on a shelf above my dresser. I never look in them, and if I need them, I can readily get new free and up-to-date ones from the local AAA office.

I think you get the picture.... I've had real packrat tendencies (and judging from my family background, I come by it honestly!), and I'm really digging my way out -- takes time, but I'm having fun! Now, I've done this sort of thing before, after reading books by Don Aslett and others on the joys of dejunking. But with FlyLady, I'm reminded via email to do it every day. To just get up right now and do it, for 15 minutes. And I do it -- you will too.

FlyLady guides new 'flybabies' gently through the beginning steps of being more organized, and then moves you on to further realms -- thinking about something called 'zone cleaning', developing more detailed morning, afternoon, and evening routines, getting your basic finances in order, and more.

Another motto is: "You can do anything for 15 minutes" -- and she highly recommends one of my very favorite tools.... a digital timer, to clock yourself. I'm even thinking about getting my kids their own digital timers to have for themselves -- timing how long it takes to do a math assignment or setting a timer for only 20 minutes to get a start on a tough writing assignment can really work wonders. I remember my good homeschooling friend Phyllis Paladin first showing me the delights of digital timers, when she was helping with our MathCounts group -- she said it was her very favorite gift she'd gotten that whole year. Timers zap procrastination. As FlyLady says, "Let go of the guilt of procrastination and find

yourself moving to the beat of your timer!" She even urges quick breaks for 15 minutes of fitness activities. I've even been timing myself on jumping rope each morning before breakfast and then before lunch -- I'm up to 6 minutes at a time now (and boy, is that aerobic for me!! my initial goal was 2 minutes, and that was challenging just a few weeks ago.... babysteps keep you moving forward!)

FlyLady's all about establishing positive routines that will actually free you up so that you can tackle and complete the really important things in your life -- like creating a warm and loving homeschool environment. Those of us who tend to be messy types who rarely put things away know how discouraging the thought of doing something major like papier mache or science fair exhibits with our kids is.... to be able to do these neat 'extras' you do need some basic neatness in your physical space -- or a clear table at least.

Apparently almost 165,000 people are using FlyLady.net, and women regularly send in heartwarming testimonials about how the method has helped them to finally overcome even decades and decades of bad habits. If you sign up, you get pithy admonitions regularly, suitable for posting in your work area. I liked this one from today:

"We are given so many choices in life: we can whine and complain or we can get off our duffs and get honest with ourselves -- as in, 'This isn't working -- what can I do differently?' Our attitude is our choice. It's either a good one that blesses our families, or a stinky one that reeks and smells up the whole house. You choose -- it's your choice."

With FlyLady to help, you'll soon find yourself getting 'off your duff' about all sorts of things in your life -- including happily handling all the details of complying with the homeschooling law. Less whining, more doing, and more enjoying. Go for it -- you'll soon find yourself... well, FLYing!