



Look! I'm a clutter-free zone

Once Sandi Toksvig admitted her life was a mess, she went from domestic zoo to divinely zen in a matter of hours

The other day I had a leaflet through the door from someone offering to rummage through my drawers. At my age, this is not an offer to turn aside lightly. Sadly the offer turned out to be less racy than I had hoped. It was from a company that claimed to be 'professional organisers' for the home – people who take 'domestic turmoil' and turn it into a well-oiled machine. 'Ridiculous,' I declared to the dog as I cleared four old coffee mugs, a newspaper celebrating the marriage of Prince Andrew to Fergie, and what I think may have been someone else's child from my kitchen table and sat down to read.

Apparently my inability to keep my house tidy, organised and stress free is not my fault. According to the leaflet, 'some people are not born with de-cluttering skills'. Here was a concept that had never even entered my head. When the children were little, it never occurred to me to put them in front of

the under-stairs cupboard and see how long it would take them to find a place for the Hoover. I had no idea that de-cluttering skills might have their own neat little gene.

I wondered if this company of clutter busters was leading the way in an

entirely new job field – one that I'd never considered suggesting to my school-leaving children. Then I looked online and found I could have my wardrobes sorted from Albuquerque to Ashby-de-la-Zouch. Indeed, there was an e-book available written by 'UK de-cluttering expert Clare Baker' called De-cluttering Made Easy. I liked the fact that this was not an actual book that one might buy to prop up yet another corner of the coffee table. The tome was full of practical advice, but I couldn't help wondering how one achieved the title of 'UK de-cluttering expert'. Ms Baker, it would seem, had worked with 'clutterholics, celebrities, magazines and the BBC'

– a diverse list from which I could hardly guess who was the most untidy.

With or without help, however, the notion of living in a place where I could actually find everything was now lodged firmly in my mind, and I started thinking about where to begin. The designer William Morris once said you should 'have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful'. Although I realise for some people this would mean getting rid of some of their relatives, I thought that as a maxim it was a good starting point.

I started by pretending I was going to move. I stood in front of kitchen cupboards and asked myself if, were I heading to a new home, I would really take that fondue set with me. In my bedroom I made myself admit that the trousers saved for when I finally 'lost that weight' were not only out of fashion but out of luck. By the evening I had invented a game called 'I never said it before, but...' This involved everyone in the house being allowed to select one item that they'd never liked, but had never dared to mention as a potential for the bin. Once we'd started it was hard to stop. Knick-knacks began huddling in corners forming small support groups while we ruthlessly dispensed with snow globes, tea-light holders and a small leprechaun from Donegal who once foretold humidity.

The next morning I was up and at my office. Here I found more help online from an American woman called Sherry Borsheim. She told me that 'the average person wastes approximately 140 hours per year searching for paper files and other resources around the office'. She also declared, 'That's appalling!' which worried me. Clearly in her anxiety to get rid of clutter she had also ditched her dictionary containing the correct spellings of words. Nevertheless, I followed Sherry's advice and now have the most Zen working and living space in the world.

My only worry is that I may have gone too far. I'm pretty sure I filed the dog under D, but he doesn't seem to answer when I call him.

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