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Commentary: #1 Make a List

William C. Levin
Bridgewater State College

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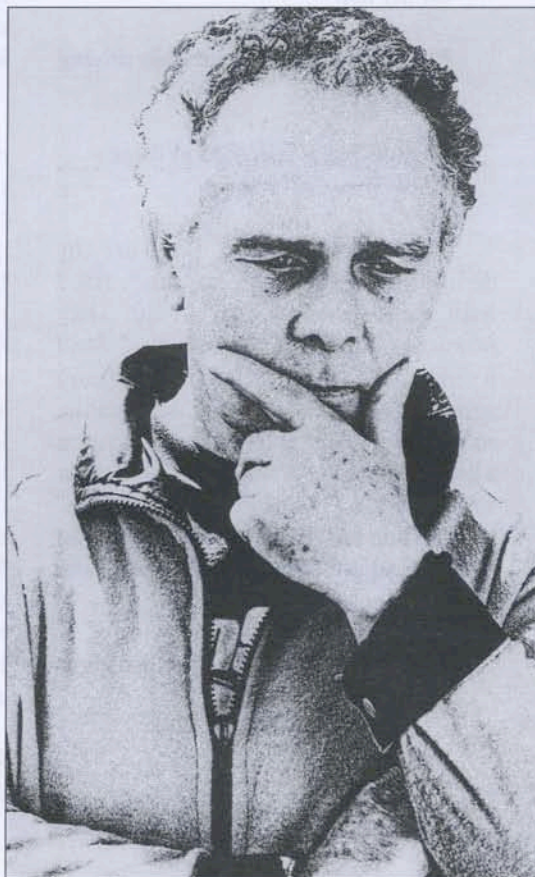
COMMENTARY: #1 Make A List

William C. Levin

I woke up early one Saturday morning and, over coffee, started writing out my list. "Things to do by Sunday Night", I titled it. My father would have approved. Once the work was done he'd say, "There. Don't you feel great now that you have finally cleared the decks?" I was after that feeling, so this list would be really fearless. No leaving something off (like doing my state taxes) merely because I hate doing it. In less than fifteen minutes my list of things to do was too long for the time available to do them. In fact, it seemed longer than a list of things I had accomplished in the previous six months. And it was complex as all get out. Chores made the list just because I could think of them. Making this list was supposed to make me feel better, but it was backfiring. I needed some rules to keep things from getting out of hand, so I started a list of rules for making my list. (Yes, I realize the danger of writing a list about how to make lists. Consider yourself fairly warned.)

1) Lists should not get too long. It would probably be a good idea to have a fixed limit. Stephanie Winston (*Best Organizing Tips*-Simon and Schuster) says the limit for one's "daily list" should be ten. Too arbitrary. Ronni Eisenberg (with Kate Kelly *Organize Your Home!* Hyperion) says to limit the number of items to the room available on the wall calendar in your kitchen. Dumb. What if you have a fat magic marker and I have one of those deadly-skinny pens? Is

that fair, or what? I think the right number should be determined by the kind of person who is making the list. For me, three seems about right. I need lots of time before chores (preparation and planning for efficiency, accumulation of the right tools and materials, etc.) and after (physical and emotional recovery from the exertion). However, I also have friends whose lists often get into triple figures. They seem comforted by the mass of tasks before them, like a road map to their future weekends. Always somewhere to go. If you can deal with the guilt of carrying over list items to another day, then go for length. But I warn you, you probably won't get them all done before the list gets lost.



2) No fair putting on your list things that you've already taken care of. This is cheating. Say I have this long list of stuff to do and, because I've done so few of

them, I start listing things I've done days or weeks before so I can have the fun of crossing them off. After "(37) Wash the outsides of the windows on the third floor" (not done, of course) I stick in "(38) Eat lunch last Wednesday". I then wait a few minutes before discovering it on the list ("Whoa! What have we here?") and triumphantly crossing it off. So item #1 everyone's list should be "Start a list of things to do". There. At least that's done. Cross that baby off.

3) There should be some way of limiting the kinds of things that make a list. By my standards there should never be a real big gap between the least and most mundane items. For example, you should not have on the same list the items "Clip my toenails" and "Decide on my political philosophy". It might help to make a list of one hundred things you feel you should do, then arrange them in increasing order of profundity (decreasing mundanity?). This will set the scale of the kinds of tasks that get your attention. Then it will be easy to keep the items in the same scale of seriousness. (By the way, if the 100th item on your list, the *most* meaningful task, is "clip my toenails", you've got problems beyond the scope of this article.)

4) Try to avoid list items out of time order. For example, one list I made recently started with the items "1) Fix the brakes on the lawn tractor" "2) Order brake parts for the lawn tractor". I know this to be a sneaky way to compose a long list of chores, only half of which of which can be done.

5) Sometimes we think our lists are organizing the world when, in fact, they are just listing things. Don't get confused. To illustrate; I can list all the things in my basement, but that does not make it organized. I think we get confused about this because we humans have a talent for making up categories that have no real meaning in the world in which we live. To make this clear, let me give you some examples of lists with real

organizing principles, and then some that have what I call “organizational fog syndrome”. Here are list subjects that mean something.

- a) Stuff that if I do will save me money.
- b) Stuff that if I don't take care of I will surely go to jail
- c) Stuff that if I clean up (or throw out) will make it possible for me to move from one room to another without injury.
- d) Stuff that has been
 - a) on a list at least once before
 - b) on my list for more than six months
 - c) on the lists of more than three household members for three months.
- e) Stuff that even people with serious physical and emotional disabilities would have gotten taken care of by now.
- f) Stuff that can be done in the time remaining before we get ready to go to the movies.
- g) Stuff to get rid of that will make room for new stuff I want.

Here, by contrast, are examples of lists that seem to have organizing principles, but really don't. They give false comfort and, so, suffer from organizational fog.

- a) Stuff that begins with the letters B, J or T.
 - b) Stuff to do that Miss McNichols, my second grade teacher, would probably want me to do.
 - c) Stuff that can be done left handed as well as right handed.
 - d) Stuff to do that I could write out in Spanish.
 - e) Stuff to do that involves touching brown or gray substances.
 - f) Stuff to do that I've seen done on television hospital dramas.
 - g) Stuff to do that is odd-numbered on my list.
 - h) Stuff that can be done while driving a car.
 - i) Stuff that is specified in three words, like “kill the cat.”
- 6) No positive lists. Lists are, by definition, negative, demanding, filled with things you wish to avoid. They consist of things you “gotta do.” Stuff would never make a list if it weren't something you didn't really want to do, so you didn't do it and it had to be put on a list. Making a positive list like “remember to be good to yourself,” “eat some fries” or “don't do too many things on your list of things to do” are so much goody-two-shoe blather.
- 7) It seems natural to put list items

in order of importance, but be careful about assigning degrees of importance to different chores. The calculations can get very complicated. It is fair to count three not-very-important chores as equal to one important one, but be honest about your math. So, cleaning three dresser drawers may equal one closet, but not one basement. This is a common problem when cross-comparing lists between domestic partners. For example, I should not (it turns out) try to equate cleaning all five of my dresser drawers with Domestic Partner's five cleanings of the cat-poop bin down in the basement. Bad idea. It also turns out to be difficult to compare chore-level phone calls and/or visits. “I'll call my sister if you call your brother” is a tricky trade. It involves long negotiations about the mental and emotional health of relatives, and is best left off lists entirely.

8) Lastly, recognize lists for what they really are; they are feeble attempts to make us think we can get control of a world that is subject to full-bore entropy. As we get older our list-making increases because the number of things we own, operate, need to keep track of and have lost the directions to has increased proportionately with our years. Under no conditions will we ever again “clear the decks,” and we know it. So I discover in my fiftieth year that listing all the things in the basement that should be dusted, fixed, thrown out, shelved or merely identified gives me the feeling that since the chores can be listed, they can be done. I know it isn't really true, but that isn't the point. Lists give me hope and are the next best things to real order and control.

William C. Levin is associate Editor of the Review.