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THE OPRAH  
MAGAZINE

# HOW TO LET GO

THE SWEETNESS  
OF SURRENDER

OPRAH TALKS TO  
THE GREATEST:  
MUHAMMAD ALI  
ON FEAR, FAME,  
AND HIS HOPES  
FOR HEAVEN

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**BREAKING UP**  
HOW WOMEN GET  
OVER BEING OVER

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# LOVE, LOSS, AND WHAT SHE FOUND

A BRILLIANT ORGANIZER LEADS A DESPERATE WOMAN ON A SEARCH FOR TRUTH, ORDER, AND, AT LONG LAST, CLOSET SPACE. BY LISA KOGAN

**T**O CONSTANCE PRATT, GETTING ORGANIZED usually begins with a couple of large plastic garbage bags and the desperate need to locate her passport. It means forcing herself to part with the magazines she's been saving and finally tracking down the earring whose mate she got rid of during the great purge of '99. It means a dark day spent wondering why she can't relinquish the last of her 1970s miniskirts to the custody of Goodwill. It means forging ever onward till she sees the surface of her desk, the floor, the closet, the bottom of her sock drawer, the end of her patience. Ultimately, she reduces large, unruly piles to slightly less large, unruly piles. It is a nasty, endless business. The time and energy would be well spent if it worked. But the awful truth is this: Getting organized by tossing things out never really works. It's only a matter of weeks (occasionally days) before that all-important phone number scribbled on the back of an AT&T bill will be absorbed into a clutter of bobby pins and gum wrappers, a missing credit card will have to be canceled, the dining table will be papered over in work from the office, business receipts will go another month without getting attached to an expense report, the gift bought for a friend's newborn will be lost and bought again. She is efficient on the job, fabulous at a cocktail party, essentially happy, genuinely insightful, and slowly but most certainly driving herself nuts. ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SANG AN

# The Breakup as Wake-Up

Our readers weigh in with survival tactics that helped them through the end of a relationship.

**a**fter the breakup of my relationship, the first thing I had to do was find myself again. Once the grief subsided, I read books that encouraged my independence. I took long walks alone. I no longer ran from my thoughts and desires. I sprawled out and took up the whole bed when I slept. I made exciting plans for the future. I proved to myself that I was valuable and ultimately strong and powerful. Now I'm me again, and it feels better than I can even describe.

Miranda Hale  
Spokane

I was "dumped" at the happiest time of my life—right before my wedding—and I was determined to get my life back immediately. First I moved to Atlanta and created my own consulting firm—something I had always wanted. Next I asked myself: What are my untapped passions? I had been so involved with someone else for eight years, I had no hobbies or outside interests. I then made a list of everything I was interested in. I took meditation and photography classes, snowboarding lessons, worked at the zoo, and vowed to take three personal workshops/retreats/trips every year. By going on walks, writing in a journal, taking bubble baths, I was reminded that I had a wonderful life. It's been a year now since my wedding was called off—sometimes it

seems like yesterday, other times I see how much I've grown. There was a lot of pain but certainly a whole lot of gain.

Shelli Johannes  
Atlanta

The best way to feel better after a breakup is to keep the reason for dating in mind. We date to establish boundaries. We date to find what is acceptable in a mate and what is not. We date to enhance our lives and to build relationships that are strong and meaningful. If someone dumps you, it is not a reflection of you. Before I married, when I was dumped, I looked at it as being one step closer to finding the one who was meant for me. When any type of relationship ended, it was an opportunity for me to learn more about myself.

Kim Kallenberg  
Knoxville, Tennessee

First I went shopping and changed my bedroom enough so I could lie in my bed again. I then chopped my hair from 15 inches down to half an inch, an action I was certain my ex-boyfriend would have disapproved of. I also tried things we had never done together, like white-water rafting, camping, and going to concerts. It was a great way to connect with myself again.

Kassie Schumacher  
St. Paul

I think it's important to grieve over the loss of a relationship. If you just tuck it away and try not to think about it, it will come back to haunt you in your next one. The process does take patience, however. I spent a lot of time with my girlfriends, who made me feel better right away. You also have to take some time for yourself by just sitting and reflecting about the good things in your life. I made a list of everything I liked about myself and didn't let that confidence fade.

Jeannette Bower  
Tsawwassen, British Columbia

After a yearlong engagement, my fiancé informed me that he wanted out. Initially I wasn't able to experience any kind of joy. But one morning during a run, I made a conscious decision to take notice of two beautiful things each day: a flower, the way the light fell between the leaves on a tree, another person jogging on the path, just anything. Because the things I took notice of were unrelated to anyone or anything in my life, I was able to appreciate the goodness in the small stuff. Eventually, I was able to feel appreciation and joy again, and the numbness soon faded. I remember the first time after the breakup that I caught myself singing along to the radio while driving my car. Experiencing that simple feeling of happiness showed me life would go on and I would be all right.

Heather Carpenter  
Seattle

friend who's just called her at three in the morning, *it's the blessings. It's the gift of what you notice more.*

A wake-up call into a world where everything—but everything—has a recognizable and momentary magnificence. Every bud on every flowering tree, every snowflake in its perfect symmetry, every shade the aspen leaves turn on their way from green to yellow to orange to brown; the world seen through the lens of grief is crystalline in its clarity. And all of it beautiful and hopeful and healing and fleeting and, for all of that, almost too much to bear. *The gift of what you notice more.* The *barista* at the market with the long, dark ponytail who makes the perfect tall, single latte. The young woman at the dry cleaner's with her rainbow eye shadow and her Lee Press-On Nails who gives her customers a perfect 1 percent of her attention. Seats right behind the goalie at the hockey game and the thwack of the players' bodies up against the boards, the thunk of stick against puck, of elbow

against rib, of helmet against helmet.

And if, God forbid, you should find yourself somewhere *really* romantic, like Paris or a candlelit restaurant or Long's Drug Store the night before Valentine's Day, swear that as soon as you are in love again you will come right back to that spot on the Pont des Arts and feel everything you are longing to feel right now. Alas, it will never happen. Because it is only your longing that is making Long's Drug Store and the candlelight and even Paris profound. Savor your longing. Note the clever way it has of reminding you that you are very much alive.

**Step 4: Push your luck** About a week after Randy left me, my friend Owen took me to see Joan Baez. Owen's got connections, and we were ushered straight to two seats in the first row. "About eight years ago," Joan said early in the evening, "I decided I was going to stop doing anything" CONTINUED ON PAGE 194

“Call Julie Morgenstern,” I urge my frustrated friend. Instead she puts out an SOS via e-mail to Morgenstern, CEO and president of Task Masters and the author of *Time Management From the Inside Out* and *Organizing From the Inside Out* (Owl Books).

The e-mail reads (in part): *I have closetsful of debris of one kind and another...from YEARS of pack-rat behavior—my own and other people's. I seem to be the repository of not only our daughter's past, but my late aunt Carlotta's, my parents', my late sister's, and of course my late husband's.... So you can see it's terrifying. I can only bear to tackle one closet at a time, and there are five, packed to the gills, plus a storage space in the basement and boxes strewn around and things under the beds... shopping bags.... Just listing this is making my breath come faster!*

It's the kind of letter Julie thrives on. She is a house whisperer, able to tame the most tangled mess, all the while calming and enchanting the person trapped beneath its crushing weight. She responds to my friend's frantic e-mail by picking up the phone and suggesting they set up a meeting. Constance tries again to explain that her two-bedroom New York City apartment will not be like anything she's seen before. But truth be told, there's nothing Julie hasn't seen before. “I've lived in this apartment for 29 years,” Connie moans. “I have books everywhere, old letters, scarves, keys, fabric swatches, Christmas ornaments. It's not that from time to time I don't try to throw things out,” she says, her voice growing increasingly agitated, “but whatever attempts I make turn out to be a drop in the ocean.” Undeterred, Julie replies, “Some people need abundance to feel comfortable, and there's nothing wrong with that. Getting organized doesn't necessarily mean throwing anything out. We can celebrate the abundance—it's a way of taking care of yourself. So,” she goes on, “instead of telling me what you're trying to get rid of, maybe you can tell me about what's important to you. What are the treasures? What's underneath?” And with one lightning bolt of a thought, Constance's perspective is magically changed.

## Julie's Rules of Order

1. Start in the room you spend the most time in.
2. Avoid zigzag organizing. Begin in one corner of the room and complete each section before moving on to the next.
3. Attack the visible clutter first—these items are more current and will give you instant change.
4. Don't get distracted sorting things that belong in another room, just move them to that location.
5. Search for the treasures instead of the trash—organizing should be a positive experience, not a negative one.

And I've been thinking about that question you asked the other day. There are so many things I treasure—but God knows where they are. I want to be able to put my hand on what's precious to me.”

maybe you're the one who's trying to deny that Bob's gone?” Constance takes a quick little breath. “And maybe you're afraid that if you let go of some of his things you'd be acknowledging it, and he'd finally disappear?” We sit with this for a few seconds. “Yes,” Constance says at last, “I think that's right.”

“The truth is,” Julie says, “hanging on to Bob's stuff isn't what keeps him alive. Your memories are what keep him alive. If you want all his things, that's fine, Constance. But you don't need them to have him with you. He's in your heart. I understand what you're afraid of losing,” Julie says. “What do you hope to gain?”

“Well, I want to make it easy for my daughter—I don't want her to get stuck someday dealing with this mess,” Constance says resolutely. “I'd also like to be able to invite a friend over for dinner on the spur of the moment. And maybe I'd like to redecorate. Or, maybe I'd like to sell this place. As it stands, I can't imagine how I could ever pack up and move.”

# “OH, THIS WON'T BE ANY PROBLEM,” SHE SAYS AS

### The Consultation

The following afternoon, Julie arrives to assess the situation. For Constance, it's comfort at first sight. She feels instantly at ease with Julie. Over tall glasses of Perrier, Constance tells Julie about the dream she had after their chat: “I went to meet a friend at this cafeteria, and there was my husband, Bob. I knew he was dead, but *he* didn't know he was dead. I was so incredibly happy to see him. I couldn't believe how lucky I was. But then my neighbor walked in and started saying to him, ‘Wait, how can you possibly be here? You're—’ Before she could say, ‘You're dead,’ I kicked her hard in the shins. If he knew he was dead, he'd disappear! I pulled him into a little alcove, and I hugged him tight and kissed him and told him all the things I'd wanted to tell him about how wonderful he was.” We watch the late-afternoon light play against the cocoa-colored walls of the living room she and Bob shared for nearly 25 years. “I know this dream is somehow connected to my knowing you'd be here today,” she says slowly. We all three sip and sigh. And then in a voice tender as a lullaby, Julie says: “In the dream it's Bob who doesn't know he's dead...but do you think

“Good,” Julie says. “Let's surround you only with the things you use and love.”

“Hallelujah!” I say, but Constance looks a little nervous.

“Are you getting something out of this clutter that you haven't mentioned?” Julie ventures. “Has being disorganized served you in some way?”

Constance considers this question carefully. “Sometimes I just feel paralyzed by the sheer mass of it,” she says. “But I do think I use this mess as a screen.” She pauses. “I sort of sink into it and feel very camouflaged, kind of protected,” she says a little shyly. “And the other thing is I like to keep my options open. When I pack for a weekend in the country, I want to be ready for anything. I don't want to figure out ahead of time which book I'll be in the mood to read, what clothes I'll feel like wearing—what if I'm invited to a party at the last minute and what if my hostess needs a blender?” As someone who occasionally goes with Constance to the country, I'm tempted to explain that with what she packs she could be prepared for everything from a royal coronation to an Amish barn raising, but I keep it to myself.

"I see this all the time," Julie says. "Did you have a chaotic childhood?"

"We moved around quite a bit—I probably lived in ten different houses," Constance says. "I never felt okay until I could put all my books on my bookshelf."

"So you had to be ready for anything—which is great, unless the burden of lugging around so much stuff ends up weighing you down instead of freeing you up. It's fine to keep everything, if it's organized so that you really *can* be ready for anything," Julie says, giving both permission and food for thought.

On that note, we take the grand tour of my friend's life. She bravely opens overflowing drawers, cabinets, trunks, kitchen cupboards, files, closets, and medicine chest as Julie makes notes. When Constance goes to answer the phone, I ask Julie how this unholy mess compares to others she's faced. "Oh, this won't be any problem," she answers as I stare into a closet that resembles the third day of Woodstock. "She could have three times as much stuff. It's not about the volume, it's about whether the person is ready versus resistant. This woman is ready."

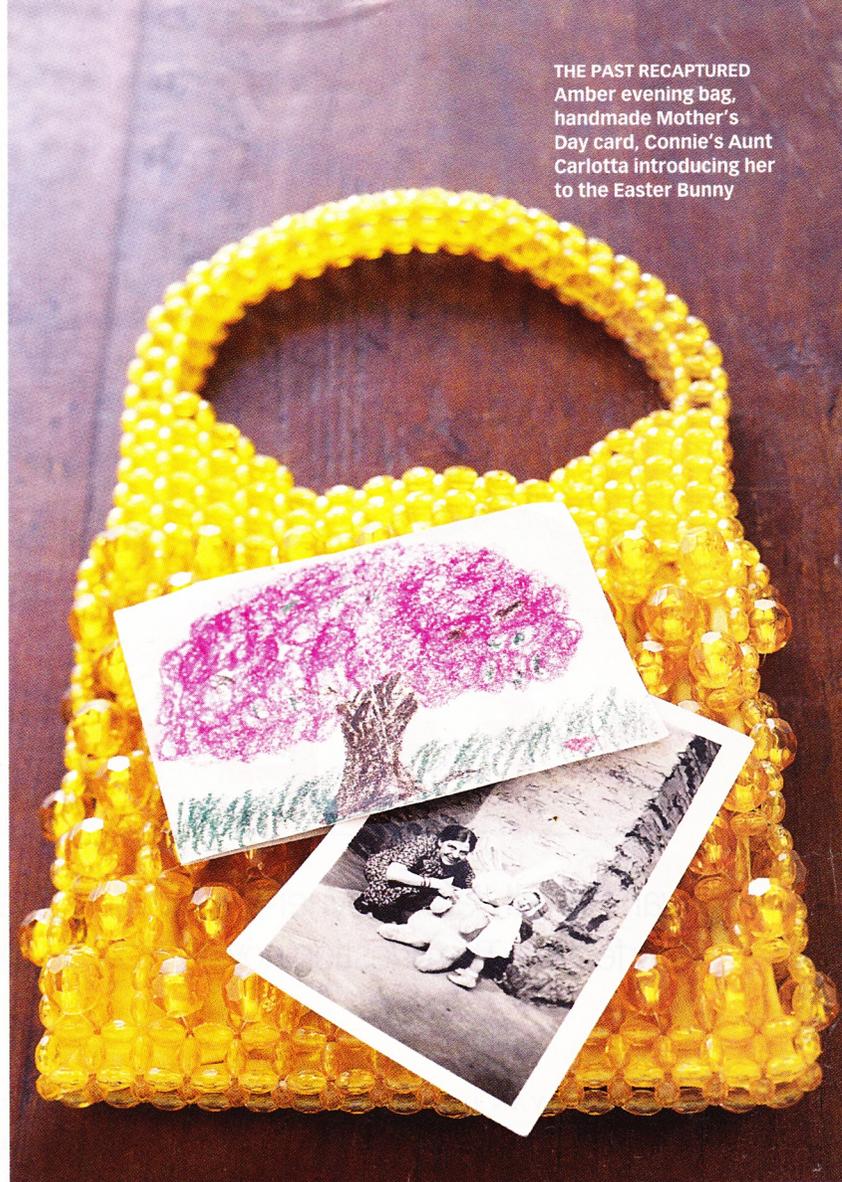
"Which room is giving you the most grief?" she asks when Constance comes back.

"Well, I guess that would be my bedroom."

"Then that's where we'll start."

### Lost in S.P.A.C.E.

We reconvene at 9 A.M. the following Saturday. Julie has brought Kristin Armann, one of her assistants, to help out. She is a delicate blonde with the strength of ten men. It is clear that in a former life the two of them built the Pyramids with their bare hands. Julie explains her S.P.A.C.E. acronym: "We're going to Sort, Purge, Assign a home, Containerize, and Equalize. We'll begin by labeling boxes to sort into—things for charity, things for your sister, your cousin, your daughter, potential Christmas presents."



THE PAST RECAPTURED  
Amber evening bag,  
handmade Mother's  
Day card, Connie's Aunt  
Carlotta introducing her  
to the Easter Bunny

## STARE INTO A CLOSET THAT RESEMBLES THE THIRD DAY OF WOODSTOCK.

"And what about a dress-up box for my nieces and nephews?" Constance says, getting into the swing of things.

"Great," says Julie. "And we'll get all the papers boxed and moved into your study."

"My study is a disaster area," Constance protests.

"But your study is the next project we're going to tackle," Julie says.

"As long as we're sorting, shouldn't we go through the papers?" Constance asks.

"Nope. We want to invest our energy in sorting through only the things that will live in the bedroom."

"But won't the room feel very empty?" Constance asks, a little anxious.

"Nothing is leaving your apartment unless you want it to," Julie continues as she separates mounds of slips and bras into black, white, and beige. "We've got to reclaim the space so that each room has very specific functions that work for you. We're trying to arrange activity zones here. The perfect model is the kindergarten classroom. There's the reading corner, the snack

corner, the arts-and-crafts area, the music area. It's a visual menu. So when that 5-year-old walks into the room thinking, What can I do now? an answer instantly presents itself."

### Treasure Hunt

The plan is to start at the first closet and circle our way around. This is a hard concept for Connie to stick with. As they begin making progress on the closet, she drifts to a pile on the chair. "You're getting sidetracked," Julie says, redirecting her to the two dozen shoes hanging on the back of the closet door. "I want you to see dramatic change as we go, whole sections complete instead of lots of partially sorted areas." Gradually, the buried treasures rise to the surface. A hat Constance wore on her honeymoon (1967), Bob's Princeton diploma (1945), tickets to the Helen Hayes theater (1957), her mother's autograph book (1924), antique evening bags, a brand-new pair of boots she'd forgotten she bought. "That happens frequently," Julie tells us. "I'd estimate people spend about 15 percent of their annual income buying things they've

CONTINUED ON PAGE 198

forgotten they already own." We're both startled. "Wait till we get to your study," she says. "I've discovered whole bank accounts and insurance policies people have lost."

All this lying around trying to look nonjudgmental as the three women work their tails off has exhausted me, and we break for takeout Thai food. As Constance leaves the room, I say to Julie, "Quick, does she really need eight slips?" Julie says, "This is about what's important to her. And I'm a permission giver. You like that purple lamp, that's great. You don't like that gorgeous suede jacket—

**"I'm a permission giver," Julie says. "You like that purple lamp, that's great. You don't like that gorgeous suede jacket—that's okay, you don't have to hang on to it no matter how much money you spent."**

that's okay, you don't have to hang on to it no matter how much you spent. If there's a national crisis, you have enough slips; if for some reason you have to go out in your slip, you're gonna have choices. Good for you. My work is about identifying and celebrating each person's unique personality through their relationship to their stuff. It's a process of clarification and self-discovery: This is who I am."

Over garlic shrimp, I tell them about a friend of mine who confided that she'd love to hire Julie, but she purchased a sex toy four years ago and hid it so well from her three kids that now she doesn't know where it is. She's afraid to let anyone go through her stuff. She has visions of the thing turning up in her daughter's Malibu Barbie Dream House. "Actually," Julie says philosophically, "people hold on to my number for an average of nine months before making the decision to call. This is intimate work. But I train my staff to be very discreet." I immediately apologize to Connie for mocking the *John Kenneth Galbraith in Conversation* tape I found under her bed. After lunch we move to Connie's other closet. Dozens of Bob's neckties hang against the door. "What is it about these ties?" she wonders out loud. Then softly she answers her own question. "The ties that bind," she murmurs as she puts

them into a box marked MATERIAL FOR POTENTIAL BABY QUILT. When that closet is finished, they start on the two bureaus brimming with sepia-toned photographs, lingerie, and, yes, a baseball cap reading ALBERTO VO; PRESENTS RINGO STARR.

"Good news," Constance says giddily, depositing a torn nightgown into the trash, "it's full of holes." Julie looks up from the suitcase she's emptying. "Here's a tip: If you catch yourself hoping something is broken or stained before you even look—that's a trigger. You can give yourself permission to let it go." Though they've been at it for hours, my friend is exhilarated, not drained. It is at long last time to assign a home to each category of

the things she's decided to keep. All winter clothes and shoes will go in one closet. All summer and evening clothes in the other. T-shirts in this drawer, socks in that, and so it goes. I head home to my own mess around dinnertime, promising to return the following afternoon.

### A Brand-New World

Kristin answers the front door—she's smiling. "We're in here," Constance calls. I step over five Hefty bags (30-gallon size) filled with stuff from the purge pile, make my way around box after box that will soon be distributed among family and friends, then down the narrow corridor leading to the bedroom...and enter a brand-new world.

I stand frozen in the doorway. If I were making a movie, this would be the moment oceans part, fireworks explode, and angels sing. The four-poster bed that once jutted awkwardly into the room has been gracefully angled between two windows. Framed pictures rest on a dresser that had been covered with odds and ends. For the first time I notice the expanse of jade-green carpet that calms the wildflower wallpaper. It is an astonishing transformation. Intellectually I understood that things would look different, but I had no idea how miraculously light

and spacious the room would feel. Constance is first to speak. "I feel like I'm flying!" she says. My eyes well up. Connie's do, too. Julie hugs us both. If we were guys, I guess we'd high-five each other and crack open a six-pack.

The next step is to containerize. Julie has ordered fabric-covered drawer dividers from [www.org-etc.com](http://www.org-etc.com) to separate lingerie into neat, accessible rows. She has also ordered a set of red velvet jewelry trays that fit into the top bureau drawer. Together, the two women untangle the contents of Constance's jewelry box and slot each brooch, earring, and necklace into its new home. For the closets, Julie has ordered slim cherrywood hangers, clear plastic shoeboxes, and straw-colored hatboxes from [www.stacksandstacks.com](http://www.stacksandstacks.com). "The final step is to equalize," Julie says. "That means maintaining the systems we've put in place. Now that literally every item has a home, it shouldn't be too difficult. But I always think throwing a couple of parties a year helps to keep things free and clear." I can picture the invitation: "You are cordially invited to my bedroom...."

We decide not to let being female keep us from that beer. Perched on the bed (none of us can bring ourselves to actually leave the room), we drink a toast to letting go of all those things that get in the way of embracing the truth. In the end, Constance and Julie have created an environment that reflects back who Constance truly is—and what makes her happy. "So, exactly how painful was this process?" I ask Connie. "There was no pain at all," my friend responds without hesitation. "Because I realized I wasn't losing anything—except the relentless guilt of not being able to get it together. I thought I was beyond hope, but it's really that nobody ever showed me how to think about all this."

"That's right," Julie says. "The ability to tackle your mess lies inside of you." I'd been seeing Julie as part fairy godmother, part Zen master; now it hits me—she's both. "You sound exactly like Glinda, the good witch of Oz," I say, clicking my loafers to make the point. "Well," she says, laughing, "I do believe that we each have the power to find our way, if not back to Kansas, then at least out of the tornado. It's just a matter of connecting with who you really are." ●