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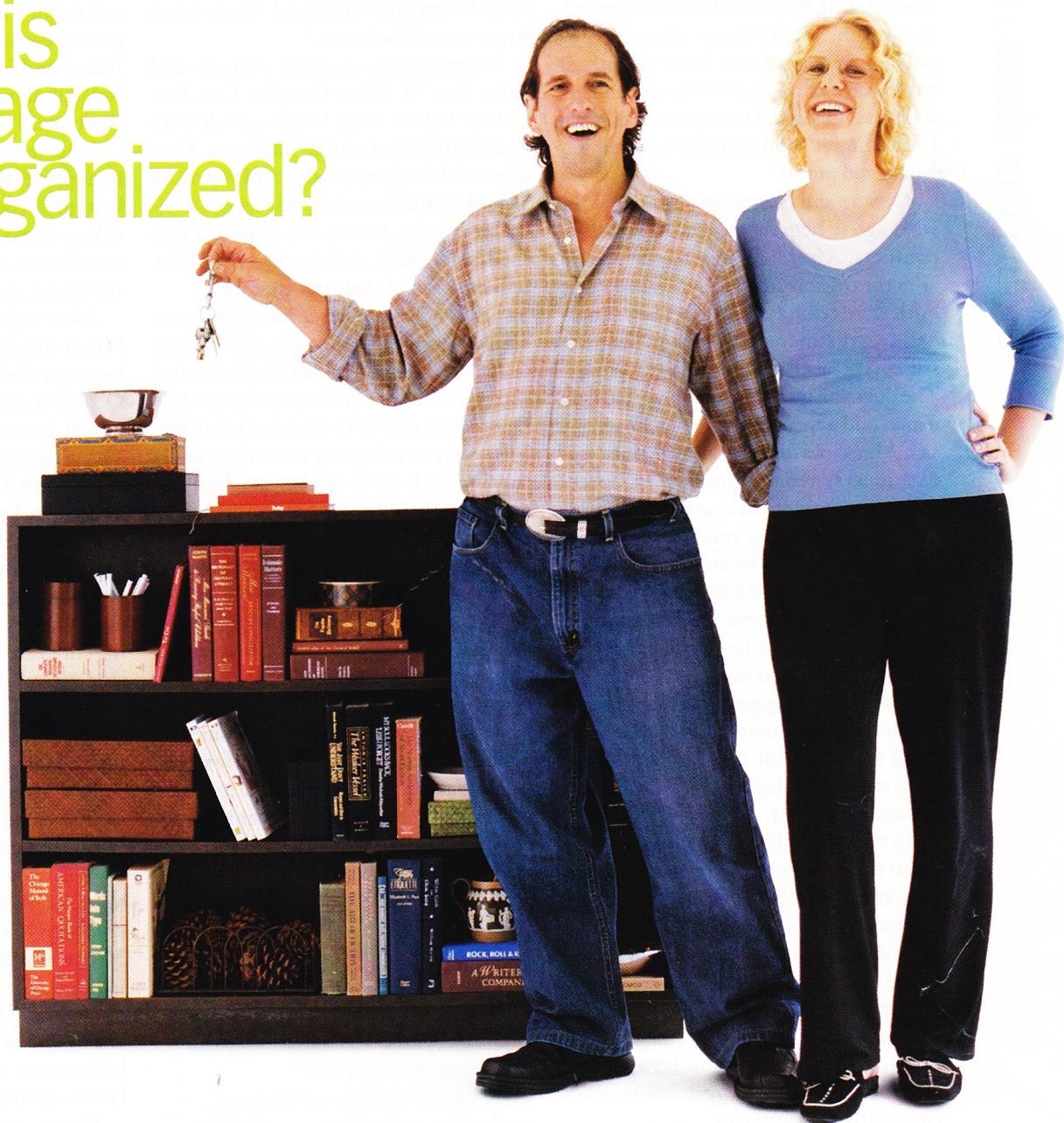
His stuff, your stuff together at last

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Can This Marriage Be Organized?

Wanted: Order in small, overcrowded apartment. Husband and wife each have their own systems. Mission impossible? **JULIE MORGENSTERN** plays referee.



"I'VE GOT TO PUT UP SOME MORE shelves," said George—his usual response to every conversation with his wife about getting rid of clutter. "Yes, George, but what about your piles of stuff?" Nancy said. "I'm tired of looking at everything we own—I don't just want to throw it onto another shelf!"

George and Nancy are a colorful couple who have been married for six years, together for ten. They live in a two-bedroom apartment that was Nancy's before George (and all his belongings) moved in. The apartment is wheezing under the weight of their combined creative vocations.

Nancy works from home as a freelance writer, with the second bedroom serving as her office. George is a musician, artist, and antiques dealer who always sees the potential in the old, the broken, the forgotten. Three years ago when their son, Dante, was born, the already overcrowded apartment had to suck in its breath to make room for a child and his paraphernalia—stroller, high chair, crib, toys. How'd they make it all fit? George put up more shelves! And now Nancy shares her office with Dante.

George and Nancy, minus the mess

George and Nancy's

communication styles are different but charmingly compatible. Nancy is steady, focused, and calm even when exasperated. George is upbeat and a bit hyperactive, with a flair for the dramatic phrase. "We're in constant turmoil with our stuff," Nancy said. "Yes," George piped in. "Fluxus maximus!"

Each accused the other of being responsible for the disorder in their home. George said he liked having systems but Nancy destroyed them. Nancy countered, "I'm the one who does all the organizing. Then George comes home from work, dumps the contents of his pockets onto ▶

the kitchen counter, throws things onto a random shelf, sheds his clothes on the bedroom floor. What's worse, when George puts something down for a minute, it never leaves that spot!" "No—you move it on me!" George interrupted. "And then I can't find it. And you never remember where you put it!"

George and Nancy first hired me two years ago to help them get a grip on their conflicts. After listening to each claim "I'm the organized one," I'd realized that both were telling the truth: They simply had two distinct styles. This wasn't the stereotypical clash of neat versus sloppy. The question was more complex. How do a man and a woman who don't share the same threshold for chaos or the same organizational systems negotiate living space?

My recommendations back then included establishing specific places for George's transient items (keys, projects from work, etc.) and following a step-by-step plan to make better use of their space. Two years later, the bedroom closet and living room looked much less cramped; they'd taken my suggestion to replace several bulky storage units with more streamlined versions. But George and Nancy were still struggling, with both the clutter and each other.

In the hall of their apartment is a sideboard where Nancy stored papers, receipts, bills, and the family calendar. George considered the space a confusing eyesore. As part of our original plan, Nancy was supposed to clear a shelf for George's homeless items. She never did it—she was afraid George's stuff would ruin her sense of order. Isn't it fascinating how we are always bothered more by someone else's clutter than by our own?

As I watched them argue, it was clear that they weren't listening to each other. Each was recommending what the other should do: "Nancy, you've got to get rid of some of those videos—you never watch half of them." "George, you can't turn our house into a repair shop. There's not enough space."

George wanted them to work together on their organizing projects but felt pushed away by Nancy. Besides, they were never in the mood to organize at the same time. "When I come home from work, I'm exhausted," George said. "Nancy starts telling me about some new system, but I can't

focus at that moment. On the weekends, when I want to get organized, Nancy wants to get out of the house."

I started by giving them some ground rules (see "6 Ways Couples Can De-clutter," below). Next I suggested they try working together on one small area. They selected the infamous sideboard and chose a Sunday afternoon, estimating the project would take two to three hours. I told them I'd be back in three days for a joint presentation of their new system.

I showed up on Tuesday to an impeccable sideboard and a beaming, affectionate couple. They reported that they'd finished with the sideboard in only an hour, while Dante was out with George's mother. They were overlapping more than interrupting each other as they laughed and explained their discoveries and solutions.

They'd had fun, putting on Celtic instrumental music (though George would have preferred Steppenwolf). "Look! We had 576 writing utensils stuffed into three pencil cups. Do we really write this much?" George said. Ultimately they decided that as writers, well, yes—there's always a pen in hand, which promptly disappears into the same place matching socks go. They agreed to separate implements into three categories—pens, markers, mechanical pencils—and to keep only a reasonable number

of each. When you move in with someone, you might think questions like how many pens to keep are too small to discuss. But as Nancy and George learned, you might as well talk about it pleasantly because if you don't, you'll end up fighting about it later.

They also realized you need permanent places for impermanent things. For instance, they'd never had a place for things to mail or things to repair. Without a home, these items just float around the house, get lost, and become clutter.

Most significant, this time around Nancy discovered how much emotional baggage she'd brought to working with George on their apartment. When she was a child, her mother had always called her a slob and commanded her to get organized—but then criticized the way Nancy approached the task. Nancy had also had several assistant positions with overbearing bosses who'd pulled rank—"You want to organize it how?!!!" Keeping George away from her systems was a way of avoiding criticism. And George had felt this tension, though he'd never understood why.

George learned to slow down, listen more, and control his impulse to shoot off ideas. He was shocked to find out that something he'd always called the Vomiting Envelope was actually a practical system of Nancy's for filing business receipts.

Will they continue to get organized together? Absolutely. Their next projects are George's tools and Nancy's office. Nancy realized she liked working with George, feeling great relief that she doesn't have to figure everything out all alone: "We're a good team. I can help him brainstorm systems. He helps me go faster—giving lots of good suggestions."

George pointed out a shelf near the ceiling that he'd built for Nancy's vintage Barbie collection. Stroking Nancy's hand, he told me how they'd first met at his collectibles shop, and how he'd encouraged her to reclaim the dolls she'd given away 20 years ago to a friend whose mother still had them in the garage. George and Nancy had begun their relationship through things they loved; now organizing those possessions had reconnected them. ●

Julie Morgenstern's new book, Organizing from the Inside Out for Teens (written with her daughter, Jessi), explains how to prevent clutter battles between adults and teenagers.

6 WAYS COUPLES CAN DE-CLUTTER

- 1 Take joint ownership of problems and solutions. Instead of starting sentences with "You should," try "How do we want to solve this?"
- 2 Assume the other person has a valid reason for his system. Listen carefully until you understand. Repeat back to confirm.
- 3 Concentrate on your shared goal: a home you both enjoy, where you can find your things. Be willing to compromise.
- 4 Stay focused. Avoid jumping from one project to another.
- 5 Schedule a mutually acceptable time to tackle clutter. Let the answering machine pick up calls.
- 6 Have fun. Get a little bell and ring it the minute either person breaks one of the rules.