A place for everything; everything in its place. Such was the philosophy that an older friend lived by, one instilled in her by her father. Her desk was always neat. Her small house was always neat. I know many people who seem to have that trait of organization and I envy them. When I grow up, I want to have a clutter-free life. What a dream!

Such is not my life today. Some of the steps to get there seem simple enough. Handle mail daily. Put away one thing before getting out another. Have a system to deal with dirty clothes and dirty dishes. I can do that. But it just doesn't seem to happen all the time.

It's been years ago when one of the sessions at a newspaper conference was about getting organized. "Taming the Paper Tiger," was the book written by the presenter. She covered how to handle all the paper in your office and home, but it also addressed other aspects in life, like dealing with laundry, wardrobe control, housework, photos and family schedules.

One of the suggestions was keeping a planner with you including a calendar, a section on tasks that needed done, things you needed to buy when you next went shopping, all addresses and phone numbers that you acquire. Everything was at your fingertips wherever you were.

Many people follow this concept, most today using computers, palm pilots or some electronic medium. In fact, I've heard people refer to losing their brain if they don't have their planner. Even the smallest phones are now worth a wealth of information (sometimes only as good as the backup).

This presenter made a living organizing people's lives. She told of companies who utilized a "file cleanout day" each year. The office was closed and everyone was instructed what to keep, what to pack up for storage and what to get rid of. That would relate more to the dated business papers. It's so much easier to file and find things when the folders and drawers aren't crammed full. She also had a plan of dealing with laundry and suggested having a basket for the different loads in your closet, one for whites, one for coloreds, one for delicates, one for jeans. As you take off your clothes, they go in the right container. Hence the laundry is already sorted and contained. Of course you also have to have a follow-through plan for getting it washed, dried, folded and put away, but you could deal with that one load at a time.

I also recall a “Junk It” tape I listened to years ago. It, too, dealt with getting organized and focused on sorting items into what to keep, what to give away and what to throw away, mainly encouraging getting rid of things.

There are websites for tips and T.V. shows when organizers literally go into a home and coach how to get rid of things and get organized. Why is it we think we have to save so much? The real trick is remembering that you saved it and knowing where it is should you ever want it. And the solution is not only to get to the point where things are organized but to commit to a daily routine of how to keep it that way.

It’s amazing how quickly a clean room can turn into the shambles. Dealing with it immediately is what’s key. And it’s not enough just for you to get in good habits. Everyone in the family needs to join in. That is unless you want to become the slave. Many of you know how that goes and believe me, if you do it for them, they’ll let you. Even a two-year-old can learn to pick up. Now a 51-year-old? Well, I haven’t given up on him yet. More recently, I’ve listened to Peter Walsh on Oprah Radio when I’m on the road. He’s an Australian and I love the accent, but I really appreciate the little tips (especially when my husband is also listening). One of his books focuses not only on the “things” that junk up your life but the chaos and junk in your attitude that interfere with a happy marriage, good relationships and general contentment.

So why, when I have all this advice available and I know what is effective, is my life full of clutter? My office is a mess. My bedroom’s a mess. My mind’s a mess. It’s poisonous! Even when things look okay, I know the drawers, closets and storage room are full of clutter.

Yes, I have the planners. Messages pop up and beepers beep to remind me of things, but too many times, I hit snooze, snooze, snooze and don’t just check things off the list. There’s always something else. Then the list gets so long that I avoid it.

As I’ve browsed through my columns over the past years, I’m amazed at how many times I’ve written about this very topic. Oh my gosh. How many times have I had a new motivation that I just knew was going to change my life

forever?

Yet why did I allow myself to falter into old habits? What is it that some people have that makes them “get it” and actually “do it?” Is it genetic? Kids raised in the same environment grow up with one being tidy and the other a slob. Of course there are those people who have far too much stress in their lives because they freak out if something’s out of place. I don’t need to worry about getting to that point.

This weekend I made an honest effort to attack a room that can’t serve its purpose as an extra guest room because it’s full of piles. While sorting, I found myself stopping to read things that were interesting, but stopped my progress. I love having the grandkids around, but I turned around to find some books I had just organized on the shelf spread on the floor. The packing peanuts that I finally threw away were fun for them to cut up after finding the little scissors that surfaced. I had a worse mess. But what’s a mess compared to the value of watching their minds at work and to see them dance to the kids’ music we found?

Besides, after they were gone, I drifted off to something else anyway and eventually treated myself to a Christmas movie. I need to focus on what I did accomplish rather than what remains. And I need to keep attacking in smaller time increments rather than thinking I need a whole day.

Okay clutter! Watch out! One of these days my motivation is going to actually stick. Be ready trash dumpsters.