

A steady, six-step process toward letting go.

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By Mary Carlomagno

I know what it's like to start over. I was on the path to needless consumption: shopping almost every day, spending \$100 a month on my cell phone, dining out more often than opening the refrigerator. A few years ago, I took stock of my own life, giving up one vice a month, serially throughout the year. The aim was to simplify my life, to go into self-imposed exile from *too much*, and to embrace *less*.

Since then, I have learned to limit my excesses and become more adaptable. *Less* became the focus in all things, beginning with career. I downsized to start my own company, called Order, which helps people free themselves of clutter, organize their time better, and break shopping addictions - all of which I needed to do on my own.

I'm not alone; lots of people are doing the same things. There are movements such as Voluntary Simplicity; Web sites such as the Simple Living Network; the PBS special *Affluenza* and accompanying book by John de Graaf, David Wann, Thomas H. Naylor and David Horsey. A lot of smart people are having the same good ideas all at once. Statistics are few, so I won't call it a "movement" - but for the millions trying to live with less, it's a profound personal movement.

I began to live with the Six Lesses: less accumulation, less clutter, less distraction, less big business, less technology, and less weight. The result: less stress and more meaning. In the process, I met many other people making the same changes.

Less accumulation. Who better than a professional mover to comment on America's obsession with stuff? Joanna Hopkinson, owner of Joanna's Moving L.L.C. of Hoboken, N.J., has been moving residences and businesses for 23 years. She has noticed that, over the last two decades, people increasingly have identified with the number and status of the things they own. "It used to be only the wealthy that had the most possessions," Hopkinson said. "This is no longer the case." What was once for the affluent is now for everyone; many kinds of once-expensive merchandise are now available at lower prices - and so we *have* to buy it. Stores like the Pottery Barn and Crate & Barrel have made "nice" furniture available to everyone. Twenty years ago, she said, many of her residential jobs involved less furniture. "When I first started, the majority of the moves involved a futon, something I rarely see today."

Today, she is meeting more and more clients looking to reverse the trend. They often ask for help in paring down.

How to de-accumulate? Put your stuff up for sale at eBay and other resale venues. (Nobody said you had to *throw* it away.) Also, remember you have to start *somewhere*. For me, the obvious place was clothes. I began to pare down my wardrobe by eliminating designer suits and fashionable shoes in favor of jeans and comfortable loafers. As a result, people see me, not elaborate outfits.

Less accumulation means less shopping. As a recovering shopaholic, I had to train myself into accepting that I did not need to shop every day. I also trained myself to use my credit cards less and less. One useful

technique is to take frequent stock of what you have and what you're buying. Review often, very often. It is enlightening and even frightening.

Less clutter. Days before a family trip, one of my clients searched for family passports - and couldn't find *any*. No wonder: Her dining room, which doubles as a home office, is filled from floor to ceiling with work projects, shipments, household items, and toys. She was living in a home of confusion where clutter had taken over.

Less distraction. Clutter is a distraction; it keeps us from doing our best. Often it is both a sign of depression, as well as its cause. Certified feng shui practitioner Melissa Lord says that clutter is a big blocker of energy, "the biggest... that exists." She warns that physical clutter can harm a person's ability to focus. "Prolonged exposure to clutter causes lack of concentration, lack of energy, and ultimately depression."

Getting rid of clutter involves getting better organized, which in turn often means *simplifying* (if you have too many projects, you may be taking on too much). A good first step is to recognize the fact of clutter. Start from the bottom up. Clutter on the floor can drag down the energy of the room. Do something about it.

Less big business. Becoming an entrepreneur was frightening at first. What would less money, less structure, and less interaction with coworkers mean for my business day? Two years later, I view my job as a career and have found a quality of life I never found in any corporation. I have launched my company and published my first book, all while working out of my home.

On the cutting edge of this trend is Stephen Warley, director of digital media at 602 Communications. Warley says he is seeing a new social revolution: "One hundred years ago, the majority of Americans worked for themselves, not for big corporations. That trend is returning today, where people are becoming more interdependent."

Warley's own story suggests that less big business - in other words, embracing the coming entrepreneurial society - entails other choices. He left his New York media job a few years ago and relocated to a suburb of Boston. In the spirit of less, he does not own a car. "If I can walk to my destination in less than 45 minutes, I walk or bike; if not, I take mass transit. Driving a car is isolating; when I ride my bike, I have more of a chance of interacting with people. I exercise and save money all at the same time." Which brings us to the Fifth Less:

Less technology. Trying to keep pace with the latest trends and devices? Fine, but first ask: Is this technology really helping me, or have I begun to serve it? I decided to live for one month without a cell phone; it taught me a lot about adaptation. I backed up the information it contained (phone lists, for example) in another form (a handwritten address book!). It was easy to adapt to not being perpetually contactable. I could make calls when they were necessary. No one died (and little business was lost) because a call was not returned immediately. I could still be productive.

Actually, the new technology is helping the *less* movement, in that machines are getting smaller, sleeker and smarter. Our challenge will be to do without as much of it as we can and to learn to use only enough of it.

Less weight. Are we carrying too much weight - literally? Probably. The country is getting more obese. But the task is twofold: not only to eat less, but also to change our attitudes about the way to lose weight. The

country is obsessed with fad diets and weight loss. Look at the success of the TV show *Biggest Loser*, in which curious viewers watch others lose weight.

Certified life coach Nancy Colasurdo works with her clients on moderation. She suggests that losing weight has to do with attitude as well as discipline: "If you allow yourself to eat what you want instead of automatically going the deprivation route," she says, "you'll find you don't want the cheesecake nearly as often. Diets are temporary. Smart, healthful choices with occasional treats are a way of life."

What is the future of less? What would a world with less look like? Less shopping and less credit-card use will result in less clutter, less accumulation, and less debt. Less gluttony will mean less hunger. Less waste leads to more recycling and a cleaner planet. Less stress leads to more meaning. Less car, more gas. Less terror, more peace.

According to the *Tao Te Ching*, "If you want to shrink something, you must first allow it to expand." Perhaps *less* is Taoism at work in America, thousands of years after Lao Tzu. We have gone big in every area - and now maybe we're ready to pare down. *Less* could very well be the future.