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NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLER

"This is the rare book that will make you both smile and think—  
often on the same page." —Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive*

# THE HAPPINESS PROJECT

Or, Why I Spent a Year Trying to  
Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets,  
Fight Right, Read Aristotle,  
and Generally Have More Fun



GRETCHEN  
RUBIN



START YOUR OWN HAPPINESS PROJECT—GUIDE INSIDE

## JANUARY

*Boost Energy*

VITALITY

- **Go to sleep earlier.**
- **Exercise better.**
- **Toss, restore, organize.**
- **Tackle a nagging task.**
- **Act more energetic.**

**L**ike 44 percent of Americans, I make New Year's resolutions—and usually don't keep them for long. How many times had I resolved to exercise more, eat better, and keep up with my e-mail in-box? This year, though, I was making my resolutions in the context of my happiness project, and I hoped that would mean that I'd do a better job of keeping them. To launch the new year and my happiness project, I decided to focus on boosting my energy. More vitality, I hoped, would make it easier for me to stick to all my happiness-project resolutions in future months.

In a virtuous circle, research shows, being

happy energizes you, and at the same time, having more energy makes it easier for you to engage in activities—like socializing and exercise—that boost happiness. Studies also show that when you feel energetic, your self-esteem rises. Feeling tired, on the other hand, makes everything seem arduous. An activity that you'd ordinarily find fun, like putting up holiday decorations, feels difficult, and a more demanding task, like learning a new software program, feels overwhelming.

I know that when I feel energetic, I find it much easier to behave in ways that make me happy. I take the time to e-mail the grandparents with a report from the pediatrician's checkup. I don't scold when Eliza drops her glass of milk on the rug just as we're leaving for school. I have the perseverance to figure out why my computer screen is frozen. I take the time to put my dishes in the dishwasher.

I decided to tackle both the *physical* and *mental* aspects of energy.

For my physical energy: I needed to make sure that I got enough sleep and enough exercise. Although I'd already known that sleep and exercise were important to good health, I'd been surprised to learn that happiness—which can seem like a complex, lofty, and intangible goal—was quite influenced by these straightforward habits. For my mental energy: I needed to tackle my apartment and office, which felt oppressively messy and crowded. Outer order, I hoped, would bring inner peace. What's more, I needed to clear away metaphorical clutter; I wanted to cross tasks off my to-do list. I added one last resolution that combined the mental and the physical. Studies show that by acting *as if* you feel more energetic, you can *become* more energetic. I was skeptical, but it seemed worth a try.

## GO TO SLEEP EARLIER.

First: bodily energy.

A glamorous friend with a tendency to make sweeping pronouncements had told me that "Sleep is the new sex," and I'd recently been at a

dinner party where each person at the table detailed the best nap he or she had ever had, in lascivious detail, while everyone moaned in appreciation.

Millions of people fail to get the recommended seven to eight hours of sleep a night, and one study revealed that along with tight work deadlines, a bad night's sleep was one of the top two factors that upset people's daily moods. Another study suggested that getting one extra hour of sleep each night would do more for a person's daily happiness than getting a \$60,000 raise. Nevertheless, the average adult sleeps only 6.9 hours during the week, and 7.9 on the weekend—20 percent less than in 1900. Although people adjust to feeling sleepy, sleep deprivation impairs memory, weakens the immune system, slows metabolism, and might, some studies suggest, foster weight gain.

My new, not-exactly-startling resolution for getting more sleep was to *turn off the light*. Too often I stayed up to read, answer e-mails, watch TV, pay bills, or whatever, instead of going to bed.

Nevertheless, just a few days into the happiness project, although I practically fell asleep on Eliza's purple sheets as I was tucking her in, I wavered for a moment when Jamie proposed watching our latest Netflix DVD, *The Conversation*. I love movies; I wanted to spend time with Jamie; 9:30 P.M. seemed a ridiculously early hour to go to bed; and I knew from experience that if I started watching, I'd perk up. On the other hand, I felt exhausted.

Why does it often seem more tiring to go to bed than to stay up? Inertia, I suppose. Plus there's the prebed work of taking out my contact lenses, brushing my teeth, and washing my face. But I'd made my resolution, so resolutely I headed to bed. I slept eight solid hours and woke up an hour early, at 5:30 A.M., so in addition to getting a good night's sleep, I had the chance to do a peaceful block of work while my family was still in bed.

I'm a real know-it-all, so I was pleased when my sister called and complained of insomnia. Elizabeth is five years younger than I am, but usually I'm the one asking her for advice.

"I'm not getting any sleep," she said. "I've already given up caffeine. What else can I do?"

"Lots of things," I said, prepared to rattle off the tips that I'd uncovered in my research. "Near your bedtime, don't do any work that requires alert thinking. Keep your bedroom slightly chilly. Do a few prebed stretches. Also—this is important—because light confuses the body's circadian clock, keep the lights low around bedtime, say, if you go to the bathroom. Also, make sure your room is very dark when the lights are out. Like a hotel room."

"Do you really think it can make a difference?" she asked.

"All the studies say that it does."

I'd tried all these steps myself, and I'd found the last one—keeping our bedroom dark—surprisingly difficult to accomplish.

"What *are* you doing?" Jamie had asked one night when he caught me rearranging various devices throughout our room.

"I'm trying to block the light from all these gizmos," I answered. "I read that even a tiny light from a digital alarm clock can disrupt a sleep cycle, and it's like a mad scientist's lab in here. Our BlackBerrys, the computer, the cable box—everything blinks or glows bright green."

"Huh" was all he said, but he did help me move some things on the nightstand to block the light coming from our alarm clock.

These changes did seem to make falling asleep easier. But I often lost sleep for another reason: I'd wake up in the middle of the night—curiously, usually at 3:18 A.M.—and be unable to go back to sleep. For those nights, I developed another set of tricks. I breathed deeply and slowly until I couldn't stand it anymore. When my mind was racing with a to-do list, I wrote everything down. There's evidence that too little blood flow to the extremities can keep you awake, so if my feet were cold, I put on wool socks—which, though it made me feel frumpish, did seem to help.

Two of my most useful getting-to-sleep strategies were my own invention. First, I tried to get ready for bed well before bedtime. Sometimes I stayed up late because I was too tired to take out my contacts—plus,

putting on my glasses had an effect like putting the cover on the parrot's cage. Also, if I woke up in the night, I'd tell myself, "I have to get up in two minutes." I'd imagine that I'd just hit the snooze alarm and in two minutes, I'd have to march through my morning routine. Often this was an exhausting enough prospect to make me fall asleep.

And sometimes I gave up and took an Ambien.

After a week or so of more sleep, I began to feel a real difference. I felt more energetic and cheerful with my children in the morning. I didn't feel a painful, never-fulfilled urge to take a nap in the afternoon. Getting out of bed in the morning was no longer torture; it's so much nicer to wake up naturally instead of being jerked out of sleep by a buzzing alarm.

Nevertheless, despite all the benefits, I still struggled to put myself to bed as soon as I felt sleepy. Those last few hours of the day were precious—when the workday was finished, Jamie was home, my daughters were asleep, and I had some free time. Only the daily reminder on my Resolutions Chart kept me from staying up until midnight most nights.

## EXERCISE BETTER.

There's a staggering amount of evidence to show that exercise is good for you. Among other benefits, people who exercise are healthier, think more clearly, sleep better, and have delayed onset of dementia. Regular exercise boosts energy levels; although some people assume that working out is tiring, in fact, it boosts energy, especially in sedentary people—of whom there are many. A recent study showed that 25 percent of Americans don't get any exercise at all. Just by exercising twenty minutes a day three days a week for six weeks, persistently tired people boosted their energy.

Even knowing all these benefits, though, you can find it difficult to change from a couch potato into a gym enthusiast. Many years ago, I'd managed to turn myself into a regular exerciser, but it hadn't been easy. My idea of fun has always been to lie in bed reading. Preferably while eating a snack.

When I was in high school, I wanted to redecorate my bedroom to replace the stylized flowered wallpaper that I thought wasn't sufficiently sophisticated for a freshman, and I wrote a long proposal laying out my argument to my parents. My father considered the proposal and said, "All right, we'll redecorate your room. But in return, you have to do something four times a week for twenty minutes."

"What do I have to do?" I asked, suspicious.

"You have to take it or leave it. It's twenty minutes. How bad can it be?"

"Okay, I'll take the deal," I decided. "What do I have to do?"

His answer: "Go for a run."

My father, himself a dedicated runner, never told me how far I had to run or how fast; he didn't even keep track of whether I went for twenty minutes. All he asked was that I put on my running shoes and shut the door behind me. My father's deal got me to commit to a routine, and once I started running, I found that I didn't mind *exercising*, I just didn't like *sports*.

My father's approach might well have backfired. With *extrinsic motivation*, people act to win external rewards or avoid external punishments; with *intrinsic motivation*, people act for their own satisfaction. Studies show that if you reward people for doing an activity, they often stop doing it for fun; being paid turns it into "work." Parents, for example, are warned not to reward children for reading—they're teaching kids to read for a reward, not for pleasure. By giving me an extrinsic motivation, my father risked sapping my inclination to exercise on my own. As it happened, in my case, he provided an extrinsic motivation that unleashed my intrinsic motivation.

Ever since that room redecoration, I've been exercising regularly. I never push myself hard, but I get myself out the door several times a week. For a long time, however, I'd been thinking that I really should start strength training. Lifting weights increases muscle mass, strengthens bones, firms the core, and—I admit, most important to me—improves shape. People

who work out with weights maintain more muscle and gain less fat as they age. A few times over the years, I'd halfheartedly tried lifting weights, but I'd never stuck to it; now, with my resolution to "Exercise better," it was time to start.

There's a Buddhist saying that I've found to be uncannily true: "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." Just a few days after I committed to my resolution to "Exercise better," I met a friend for coffee, and she mentioned that she'd started a great weight-training program at a gym in my neighborhood.

"I don't like the idea of working out with a trainer," I objected. "I'd feel self-conscious, and it's expensive. I want to do it on my own."

"Try it," my friend urged. "I promise, you'll love it. It's a superefficient way to exercise. The whole workout takes only twenty minutes. Plus"—she paused dramatically—"you don't *sweat*. You work out without having to shower afterward."

This was a major selling point. I dislike taking showers. "But," I asked doubtfully, "how can a good workout take only twenty minutes if you're not even sweating?"

"You lift weights at the very outer limit of your strength. You don't do many repetitions, and you do only one set. Believe me, it works. I love it."

In Daniel Gilbert's book *Stumbling on Happiness*, he argues that the most effective way to judge whether a particular course of action will make you happy in the future is to ask people who are following that course of action right now if they're happy and assume that you'll feel the same way. According to his theory, the fact that my friend raved about this fitness routine was a pretty good indicator that I'd be enthusiastic, too. Also, I reminded myself, one of my Secrets of Adulthood was "Most decisions don't require extensive research."

I made an appointment for the next day, and by the time I left, I was a convert. My trainer was terrific, and the atmosphere in the training room was much nicer than most gyms—no music, no mirrors, no crowds, no waiting. On my way out the door, I charged the maximum



twenty-four sessions on my credit card to get the discount, and within a month, I'd convinced Jamie and my mother-in-law, Judy, to start going to the same gym.

The only disadvantage was that it was expensive. "It seems like a lot to spend for a twenty-minute workout," I said to Jamie.

"Would you rather get more for your money?" he asked. "We're spending more to get a shorter workout." Good point.

In addition to strength training, I wanted to start walking more. The repetitive activity of walking, studies show, triggers the body's relaxation response and so helps reduce stress; at the same time, even a quick ten-minute walk provides an immediate energy boost and improves mood—in fact, exercise is an effective way to snap out of a funk. Also, I kept reading that, as a minimum of activity for good health, people should aim to take 10,000 steps a day—a number that also reportedly keeps most people from gaining weight.

Living in New York, I felt as if I walked miles every day. But did I? I picked up a \$20 pedometer from the running store near my apartment. Once I'd been clipping it onto my belt for a week, I discovered that on days when I did a fair amount of walking—walking Eliza to school *and* walking to the gym, for example—I hit 10,000 easily. On days when I stayed close to home, I barely cleared 3,000.

It was interesting to have a better sense of my daily habits. Also, the very fact of wearing a pedometer made me walk more. One of my worst qualities is my insatiable need for *credit*; I always want the gold star, the recognition. One night when I was in high school, I came home late from a party and decided to surprise my mother by cleaning up our messy kitchen. She came downstairs the next morning and said, "What wonderful fairy came in the night and did all this work?" and looked so pleased. More than twenty years later, I still remember that gold star, and I still want more of them.

This generally negative quality had a benefit in this circumstance; because the pedometer gave me credit for making an extra effort, I was

more likely to do it. One morning I'd planned to take the subway to my dentist's appointment, but as I walked out the door, it occurred to me, "Walking to the dentist will take the same amount of time, and I'll get credit for the steps!" Plus, I think I benefited from the "Hawthorne effect," in which people being studied improve their performance, simply because of the extra attention they're getting. In this case, I was the guinea pig of my own experiment.

Walking had an added benefit: it helped me to think. Nietzsche wrote, "All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking," and his observation is backed up by science; exercise-induced brain chemicals help people think clearly. In fact, just stepping outside clarifies thinking and boosts energy. Light deprivation is one reason that people feel tired, and even five minutes of daylight stimulates production of serotonin and dopamine, brain chemicals that improve mood. Many times, I'd guiltily leave my desk to take a break, and while I was walking around the block, I'd get some useful insight that had eluded me when I was being virtuously diligent.

### TOSS, RESTORE, ORGANIZE.

Household disorder was a constant drain on my energy; the minute I walked through the apartment door, I felt as if I needed to start putting clothes in the hamper and gathering loose toys. I wasn't alone in my fight against clutter. In a sign that people are finding their possessions truly unmanageable, the number of storage units nationwide practically doubled in one decade. One study suggested that eliminating clutter would cut down the amount of housework in the average home by 40 percent.

To use the first month of my happiness project to tackle clutter seemed a bit small-minded, as if my highest priority in life were to rearrange my sock drawer. But I craved an existence of order and serenity—which, translated into real life, meant a household with coats hung in the closet and spare rolls of paper towels.

I was also weighed down by the invisible, but even more enervating, psychic clutter of loose ends. I had a long list of neglected tasks that made me feel weary and guilty whenever I thought of them. I needed to clear away the detritus in my mind.

I decided to tackle the visible clutter first, and I discovered something surprising: the psychologists and social scientists who do happiness research never mention clutter at all. They never raise it in their descriptions of the factors that contribute to happiness or in their lists of strategies to boost happiness. The philosophers, too, ignore it, although Samuel Johnson, who had an opinion about everything, did remark, “No money is better spent that what is laid out for domestic satisfaction.”

By contrast, when I turned to popular culture, discussions of clutter clearing abounded. Whatever the happiness scientists might study, ordinary people are convinced that clearing clutter will boost their happiness—and they’re “laying out money for domestic satisfaction” by buying *Real Simple* magazine, reading the *Unclutterer* blog, hiring California Closets, and practicing amateur feng shui. Apparently, other people, like me, believe that their physical surroundings influence their spiritual happiness.

I paced through our apartment to size up the clutter-clearing challenge I faced. Once I started really looking, I was amazed by how much clutter had accumulated without my realizing it. Our apartment was bright and pleasant, but a scum of clutter filmed its surface.

When I surveyed the master bedroom, for example, I was dismayed. The soft green walls and the rose-and-leaf pattern on the bed and curtains made the room calm and inviting, but stacks of papers were piled randomly on the coffee table and on the floor in the corner. Untidy heaps of books covered every available surface. CDs, DVDs, cords, chargers, coins, collar stays, business cards, and instruction booklets were scattered like confetti. Objects that needed to be put away, objects that didn’t have a real place, unidentified lurking objects—they all needed to be placed in their proper homes. Or tossed or given away.

As I contemplated the magnitude of the job before me, I invoked my

Tenth Commandment: “Do what ought to be done.” This commandment distilled into one principle a lot of different strands of advice my mother had given me over the years. The fact is, I tend to feel overwhelmed by large tasks and am often tempted to try to make life easier by cutting corners.

We recently moved, and beforehand, I was panicking at the thought of everything that needed to be done. What moving company should we use? Where could we buy boxes? How would our furniture fit into our new apartment building’s tiny service elevator? I was paralyzed. My mother had her usual matter-of-fact, unruffled attitude, and she reminded me that I should just do what I knew I ought to do. “It won’t really be that hard,” she said reassuringly when I called her for a pep talk. “Make a list, do a little bit each day, and *stay calm*.” Taking the bar exam, writing thank-you notes, having a baby, getting our carpets cleaned, checking endless footnotes as I was finishing my biography of Winston Churchill . . . my mother made me feel that nothing was insurmountable if I did what I knew ought to be done, little by little.

My evaluation of our apartment revealed that my clutter came in several distinct varieties. First was *nostalgic clutter*, made up of relics I clung to from my earlier life. I made a mental note that I didn’t need to keep the huge box of materials I used for the “Business and Regulation of Television” seminar I taught years ago.

Second was self-righteous *conservation clutter*, made up of things that I’ve kept because they’re useful—even though they’re useless to me. Why was I storing twenty-three glass florist-shop vases?

One kind of clutter I saw in other people’s homes but didn’t suffer from myself was *bargain clutter*, which results from buying unnecessary things because they’re on sale. I did suffer from related *freebie clutter*—the clutter of gifts, hand-me-downs, and giveaways that we didn’t use. Recently my mother-in-law mentioned that she was getting rid of one of their table lamps, and she asked if we wanted it.

“Sure,” I said automatically, “it’s a great lamp.” But a few days later,

I thought better of it. The lampshade wasn't right, the color wasn't right, and we didn't really have a place to put it.

"Actually," I e-mailed her later, "we don't need the lamp. But thanks." I'd narrowly missed some *freebie clutter*.

I also had a problem with *crutch clutter*. These things I used but knew I shouldn't: my horrible green sweatshirt (bought secondhand more than ten years ago), my eight-year-old underwear with holes and frayed edges. This kind of clutter drove my mother crazy. "Why do you want to wear *that*?" she'd say. She always looked fabulous, while I found it difficult not to wear shapeless yoga pants and ratty white T-shirts day after day.

I felt particularly oppressed by *aspirational clutter*—things that I owned but only aspired to use: the glue gun I never mastered, mysteriously specific silver serving pieces untouched since our wedding, my beige pumps with superhigh heels. The flip side of aspirational clutter is *outgrown clutter*. I discovered a big pile of plastic photo boxes piled in a drawer. I used them for years, but even though I like proper picture frames now, I'd held on to the plastic versions.

The kind of clutter that I found most disagreeable was *buyer's remorse clutter*, when, rather than admit that I'd made a bad purchase, I hung on to things until somehow I felt they'd been "used up" by sitting in a closet or on a shelf—the canvas bag that I'd used only once since I bought it two years ago, those impractical white pants.

Having sized up the situation, I went straight to the festering heart of my household clutter: my own closet. I've never been very good at folding, so messy, lopsided towers of shirts and sweaters jammed the shelves. Too many items were hung on the clothes rod, so I had to muscle my way into a mass of wool and cotton to pull anything out. Bits of socks and T-shirts hung over the edges of the drawers that I'd forced shut. I'd start my clutter clearing here.

So I could focus properly, I stayed home while Jamie took the girls to visit his parents for the day. The minute the elevator door closed behind them, I began.

I'd read suggestions that I should invest in an extra closet rod or in storage boxes that fit under the bed or in hangers that would hold four pairs of pants on one rod. For me, however, there was only one essential tool of clutter clearing: trash bags. I set aside one bag for throwaways and one for giveaways and dived in.

First, I got rid of items that no one should be wearing anymore. Good-bye, baggy yoga pants. Next I pulled out the items that, realistically, I knew I wouldn't wear. Good-bye, gray sweater that barely covered my navel. Then the culling got harder. I liked those brown pants, but I couldn't figure out what shoes to wear with them. I liked that dress, but I never had the right place to wear it. I forced myself to take the time to make each item work, and if I couldn't, out it went. I started to notice my dodges. When I told myself, "I would wear this," I meant that I didn't, in fact, wear it. "I have worn this" meant that I'd worn it twice in five years. "I could wear this" meant that I'd never worn it and never would.

Once I'd finished the closet, I went back through it once again. When I finished, I had four bags full of clothes, and I could see huge patches of the back of my closet. I no longer felt drained; instead, I felt exhilarated. No more being confronted with my mistakes! No more searching in frustration for a particular white button-down shirt!

Having cleared some space, I craved more. I tried any trick I could. Why had I been holding on to thirty extra hangers? I got rid of all but a few extra hangers, which opened up a considerable amount of space. I got rid of some shopping bags I'd kept tucked away for years, for no good reason. I'd planned only on sorting through hanging items, but, energized and inspired, I attacked my sock and T-shirt drawers. Instead of pawing around for items to eliminate, I emptied each drawer completely, and I put back only the items that I actually wore.

I gloated as I surveyed my now-roomy closet. So much space. No more guilt. The next day I craved another hit. "We're going to do something really fun tonight!" I said to Jamie in a bright voice as he was checking sports news on TV.

“What?” he said, immediately suspicious. He kept the remote control prominently in his hand.

“We’re going to clear out your closet and drawers!”

“Oh. Well, okay,” he said agreeably. I shouldn’t have been surprised by his reaction; Jamie loves order. He turned off the TV.

“But we’re not going to get rid of much,” he warned me. “I wear most of this stuff pretty regularly.”

“Okay, sure,” I said sweetly. We’ll see about that, I thought.

Going through his closet turned out to be fun. Jamie sat on the bed while I pulled hangers out of his closet, two at a time, and he, much less tortured than I, gave a simple thumbs-up or thumbs-down—except once, when he insisted, “I’ve never seen that pair of pants before in my life.” He got rid of a giant bag of clothes.

Over the next few weeks, as I adjusted to my half-empty closet, I noticed a paradox: although I had far fewer clothes in front of me, I felt as though I had *more* to wear—because everything in my closet was something that I realistically would wear.

Also, having few clothing choices made me feel happier. Although people believe they like to have lots of choice, in fact, having too many choices can be discouraging. Instead of making people feel more satisfied, a wide range of options can paralyze them. Studies show that when faced with two dozen varieties of jam in a grocery store, for example, or lots of investment options for their pension plan, people often choose arbitrarily or walk away without making any choice at all, rather than labor to make a reasoned choice. I certainly felt happier choosing between two pairs of black pants that I liked rather than among five pairs of black pants, the majority of which were either uncomfortable or unfashionable—and which made me feel guilty for never wearing them, to boot.

Who knew that doing something so mundane could give me such a kick? By this point, I was jonesing for more of the clutter-clearing buzz, so while a pregnant friend opened her presents at a baby shower, I quizzed my fellow guests for new strategies.

“Focus on the dump zones,” advised one friend. “You know, the dining room table, the kitchen counter, the place where everyone dumps their stuff.”

“Right,” I said. “Our biggest dump zone is a chair in our bedroom. We never sit in it, we just pile clothes and magazines on it.”

“Junk attracts more junk. If you clear it off, it’s likely to stay clear. And here’s another thing,” she continued. “When you buy any kind of device, put the cords, the manual, all that stuff in a labeled Ziploc bag. You avoid having a big tangle of mystery cords, plus when you get rid of the device, you can get rid of the ancillary parts, too.”

“Try a ‘virtual move,’” another friend added. “I just did it myself. Walk around your apartment and ask yourself—if I were moving, would I pack this or get rid of it?”

“I *never* keep anything for sentimental reasons alone,” someone else claimed. “Only if I’m still using it.”

These suggestions were helpful, but that last rule was too draconian for me. I’d never get rid of the “Justice Never Rests” T-shirt from the aerobics class I took with Justice Sandra Day O’Connor when I clerked for her, even though it never did fit, or the doll-sized outfit that our preemie Eliza wore when she came home from the hospital. (At least these items didn’t take up much room. I have a friend who keeps twelve tennis racquets, left over from her days playing college tennis.)

When one of my college roommates visited New York, we waxed lyrical over coffee about the glories of clutter clearing.

“What in life,” I demanded, “gives immediate gratification equal to cleaning out a medicine cabinet? Nothing!”

“No, nothing,” she agreed with equal fervor. But she took it even further. “You know, I keep an empty shelf.”

“What do you mean?”

“I keep one shelf, somewhere in my house, completely empty. I’ll pack every other shelf to the top, but I keep one shelf bare.”

I was struck by the poetry of this resolution. An empty shelf! And she



had three children. An empty shelf meant possibility; space to expand; a luxurious waste of something useful for the sheer elegance of it. I had to have one. I went home, went straight to my hall closet, and emptied a shelf. It wasn't a big shelf, but it was empty. Thrilling.

I hunted through the apartment, and no object, no matter how small, escaped my scrutiny. I'd long been annoyed by the maddening accumulation of gimcracks that children attract. Glittery superballs, miniature flashlights, small plastic zoo animals . . . this stuff was everywhere. It was fun to have and the girls wanted to keep it, but it was hard to put it away, because where did it go?

My Eighth Commandment is "Identify the problem." I'd realized that often I put up with a problem for years because I never examined the nature of the problem and how it might be solved. It turns out that stating a problem clearly often suggests its solution. For instance, I hated hanging up my coat, so I usually left it slung on the back of a chair.

Identify the problem: "Why don't I ever hang up my coat?"

Answer: "I don't like fussing with hangers."

Solution: "So use the hook on the inside of the door!"

When I asked myself, "What's the problem with all these little toys?" I answered, "Eliza and Eleanor want to keep this stuff, but we don't have a place to put it away." Bingo. I immediately saw the solution to my problem. The next day, I stopped by the Container Store and bought five large glass canisters. I combed the apartment to collect toy flotsam and stuffed it in. Clutter cured! I filled all five jars. What I hadn't anticipated was that the jars looked great on the shelf—colorful, festive, and inviting. My solution was ornamental as well as practical.

A pleasant, unintended consequence of my clutter clearing was that it solved the "four-thermometer syndrome": I could never find our thermometer, so I kept buying new ones, and when my clutter clearing flushed them all out, we had *four* thermometers. (Which I never used, by the way; I felt the back of the girls' necks to see if they had a fever.) It's a Secret of Adulthood: if you can't find something, clean up. I discovered that al-

though it seemed easier to put things away in general areas—the coat closet, any kitchen drawer—it was more satisfying when each item went in a highly specific location. One of life’s small pleasures is to return something to its proper place; putting the shoe polish on the second shelf in the linen closet gave me the archer’s satisfaction of hitting a mark.

I also hit on a few daily rules to help keep the apartment from constantly falling into disorder. First, following my Fourth Commandment, “Do it now,” I started to apply the “one-minute rule”; I didn’t postpone any task that could be done in less than one minute. I put away my umbrella; I filed a document; I put the newspapers in the recycling bin; I closed the cabinet door. These steps took just a few moments, but the cumulative impact was impressive.

Along with the “one-minute rule,” I observed the “evening tidy-up” by taking ten minutes before bed to do simple tidying. Tidying up at night made our mornings more serene and pleasant and, in an added benefit, helped prepare me for sleep. Putting things in order is very calming, and doing something physical makes me aware of being tired. If I’ve been reading under the covers for an hour before turning out the light, I don’t get the same feeling of luxurious comfort when I stretch out in bed.

As the clutter behind closed doors and cabinets began to diminish, I attacked visual clutter. For instance, we subscribe to a huge number of magazines, and we couldn’t keep them neat. I cleared out a drawer, and now we keep magazines stacked out of sight, ready to grab before we head to the gym. I’d been keeping invitations, school notices, and various miscellanea posted on a bulletin board, but I pulled it all down and moved it into a file labeled “Upcoming events and invitations.” I was no more or less organized than before, but our visual chaos dropped.

I’d dreaded doing the clutter clearing, because it seemed like such an enormous job, and it *was* an enormous job, but every time I looked around and saw the extra space and order, I registered a little jolt of energy. I was thrilled with the improved conditions in our apartment, and I kept waiting for Jamie to say, “Boy, everything looks terrific! You’ve done so

much work, it's so much nicer!" But he never did. I love my gold stars, so that was disappointing, but on the other hand, he didn't complain about lugging five hundred pounds of stuff to the thrift store. And even if he didn't appreciate my efforts as much I'd expected, it didn't really matter; I felt uplifted and restored by my clutter clearing.

### TACKLE A NAGGING TASK.

Unfinished tasks were draining my energy and making me feel guilty. I felt like a bad friend because I hadn't bought a wedding gift. I felt like an irresponsible family member because I'd never gotten a skin cancer check (and I have the superfair skin that comes with red hair). I felt like a bad parent because our toddler, Eleanor, needed new shoes. I had an image of myself sitting in front of a hive-shaped laptop, while reminders in the form of bees dive-bombed my head, buzzing, "Do me!" "Do me!" while I slapped them away. It was time for some relief.

I sat down and wrote a five-page to-do list. Writing the list was sort of fun, but then I had to face the prospect of doing tasks that I'd been avoiding—in some cases, for years. For the sake of morale, I added several items that could be crossed off with five minutes of effort.

Over the next several weeks, I doggedly tackled my list. I had my first skin cancer check. I got the windows cleaned. I got a backup system for my computer. I figured out a mystery cable bill. I took my shoes to be reheeled.

As I grappled with some of the more difficult items on the to-do list, though, I faced a discouraging number of "boomerang errands": errands that I thought I was getting rid of but then came right back to me. Eighteen months overdue, congratulating myself on crossing the task off the list, I went to the dentist to get my teeth cleaned, only to discover that I had decay under one filling. I had to return to the dentist the next week. Boomerang. After months of procrastination, I asked the building super to

fix our bedroom wall light, but it turned out he couldn't do it. He gave me the number of an electrician. I called the electrician; he came, he took the light off the wall, but he couldn't fix it. He told me about a repair shop. I took the light to the repair shop. A week later, I picked it up. Then the electrician had to come back to install it. Then the light worked again. Boomerang, boomerang, boomerang.

I had to accept the fact that some nagging tasks would never be crossed off my list. I would have to do them every day for the rest of my life. Finally I started wearing sunscreen every day—well, most days. Finally I started flossing every day—well, most days. (Although I knew that sun exposure can lead to cancer and unhealthy gums can lead to tooth loss, focusing on wrinkles and bad breath proved to be more motivating considerations.)

Sometimes, though, the most difficult part of doing a task was just deciding to *do it*. I began one morning by sending an e-mail that included only forty-eight words and took forty-five seconds to write—yet it had been weighing on my mind for at least two weeks. Such unfinished tasks were disproportionately draining.

An important aspect of happiness is managing your moods, and studies show that one of the best ways to lift your mood is to engineer an easy success, such as tackling a long-delayed chore. I was astounded by the dramatic boost in my mental energy that came from taking care of these neglected tasks.

### ACT MORE ENERGETIC.

To feel more energetic, I applied one of my Twelve Commandments: “Act the way I want to feel.” This commandment sums up one of the most helpful insights that I'd learned in my happiness research: although we presume that we *act* because of the way we *feel*, in fact we often *feel* because of the way we *act*. For example, studies show that even an artificially induced smile brings about happier emotions, and one experiment suggested

that people who use Botox are less prone to anger, because they can't make angry faces. The philosopher and psychologist William James explained, "Action seems to follow feeling, but really action and feeling go together; and by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not." Advice from every quarter, ancient and contemporary, backs up the observation that to change our feelings, we should change our actions.

Although a "fake it till you feel it" strategy sounded hokey, I found it extremely effective. When I felt draggy, I started to act with more energy. I sped up my walk. I paced while talking on the phone. I put more warmth and zest into my voice. Sometimes I feel exhausted by the prospect of spending time with my own children, but one tired afternoon, instead of trying to devise a game that involved my lying on the couch (I've managed to be astonishingly resourceful in coming up with ideas), I bounded into the room and said, "Hey, let's play in the tent!" It really worked; I did manage to give myself an energy boost by acting with energy.

By the end of January, I was off to a promising start, but did I feel happier? It was too soon to tell. I did feel more alert and calm, and although I still had periods when I felt overtaxed, they became less frequent.

I found that rewarding myself for good behavior—even when that reward was nothing more than a check mark that I gave myself on my Resolutions Chart—made it easier for me to stick to a resolution. Getting a bit of reinforcement did make a difference. I could see, however, that I'd have to remind myself continually to keep my resolutions. In particular, I noticed a decline in my order-maintaining zeal by the end of the month. I loved the big payoff of cleaning out a closet, but keeping the apartment tidy was a Sisyphean task that never stayed finished. Perhaps the "one-minute rule" and the "evening tidy-up" would keep me attacking clutter regularly, in small doses, so that it couldn't grow to its previous crushing proportions.

Nevertheless, I was astonished by the charge of energy and satisfaction I got from creating order. The closet that had been an eyesore was now a joy; the stack of papers slowly yellowing on the edge of my desk was gone. “It is by studying *little things*,” wrote Samuel Johnson, “that we attain the great art of having as little misery, and as much happiness as possible.”