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The mess he made: A life-long slob decides it's time to get organized

By Michael S. Rosenwald
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My parents recall that my teenage room was such a disaster, the piles of clothes and old newspapers so high, that our dog Ozzie considered it equivalent to the back yard and used it accordingly. Ozzie was clever enough to open closed doors, so my parents installed a chain lock on the outside. The chain naturally prompted questions from visitors, the most tactful being: "Why are you locking your son away?"

Nearly 20 years later, my high school girlfriend cannot shake the memory of being surrounded by my piles. "I remember your room smelling so bad I would seriously breathe out of my mouth until I could somewhat get used to it," she told me when I tracked her down on Facebook. "I can't describe it, but I'm sure if I did one of those tests with a blindfold, I could pick it out even to this day. Maybe a mixture of old sneakers and dirty clothes and rotting food all mixed together."

My parents once moved all of my stuff to the front lawn, hoping the embarrassment would reform me. Ingenious. Didn't work.

My problems accelerated after I left for college. My freshman roommate, who eventually became one of my closest friends, only recently told me that he had requested, but was denied, a roommate change after he was unable to safely walk from one end of our room to the other without slipping on a pile of newspapers, magazines, books or unopened mail.

Living alone made matters worse. When I was in graduate school, burglars stole a laptop from my apartment. The detectives, two women who reminded me of Cagney and Lacey, took only a few seconds to offer their first investigative finding: "Wow, your place really got ransacked." I explained that nothing in the apartment had been touched, including stacks of several years' worth of newspapers, and that I hadn't cleaned up because I had wanted to preserve fingerprint evidence.

There was silence. Then one of the detectives said, "We're calling your mother."

I said, "She knows."

You may be surprised to learn that I am married. I should confess that my wife, Megan, was not briefed on any of these tales when we first met in Boston, and I made sure she didn't learn of my special qualities until I had charmed her extensively. "I felt you kind of deceived me when we first met," she told me recently. "You had your car professionally cleaned, a friend picked out your clothes, and you even hired a maid to clean your apartment before I came over the first time."

For reasons I still can't totally explain, she not only agreed to move with me to Maryland a few years later but also said yes, without a twitch, when I proposed.

Still, she wondered. "I remember going through your books before we moved," she said, "and finding two or three copies of the same book. Who does that?"

Megan's question led me to confront myself: Am I, as she puts it, the laziest, most nauseating slob in modern U.S. history? Or is something else going on -- something more complicated?

Am I a hoarder?

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Like most people, when I think of hoarding, the images that come to mind are the horrific scenes of uninhabitable homes that enter our living rooms during Sweeps Week. We watch these TV tales in the same way that we slow down for multiple-vehicle pileups on the Beltway. A couple of years ago, in an episode titled "Inside the Secret Lives of Hoarders," Oprah Winfrey visited a Rockville couple whose 3,000-square-foot home was overflowing with 75 tons of garbage. I went looking for the clips the other day on Oprah's Web site, and the page about the show shouted, "Uncover what's behind a hoarder's closed doors!" I felt my stomach turn. The exclamation point, to me, screamed: "Freak show here. Step right up." For many Americans, these are hoarders, no further details needed. But as I now know, that's not the whole story.

After soliciting recollections of my slobbiness from friends and family, I looked into the scholarship on disorganization and hoarding. The first book I came across was co-authored by Randy Frost, the world's foremost hoarding expert. Titled "Buried in Treasures: Help for Compulsive Acquiring, Saving, and Hoarding," the book prompted a double take from the cashier when I paid for it at Barnes & Noble. Usually, I don't ask for a bag. This time, I did.

The book includes a questionnaire Frost devised to identify hoarders. Reclining in my living room La-Z-Boy, I pulled out one of my favorite fountain pens and took the test. (I have hundreds of fancy pens, vastly more than I could ever use.) One question was: "How much does clutter in your home interfere with your social, work or everyday functioning? Think about things you don't do because of clutter." Our dining room table and its chairs are totally covered with my piles of papers and at least a dozen bottles of fountain pen ink, so the idea of having people over for dinner or even to watch a football game is rather exotic.

Another question: "To what extent do you have difficulty throwing things away?" Answer: I tell my wife I am throwing things away, but, really, I just hide stuff in other places.

"How strong is your urge to save something you know you may never use?" Before leaving Boston in 2004, I found a box of unopened mail -- catalogues, flyers, bills and letters from collection agencies -- dating to 1993.

I totaled my answers to the test's 15 questions. My clutter score qualified as "severe." My "difficulty discarding" score qualified as "severe." My "acquiring" score qualified as "severe." I looked up in the direction of our dining room table and thought, Uh-oh.

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Frost has a corner office in the humanities building on the campus of Smith College, a women's school in Northampton, Mass. He invited me to visit so I could be psychologically dissected in his advanced seminar on hoarding. I was to be the guest specimen. When I arrived, he was straightening his desk, which was already tidy. Frost is 6-foot-5, built like a basketball forward, with a tightly groomed mustache and much less than a full head of hair. He is charming and soft-spoken, two qualities that probably ingratiate him well to the thousands of hoarders whose homes he has visited for his studies.

Frost came to Smith in 1977 to teach abnormal psychology, but it wasn't until 1991 that he stumbled on hoarding. A student was discussing ideas for her term paper. She wondered about people who could not throw things away. Could she write her paper on this topic? Frost did not think the behavior, while abnormal, was widespread enough to justify a term paper. "Hoarding is something you don't see very often, and there is no literature on it," he said to her. But the student persisted. She mentioned the Collyer brothers, the infamous pair who died under 130 tons of junk in their tiny Manhattan apartment -- they are the subject of a new novel by E.L. Doctorow -- and how her mother often told her to "clean up your room so you don't end up like the Collyer brothers."

Frost told his student to place an ad in the newspaper to see if any hoarders might help her with firsthand accounts. He expected a few calls. They got 100. "It's been like a runaway train since then," he said. He recently co-authored a new book on the subject, "Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things." Frost said current studies show that from 2.5 percent to 5 percent of American adults suffer from some form of hoarding. In 1991, Frost and his student knew only of those 100 callers, and they surveyed them in the first major study of hoarding.

In many homes, they found, stuff was piling up -- not necessarily overtaking homes but rendering many important functions impossible. One subject's house had "a series of maze-like paths through rooms piled to the ceiling with miscellaneous objects." Another had no clutter visible, but the basement and attic had hundreds of boxes stacked in rows up to the ceiling. Kitchen tables became storage pallets. Living rooms became labyrinths. Spare bedrooms became flea markets. But why?

Frost and his student's quizzing of these initial subjects turned up some tantalizing clues.

Saving allows the hoarder to avoid making what they view as risky decisions. For the past decade, I have bought, nearly every other year, the same exact pair of brown and black Timberland loafers. When I'm done with them, I never throw them away. I probably have six or seven pairs stashed in various places. Something about throwing away shoes makes me uncomfortable -- the same way I feel when looking at a three-year-old New Yorker magazine that I stuff under the bed or when I move a three-month-old Best Buy catalogue from the dining room to the basement.

These behaviors typically emerge in adolescence. My mom remembers that my years spent waiting tables were profitable for her because she could always count on finding dollar bills around my room. Lift up a stack of papers, find five bucks. A lottery of sorts. She barred the cleaner who came to our house once a month from entering my room -- not because she wanted to keep the money for herself, but for fear that if the woman started cleaning in there, she'd never come out. My room often provoked arguments between my parents. My dad would say, "How can you let him live like this?" My mom would say: "His room. His choice."

Frost's research also showed that many hoarders have close relatives who behaved similarly, suggesting a genetic component to the phenomenon. That would be my father's father, Sam, after whom we named my son. Sam, a widower, lived alone. He ate out for every meal. Nobody ever visited his apartment. When we picked him up, we drove up, honked, and, a few minutes later, he would slip out his front door.

After my grandfather died, my father entered his apartment and was astonished. It looked very much like my house does now. There were, for instance, hundreds of old Reader's Digests scattered around. "They were everywhere," Dad told me.

I told Frost I was the same way: "I know I'm never gonna use all this stuff I save, but I still keep it."

He leaned forward and said, "We hear that over and over again."

I told Frost I could sense my wife becoming increasingly frustrated with my piles. He said marriages with hoarders often fracture because the collectors cannot tolerate the boundaries their spouses set. "It sounds like that's the most dangerous thing for you right now," Frost said. "If you become more rigid about this or if it becomes too much for her, then it's gonna be worse."

I told Frost about my son. He is only 2, but this behavior pattern needs to stop -- somehow, some way -- so he doesn't follow my path, and his namesake's, too. I explained that I feel desperate to give my boy whatever nurture he needs to head off what nature might bring his way. Now that Sam is tall enough to see the top of the dining room table, I wonder: When he looks at it, what does he think?

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Over the years, there have been interventions. Friends helped me gut my bachelor apartment, hauling out enough garbage bags to move the Hefty company's stock higher on Wall Street. One set of friends chose to wear gloves. An old girlfriend once cleaned out my apartment while I was unconscious in bed after wisdom tooth surgery. This caused me more stress than the throbbing in my mouth.

God, via clergy, has also intervened. Before Megan and I got married, our rabbi held three counseling sessions with us, two of which we spent talking about Megan's contempt for my living habits. Megan told the rabbi that my slobbiness made her worry about our future. I told him what I'd always told my parents and others who have confronted me: The stuff is mine; it doesn't bother me; it's on my side of the room; just ignore it. The rabbi didn't so much try to offer solutions as to air out the issue. He asked Megan whom she blamed. I was surprised when she replied, "His mom." She recently told my mother the same thing, and though laughter followed, it was of the nervous sort.

I raised the issue separately with my mom (initially via e-mail, because I lack guts), and her reply was: "That's just great. Now I look like a bad mother." I felt like a bad son. Seeking to defend her to herself, I pointed out in another e-mail that if she was responsible, then why wasn't my sister, who is a total neat freak, just like me? We are 16 months apart and were raised in the same house, at the same time, under the same regime.

But (and this is a big but) if my mom is not to blame, that would implicate my genes in some way. And if my genes are responsible, again, why is my sister neat? The roots of my problem are more complicated than a simple designation of nature

or nurture, something Frost and other researchers have yet to pin down.

No matter who is to blame -- if anyone -- Megan has now suffered through years of dealing with my piles, and though she isn't pleased, to say the least, about this story, she was thrilled when I started to look into other forms of intervention, particularly since her threats of "clean this up before I get rid of all of it" have not changed me.

They have, however, kept me from tilting back into total disarray. Without my wife, the piles would grow until they took over the house. There would be at least four years' worth of newspapers in the kitchen -- on the counters, the floor, the table, under the sinks. We live an endless loop: She complains; we argue; I clean a little; piles grow back. Repeat. Frost, in "Buried in Treasures," suggests calling the pros if you feel overwhelmed by the issue and your friends or family can't help you get things in order. Another reason to seek help: if anxiety or depression is getting in the way.

A few ideas for de-cluttering have surfaced over the years. A storage company offered to send me a large container to move all my stuff into. The company's pitch: "It can be your new man cave. We at Units Mobile Storage will bring a unit right to your driveway. ... Set up a TV and thoroughly enjoy life surrounded with all your stuff without your wife having to live and breathe it every day. It will cut down on the nagging and may indeed save your marriage!"

Megan nixed the idea. "First of all, it's ridiculous," she said. "Second of all, our homeowners association would throw us out."

Another idea came from Bernie Kastner, an Israeli psychologist and handwriting analyst who, upon hearing my story, offered to study my handwriting to find ways to help. I sent him a one-page handwriting sample. A few days later, he sent me a three-page analysis of my personality that was so accurate as to be frightening. The report: "When directly confronted and threatened with the possible consequences of his actions, he may dig in his heels and become even more insistent on doing what he wants."

Me: Are you taking notes, Megan?

Kastner and I chatted on the phone. He suggested turning my messes into a game. Bet money that I won't keep clean. If it's a game and I stand to win some cash, that should clear up the problem. Brilliant, I thought. We hung up, and then I remembered that Megan had once tried something similar to get me to make the bed. She would grade me on my bed-making efforts. If I scored high enough each month, she would treat me to a steak dinner. There is literally nothing I won't do for steak -- except, it turns out, make the bed.

Then Mo showed up. Mo Osborn is a nurse turned professional organizer. And not just any organizer but a member of the National Study Group on Chronic Disorganization, a group of 200 organizers who help people like me. Mo is petite and bubbly and utterly charming.

I led her on a tour of the house. First stop, the dining room table. I admitted: "I'm not going to lie; this stuff that I have on the chairs over there, that was stuff on the table that I didn't have room for anymore, so I just moved it to the chairs." Mo's advice: Get a small bookshelf to keep nearby. I get to have my stacks, but they would be out of the way.

Up to the bedroom. Mo looked at the leaning tower of books and magazines. I said if I roll over too violently while sleeping -- I am the violent rollover type -- Magazine Mountain crumbles. This has happened a few times, generally between 3 and 5 a.m. Mo's idea: Donate the duplicate books and the ones I won't ever read to a prison book program or the State Department's reading abroad program. The theory: If I know they are going to a good purpose, that will help break my attachment. Also: Put a recycling bin next to the bed. If I sort right away, instead of waiting for the piles to grow, I will undercut my tendency to save.

Mo was full of great ideas. I was excited. I told Mo that my wife would call her to say thanks, that she had given me a path, both literally and figuratively, to a cleaner, less cluttered life. It would be like living in a hotel suite. "I'll report back to you soon," I said.

But the tools have to be used for them to work, and only I could employ them. A week went by. Mo called to see how I was doing. I didn't call her back. I sent her a note saying that The Washington Post was dispatching a photographer to take pictures of my messes, so I couldn't touch anything. That was essentially true, though I could have bought the bookshelf and tidied up a smidge. The photographer came, and a few more weeks went by. Of the many excellent suggestions Mo offered, I had implemented exactly none.

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We sat in a circle in a small classroom down the hall from Frost's office. I was tense. My audience was students specializing in the study of abnormal behavior, and I was the abnormal one. As I introduced myself, I stumbled over my words. But as I talked more, offering details about my slobbiness, I grew more comfortable. I felt like I was unloading a secret, a burden. The dozen students of Psychology 354, Seminar in Advanced Abnormal Psychology: The Meaning of Possessions, were there to help me, not judge me. In that setting, I began to sense, for the first time, why so many interventions had failed.

"My wife and I were in a bookstore recently," I told the students, "and she said, 'I don't know why you're shopping in a bookstore; you have accumulated a bookstore next to the bed.' " A few students giggled. That pleased me, probably, I realized, because my identity has become tied up with being a slob, just as Woody Allen's is tied up in being a hypochondriac. The students were shrinking me, as the saying goes, but I was also shrinking myself.

"I had garbage bags everywhere," I said, detailing my attempts to clean my apartment before I left Boston. "One of the garbage bags happened to have a light bulb in it for some reason, and I stepped on it with my bare feet and needed surgery." I waited for the students to laugh. They didn't. One gasped. Maybe this wasn't something to laugh at. Maybe, all along, there has been an audience of one: me.

Later, I would learn from Frost that I keep my stuff on tables and in piles because having everything in plain sight provides comfort and, in a sense, a form of organized disorganization. If I can see it, I know it's there. That was the practical explanation. But as the students questioned me -- about the pleasure I feel acquiring stuff, the anxiety I feel tossing it -- I sensed that there was something deeper, more philosophical. And it was this: All of the stuff I pile up is a sort of second body, my twin. I am Michael Rosenwald, and those piles -- the books, magazines, fountain pens, inks, newspapers, everything -- are also me. The more I have of it, the more I am me. Up there in front of the class, I was beginning to confuse myself, and then I felt as if I might cry.

I blurted this out to the class: "What would I be without it all?"

Frost said: "What am I without my things? That gets to this whole issue. A sense of identity. What am I without my stuff? What's happened over the years is the stuff has somehow invaded your sense of self, your identity, because without it you feel like you don't know who you are."

That clicked. I will buy books more than once because I can't remember if I bought them or not, and I feel like if I don't get them, I will never have a chance to have them again, and I need those books. I need them, it turns out, to keep up with my concept of myself. I recently bought a copy of a magazine that I had bought two weeks before. When I got home, there it was, the same magazine, on my nightstand. How could I have done that? What a waste of money. But I did it. Had to have it -- again.

As the class stared at me, probably wondering what planet I had arrived from, my sense of ease slipped away. I wanted to be anywhere but in that classroom. I crossed my legs, then uncrossed them. I took a drink from a bottle of water. Then it hit me: What if I really am a hoarder? I shot a quick glance at my cellphone to see how much time was left in class -- 45 minutes. Yet it was also a moment of deep clarity.

Then a student asked the question I had secretly been hoping for: Have you told your wife that you think you might be a hoarder? The money question! My chance at innocence! I have a condition, Megan. I'm not a slob. I'm a hoarder.

I sat straight up, cleared my throat and delivered my response, which I had been rehearsing in my head for days: "I think it is hoarding. She thinks I'm lazy. So there's a huge disconnect. She's also a physician; I didn't mention that. She's a family doctor, so she sees a lot of mental health issues. Her perception of hoarding is the Oprah image, which is, let's go into somebody's house and see the things toppling over them. What I've learned is that, yes, that is hoarding, but there is another way of getting toppled over on yourself and your relationships."

The rest of the class felt like a blur. I was there but not there. I was in my bedroom, on top of that pile, looking back at myself lying on my bed, staring at it all. I was on the dining room table, looking out at myself from under a pile of newspapers. I was in a bookstore, watching myself walk around, looking at books that made me feel more like me.

"We have run out of time," Frost finally said. "Thank you, Mike. This is very brave, very courageous."

Then he whispered in my ear: "Let's go back to my office. I want to make sure you are okay." I told him I was. That night, I barely slept.

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I took my shirt off. My wife ASKED, "What are you doing?" I said I was getting ready to clean.

"Does your shirt have to be off to clean?" she asked. "I'm thinking I might sweat," I explained.

She said, "I hope you do."

I took three Advils. I assumed a headache was inevitable. We stood in the dining room, clearing what remained of the junk I had begun disposing a couple days before.

I said, "I need to set my lineup for my fantasy football team."

She answered, rather loudly, "You're doing what that book says I shouldn't let you do."

Megan was referring to Frost's book -- the self-help part, where he helps reformed hoarders overcome what he calls "the bad guys" that get in the way of organization. This was the "It's not my priority" bad guy, found on page 139: "If you find that other things start to seem more important to you than sorting and organizing, stop and reassess your goals and priorities. Are these other things true emergencies that you really must attend to right now?" I told my wife the fantasy team lineup was important. She reminded me I was in last place in my league.

We moved upstairs to the leaning tower of books and the nearby piles of magazines. We made two new piles: go-away and keep. We used the bed as our sorting station.

I asked, "Do you want to turn on the TV?" She said, very lovingly, "I want a new husband."

We were off to a splendid start. She began digging into the pile next to my bed and said, "Oh, a pair of shoes."

I said, "I was looking for those."

She said nothing.

Then we started through the books. Of the first five books we examined, three were identical to volumes I already had downstairs. The very thought of putting one of them on the go-away pile gave me heartburn. Another Frost bad guy had arrived -- the "Unhelpful beliefs about your stuff" one. "I feel so attached to these things!" states the definition of this bad guy. "But all this stuff is useful!" I turned to page 149: "How many do I already have, and is that enough?"

I said to myself: "Two." I also told myself that the book I already had was the same, word for word, as this one. It went in the go-away pile.

This didn't feel as bad as I had thought it would. I kept telling myself, This stuff isn't me. If it all disappeared in a fire, my body would not implode, my identity wouldn't turn to ashes. I would emerge, walking out the front door with soot on my face, the same person I was before the flames, only without the stuff. The stuff was not me, the stuff was not me -- it felt like some self-help mantra. The more I told myself that story, the easier the tossing became. We went on like this for an hour in the bedroom. For every book I kept, I let five more go. Every time I showed signs of indecisiveness, my wife said: "Do you really need this? Are you going to die without it?" The result was three boxes for the Salvation Army.

As I carried the boxes to the car, I thought about a question I was asked in Frost's class: "What's your fantasy about how you want your living space to look?"

I said: "I love hotels, and when I go into a hotel room, I love how clean it is, and I love the orderliness of it. I guess most of all I just don't want to be nagged anymore. I don't want to be stressed out by it anymore."

When I went back upstairs, my nightstand was clean, and the floor around my bed revealed carpet I hadn't seen in months. It didn't look like a hotel room, but it was close, at least to my eyes. We cleaned up my stuff throughout the house. It took all day and into the next one. I told my wife how much I liked everything clean, and she reminded me that I have cleaned before, only to relapse. I vowed this time would be different.

She said, "I hope so."

I said to myself: "I know why I do this now. I've got this figured out."

Two weeks later, the piles were back.

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