

 By Lisa McLaughlin Thursday, Jun. 05, 2008
Excess consumption is practically an American religion. But as anyone with a filled-to-the-gills closet knows, the things we accumulate can become oppressive. With all this stuff piling up and never quite getting put away, we're no longer huddled masses yearning to breathe free; we're huddled masses yearning to free up space on a countertop. Which is why people are so intrigued by the 100 Thing Challenge, a grass-roots movement in which otherwise seemingly normal folks are pledging to whittle down their possessions to a mere 100 items.

"Stuff starts to overwhelm you," says Dave Bruno, 37, an online entrepreneur who looked around his San Diego home one day last summer and realized how much his family's belongings were weighing him down. Thus began what he calls the 100 Thing Challenge. (Apparently, Bruno is so averse to excess he can't refer to 100 things in the plural.) In a country where clutter has given rise not only to professional organizers but also to professional organizers with their own reality series (TLC's Clean Sweep), Bruno's online musings about his slow and steady purge have developed something of a cult following online, inspiring others to launch their own countdown to clutter-free living. (See how Americans spend now.)

Bruno keeps a running tally on his blog, guynameddave.com, of what he has decided to hold on to and what he is preparing to sell or donate. For instance, as of early June, he was down to five dress shirts and one necktie but uncertain about parting with one of his three pairs of jeans. "Are two pairs of jeans enough?!", he asked in a recent posting.

That's not the only dilemma faced by this new wave of goal-oriented minimalists. One of the trickier questions is what counts as an item. Bruno considers a pair of shoes to be a single entity, which seems sensible but still pretty hard-core when you're trying to jettison all but 100 personal possessions. Cait Simmons, 27, a waitress in Chicago, takes a different approach. Although she has pared down her footwear collection from 35 to 20 pairs, she says, "All my shoes count as one item."

Daniel Perkins, 34, a graphic designer in New York City, isn't working toward a quantitative goal but says he and his wife have instead pledged "within a year to have only things that we use daily in our apartment." Ten years ago, "I wore hats, and we made crepes every Sunday," he says. "But that's not who we are anymore." So he sold the fedoras and crepe pans on eBay.

But what about Christmas ornaments? Family heirlooms? Those skinny jeans you hope to but will probably never wear again? "It's a very emotional process," says professional organizer Julie Morgenstern. Her new book, When Organizing Isn't Enough: SHED Your Stuff, Change Your Life, lays out a plan for clearing out both physical and sentimental clutter. "Often these are things that represent who you once were," she says. "But once their purpose is over, they just keep you stagnant." SHED, by the way, is an acronym for "separate the treasures, heave the trash, embrace your identity from within and drive yourself forward." Which is a handy little guide to Dumpstering your way into a state of Zen.

"It comes down to the products vs. the promise," says organizational consultant Peter Walsh, who characterizes himself as part contractor, part therapist. "It's not necessarily about the new pots and pans but the idea of the cozy family meals that they will provide. People are finding that their homes are full of stuff, but their lives are littered with unfulfilled promises."

Walsh isn't surprised that decluttering is so popular these days. Between worrying about gas prices and the faltering economy, people's first reaction, he says, "is often, 'I need to get some control over my life, even if it is just a tidy kitchen counter.'"

When Walsh helped homeowners purge their belongings on

Clean Sweep, the weekend-long project would end with a huge garage sale. Off camera, good riddance is usually a good bit slower. Simmons has given herself a six-month deadline to winnow her stuff to 100 things ♦ or at least 100 categories of things. (Hey, I'm not knocking her. I've got more than 100 things in my purse.)

Bruno hasn't set an end date for his purging project, which so far has claimed, among other items, his guitar, an iPod and a baseball jersey signed by Pete Rose. He's ignoring all the stuff he shares with his family, things like the house and the car and the pantry. Yet he's still not sure he can let go of all but 100 of his own possessions. Right now he's down to one nice pen, one mechanical pencil and one spork, although he counts that last utensil as part of a camping cooking set that includes two pots. And his current tally of 97 items doesn't include his toy trains, woodworking tools and a few other things he says he still needs to think through. But his daughters' doll collection remains off limits. Turns out that clearing the clutter makes you focus on what really counts.

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