

A PATH TO FINANCIAL FITNESS

I experienced one of those defining moments in life when I was nine years old. My parents called my older brother and me to a family conference one Sunday afternoon in the kitchen, where my mother bluntly proclaimed: “If anything ever happens to your father and me, don’t stop and spend time crying. I want you to step over our bodies and go straight to the bank.”

Though the message was not warm and fuzzy, it was practical and made sense in the context of my parents’ life experiences. My father was an immigrant and my mother was the daughter of immigrants. Both had little education, and they were poor when they got married. Yet, by the time my mother made this pronouncement, my parents had close to a million dollars in assets. Her message was that we would one day be guardians of the wealth they had worked so hard to accumulate and we had best learn to respect and manage it.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, my parents dragged me to almost every meeting they had with their banker, their C.P.A., and their lawyers. They did this in part because their lack of formal education made them uncomfortable in front of white-collar professionals. But they also knew I would one day go to college, and they wanted me to get a head start in learning about the world of finance. Bringing me to these meetings also showed me that there were many situations in life, such as keeping one’s finances organized and managed properly, where one should seek outside help, however uncomfortable it might feel.

The organization and management skills I gleaned from my parents contributed to my professional successes. I became involved in several types of businesses, including real estate and catering. However, I decided to become a professional organizer when I observed several of my creative and intelligent friends make mistakes that had serious financial consequences simply because they could not handle the paperwork related to their businesses. One was a building contractor who neglected his paperwork. Invoices

did not always get billed or get billed in a timely way. Incoming bills often remained unpaid, and project papers were not filed properly; the result was chaos and disorder. Another friend was a therapist who became so involved in helping her patients that she only sporadically billed them and did not follow up on payments. Fortunately, both of these friends had the good sense to bring in outside consultants, and their stories had happy endings.

At the time, I questioned how smart people could make such obvious financial blunders. I realized, though, that there are many bright and talented people whose areas of expertise may not include the organizing and processing of paperwork. These are people who could benefit by enlisting the help of a professional organizer.

A professional organizer can help you arrange your financial records logically, systematically, simply, consistently, and intuitively. Every system we create is designed to fit you and your lifestyle -- your way of thinking. Many of us help clients to keep track of income and expenses. Dave Natan, a C.P.A. at Newburg & Company in Wellesley, MA, recommended an organizer to one of his clients who every year at tax time came into his office with shopping bags full of receipts. She had neglected to record what most of the receipts were for, thereby losing many potential deductions. The organizing consultant input all of the client's financial data to the financial software program Quicken and taught her how to use the program. That eventually saved her thousands of dollars in taxes and yearly accountant bills. The organizer also calculated a budget for the client that enabled her to profile and understand her own patterns of spending.

Professional organizers do everything from opening and organizing mail, to paying bills, to developing monthly checklists and payment schedules for clients, to setting up their clients' computer systems for online banking and bill payments. Organizers can create spending profiles that will help you save money and time. They can instruct you in identity theft protection. They can organize your estate documents -- wills, trusts, and powers of attorney -- making sure they are located in one easily accessible, central place.

And they can help you inventory your financial records and draft a retention schedule for them so that you avoid excess and unwanted accumulation.

My mother's words, delivered so many years ago, still pack meaning for me today. Yes, she wanted me to be responsible for her assets. But she also wanted me to strategize and plan, and she wanted that planning to extend to all aspects of my life, not only the financial. I learned to seek help when I needed it. And I chose to devote my career to helping people get organized, financially and otherwise, and better manage their lives.

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