

This organizer's decluttering method isn't easy. So why do celebs treat her like a guru? - The Washington Post

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By Megan Buerger

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Organizer Julie Naylon helps clients declutter excess stuff and find a home for the rest. (Douglas Hill/for The Washington Post)

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There's an infamous scene in "Mommie Dearest," the 1981 cult film about Joan Crawford's neuroses, that strikes a chord with neat freaks. Crawford, played by Faye Dunaway, discovers a dress on a wire hanger and explodes into a blind rage. "No wire hangers!" she screams at her daughter. "Ever!" The outburst — so spectacularly vicious it sparked skepticism from critics — made Crawford look downright unhinged. But those who share her aversion to clutter, well, they almost get it.

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“Oh, it’s terrifying,” says Julie Naylor, a Los Angeles-based professional organizer to some of Hollywood’s busiest writers, directors, producers and actors, including Molly Shannon, Rashida Jones and Adam McKay. “And absurd. But have I found myself uttering it while working with a client? Yes. And is there a special place in hell for wire hangers? Yes. So, you know, I guess I don’t think it’s that crazy.”

What Naylor thinks that scene captures best is the sense of desperation, the grappling for control. Many of us are feeling this deep down, she says, “suffocated by stuff that keeps piling up,” such as junk mail, charging cords, toys and plastic containers, even push notifications. The load can feel particularly heavy these days when combined with mounting political chaos, ceaseless work emails and the pull to shop to cope with stress. It’s no wonder organizing evangelists like Marie Kondo, Peter Walsh and the Home Edit’s Clea Shearer and Joanna Teplin are cultural sensations, armed with books, TV shows, branded social media accounts and YouTube tutorials that reframe decluttering as an almost spiritual practice.



Naylor in the bedroom closet of her South Los Angeles home. (Douglas Hill/for The Washington

Naylor’s approach is different. She has no breezy 10-step plan, no highly stylized Instagram feed, no e-commerce store full of handy organizing gadgets. She isn’t convinced spice jars and color-coding will solve our larger issues with clutter.

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“Habits run deep,” she says, “real deep. Boxes certainly help, but it’s like buying new clothes before you’ve lost the

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the source.”

Naylon’s focus is on personal, therapeutic methods: In sessions that are often emotionally exhausting, she asks her clients intimate questions about relationships, career changes and how they ultimately want to live. Lasting transformations, she believes, are inside-out and never easy. This makes her less like a personal trainer or stylist and more like a guru, sought out by clients who desperately want to get organized, but also to heal.

weight or changed your lifestyle. You need to start at



Naylon created this crafts closet for a client in Pacific Palisades, Calif. The children have a designated arts and crafts room upstairs, but Naylon assembled a mini crafts closet near the downstairs kitchen for easier supervision. Clear boxes make it easy for kids to see what they need. (Douglas Hill/for The Washington Post)

“Most people who contact me are shutting down,” Naylon says. “They’re beyond wanting an aesthetic transformation. They need help.” For that reason, she isn’t big on before-and-after photos and offers a nondisclosure agreement before each project. “In this town, people appreciate that level of trust,” she says.

She doesn’t view organizing as one-size-fits-all; her strategies for each client are tailored to the issues they’re facing and the kind of life they want. And she requires some degree of participation from all clients.

“People will ask me to clear out their garage and say, ‘Whatever

you think. I trust you!’ But I don’t work like that. How do you implement a system if you don’t know how the person wants to live?”

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Naylon initially wanted to be a showrunner — she moved to Los Angeles in 2000 after graduating from film school in Chicago — but eventually, her passions shifted. After years working for entertainment industry titans such as Jerry Bruckheimer, Nora Ephron and Barry Sonnenfeld, she discovered she had a knack for making dizzying lives run smoothly. In 2008, after helping McKay (who wrote and directed “The Big Short” and is a producer on HBO’s “Succession”) move his family across the country and seeking advice from Julie Morgenstern, one of Oprah Winfrey’s go-to organizers, Naylon decided to start her own business. She called it No Wire Hangers, a nod to her film career and her environmentally friendly views on stuff (including those flimsy dry-cleaner disposables).

“These days, we’re more aware of our problems with spending and waste, but back then it really felt like a blind spot,” she says. “Still, whether you’re buying a bunch of stuff you don’t need or just hanging on to a bunch of stuff you don’t need, there’s a reason for that. Clutter is just postponed decisions. I try to find out what’s holding people back.”

That often takes heavy digging, and sessions with Naylon can be intense. “She’s somewhere between a therapist and Mary Poppins,” says Fielding Edlow, a comic and writer who swears, only somewhat jokingly, that Naylon saved her marriage when she, her husband and their two cats moved while Edlow was pregnant in 2011.

Another client, lawyer Tamar Feder, echoed the psychologist comparison: “She asks you questions that seem silly or inconsequential, but they turn out to be genius.” Feder, who now lives in Israel, says Naylon gently waded through every issue, including the belongings that were holding her back by taking up too much “emotional space” (also: why she had five rain jackets). “Sometimes you just need to hear yourself say things out loud,” Feder says, “but someone needs to ask the right questions.”

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"Everyone is the same. We're all human," she says. "Behind every call is someone who feels a little guilty or a little ashamed about their state of things, buried in the rubble. I tell them that there's nothing to be ashamed of."

More often than not, Naylon's decluttering projects are intensely personal; clients tend to call for help with sorting through belongings after a death or divorce, or to downsize. She's hand-delivered boxes to clients' exes after breakups, uncovered documents during a property dispute, even helped a couple divide their belongings piece by piece after a divorce — with both of them in the room.

Such instances require a particular mix of compassion and professionalism. In 2009, Conan O'Brien asked her to come on his show for an organizing intervention for one of his producers. "His office is a fire trap," he quipped. "We think there might be vermin in his office." Naylon breezily shrugged it off. "I've seen everything," she said.

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In person, Naylon, 41, is nothing like Crawford's harebrained, loose-cannon caricature. You get the sense that nothing could shock her, surely a quality you'd want in someone you invite into your private spaces. And unlike her more high-life clientele, many of whom employ chefs, house managers and dog walkers, Naylon is fairly down-to-earth. A working mother and her household's breadwinner — longtime

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boyfriend Wes Wininger, a musician, is a stay-at-home dad — she often sees as many as three clients a day and works six days a week. She prefers to thrift rather than buy new, finding much of her furniture on Craigslist, and is a firm believer in trusting our memories rather than handcuffing ourselves to a storage locker.

“People hold on to things because they don’t want to forget them, but I believe we remember what we’re supposed to remember,” she says. For people who find that hard to accept, she recommends taking photos. “If that sweater really meant something to you, you probably have a picture of yourself wearing it,” she says. “Keep that, and give the sweater to someone who needs it.”

Her home, a 1932 Spanish Revival in South Los Angeles, is airy, elegant and minimal. She and Wininger, 49, bought and restored it in 2016, keeping many of its original details, like the quirky yellow kitchen tiles and stained-glass sconces. With 10½ -foot-high ceilings, dark wood floors (discovered under carpet) and 6½ -foot-high windows that bathe the living room in light, it evokes a Zen feeling. Even her 3-year-old daughter, Maude, speeding around the house in a tutu, has a hard time disturbing the peace as she leaves a trail of books, blocks and other tiny debris.

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(When asked whether motherhood changed her approach to tidiness, Naylor laughs. Every house gets messy, she says, but it’s worse when you have more stuff. “We have less stuff, so the only difference is that for us it takes 10 minutes.”)

In recent years, Naylor has begun helping clients go paperless. “Paper is the one thing everyone is drowning in,” she says. “People don’t know what they can hold on to and let go of.” Naylor prides herself on having only two pieces of paper — her birth certificate and car title — and keeps master spreadsheets for digital decluttering, including managing email, subscriptions and bills.

Children, she says, are the easiest to teach. They haven’t developed

collecting habits and are less sentimental. When in doubt, reframe the question. That's how she negotiates with Maude. "Rather than saying, 'Should we throw this away?' I'll say, 'Do you want to keep these dolls or are you ready to pass them on to another baby?' It's her call, but you'd be surprised. Most of the time, kids like to give."

Megan Buerger is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer. Her music and lifestyle reporting regularly appears on NPR and in The Washington Post, Pitchfork, Billboard and other publications.

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