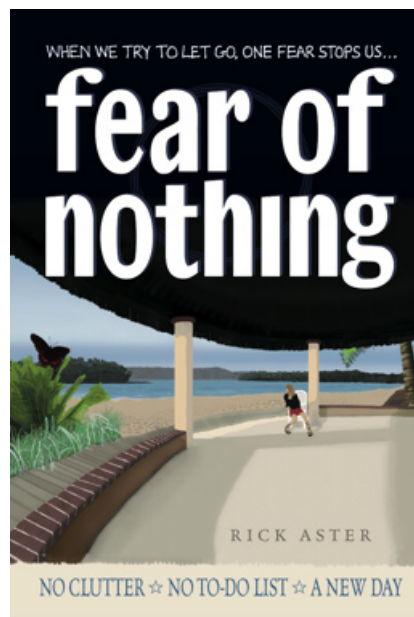


*Fear of Nothing, by Rick Aster  
coming New Year's Day*



<http://www.rickaster.com/fearofnothing>  
<http://fearofnothing.blogspot.com>

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# 1

## *Waiting for a Rainy Day*

There are no rainy days anymore.

In an earlier age, a rainy day actually meant something. “Rainy day” was almost synonymous with bad news — you could till, plant, and tend your fields in fair weather, but rain would interrupt your plans and send you indoors.

As a farmer in the agricultural age, you needed to be out in the fields. You could not afford to waste a sunny day. If there was work that could be done indoors, you would set it aside and save it for a rainy day. When the rainy day arrived, you would have something constructive to do. The rain might keep you away from your most important work, but you could still make good use of your time. You might sharpen tools and patch the holes in your boots. When you were done, you would sit and wait for the rainy day to end.

This way of relating to the weather was a universal experience at one time, but now, just a few generations later, it is a scenario

that most of us have never experienced. A thousand innovations arrived — railroads, telephones, shopping malls — that took away the significance of rain. Rainfall might dampen our spirits, but it can't wash away our to-do lists. For most of the things we want to do, rainy weather makes no difference at all.

In the information age there are no rainy days to fill, yet we manage our lives as if there were. We still save things to do on the next rainy day. There are old cars to fix, thank-you notes to write, tax forms to fill out, flowers to plant, baby clothes to try to give away — not today, but “someday.”

What is *someday*? It is not a day on the calendar. It is certainly not today — today there is not a moment to spare! It could not be tomorrow either, or the next day, or any day next week. No ordinary day will make the time available for us to do any of the things we have saved up. Still we insist that we must do *all* these things someday. *Someday* must be quite an extraordinary day.

Of course, *someday* is a myth. You could wait for the rest of your life and *someday* would never come. *Someday* is the rainy day of another age. Once, people waited for a rainy day to end. Now it is the opposite: people are waiting for a rainy day to come. Then they will finally do the things they have been saving. But of course, the rainy day never arrives. There are no rainy days anymore.

## The Ghost and the Fairy Godmother

The rainy day of agricultural times lingers like a ghost. It is still part of the way we understand our lives, still telling us things we should do and things we must not do. “A rainy day” is now a cliché we may refer to in planning for the future, although few of us fully understand what it implies.

We see the ghost of the rainy day in the stubbornness of *things*. *Material things* that lightly follow us home, then acquire unexpected inertia as they wait for us to put them to use. *Things to do* that ring hopeful chords in our imaginations and on our lists yet remain silent in reality. Each of these *things* is a gift left behind by a ghost of a rainy day that will not be keeping its appointment with us.

A ghost that brings too many things — when you put it that way, it seems harmless enough. Isn't it better to have too many things than too few? Who wants to be Cinderella with nothing to wear but the rags on her back when everyone has gone to the ball?

Yet if this story line comes up today, it takes the form of “a closet full of clothes and nothing to wear!” — a paradox, perhaps, but it stops you just as surely as Cinderella's predicament stopped her. In a way, it is worse, because with a visit from her fairy godmother, Cinderella could gain the gown, shoes, and coach that she was longing for, but even a fairy godmother cannot solve the problem of too many things. And owning a mountain of things is little consolation when you are running late and your keys are missing in the middle of it all. *Every* extra thing interferes with all the things you actually use and all the things you actually do.

Excess *is* a problem. As long as you are saving things for a rainy day that does not exist, it will cause you no end of difficulties.

## The Questions of Our Time

Excess sneaks up on you. Before you realize anything is happening, your days are filled with one thing after another to do. Your space seems to fill itself with the dead weight of things that just sit there. How does this happen? What do all these things mean? These are the questions of our time. Where did all this stuff come from? How can there be *so many* things to do?

In an age that stamps out products and organizes information with such alacrity, these are questions that cannot be avoided. Never before has *too much* been a problem for so many people.

*Too much* is a hard thing to recognize when so much of our history is a story of lack and when food and clean water remain a struggle for half the world. You can mistakenly try to write your troubles as the next chapter in this long-running story of lack. Yet if you have food and water to spare and the time to read a book such as this one, it is safe to say that more of your personal problems have to do with too much than too little.

Excess in its various forms is an obvious cause of problems, even if we try to blame some of these problems on our own real or imagined shortcomings. If you trip over things in the hallway, it is not because you are clumsy; it is because there are things crowding your walking space. If you forget the most important thing you needed to do, it is not because you are forgetful; it is because of all the other things you are trying to do. If you leave your jacket behind in a restaurant, it is not because you have no presence of mind; it is because your mind is racing ahead to the next things on your schedule. If you lose touch with your friends, it does not mean you do not care; it is the result of a life so busy with other things that it is hard to find the time to stay in touch.

Countless problems are the direct result of excess. Excess also has a hand in other problems that may seem vague or mysterious on the surface. If you ever feel overwhelmed by life, you can be sure you have too many things and too many things to do. By definition, you cannot be overwhelmed by nothing — only by a mountain of things.

Many of us have become so used to feeling overwhelmed that we say it is an unavoidable part of modern life. We can no longer even imagine a life that flows smoothly — or if we can, it is nothing more than a distant dream. Yet feeling overwhelmed is easy to solve; it is the simple result of having too many things that demand our attention. Take enough of the excess away, and it can soon start to seem as if everything is happening at just the right speed and at just the right time.

### The Genie Who Asks You to Give Things Up

The mere existence of things is not the problem. You live in a vast universe that contains a great many things, and everywhere you go, you find new things, but this is not what we mean by excess. It is not the things themselves, but your attachment to them, that creates the problem.

Having too much can become a barrier in life as soon as you become attached to the excess. To understand what this means, imagine the following sequence of events.

*Walking in a city, you turn a corner and come upon a very old lamp. You lean down to pick it up. As you touch it, the lamp lets out a puff of smoke, and out of the smoke, a genie appears. "I will grant your wishes," the genie tells you.*

*But as you explain the many things you have been wishing for, the genie interrupts. "Wait. In order for me to make your wishes come true, I have to change the circumstances of your life.*

*"I will take away many of your possessions," the genie explains, to your dismay. "You can keep everything you actually use, but I will take away many of the things you have not used in the last few days. Some of these things are valuable, so I will sell them and put the money in your bank account.*

*"In addition," the genie continues, "I'll need you to give me your to-do list. I can't let you do any of the things you had planned for today. I don't mean to keep you from doing anything you need to do. If these things are still important tomorrow, you can do them tomorrow.*

*"I have to do this to make some space in your life for the things you are wishing for," the genie explains apologetically.*

*"Now wait a minute," you say.*

The problem you face in this fairy tale is the same problem that stops you in real life. You cannot advance toward the life of your dreams without leaving some things behind. Yet even after you know it is essential to give things up, it is still hard to do. Given the choice between gaining the life they wish for and keeping what they already have, most people stop dead in their tracks and say, "Isn't there some way I can have both?"

### Being Stuck and Moving Forward Again

This is what it means to be so attached to your things that you become immobilized. It is never the thing itself, but only an idea that has you stuck. One day many years ago, I got my boots stuck in the soggy ground of a swamp. It seemed that I could not go anywhere, but actually it was only the *boots* that were stuck. What

kept *me* stuck was an unexamined assumption — the idea that I had to keep my feet in my boots. The problem was solved quickly when I realized I could step out of the boots. Whenever you seem to be stuck, it is time to start questioning the ideas that keep you where you are.

The unthinking attachment to things causes one of the world's great recurring tragedies. Instead of choosing the lives they live, most people are living in ways that come to them essentially by accident. Everything they do is defined by the first stuff that happened to fall into their lives. They can't bring themselves to give this stuff up, yet until they do, they are stuck with the stuff they have, mired in it and living a life that is not going anywhere. Most people, I am afraid, simply stay stuck. Barely inching forward, they mistakenly think this slight progress is the journey of life.

To make real progress, you need to go back to where you were before your life got bogged down by the excess in it. You need to rediscover the feeling of having enough things to take effective action but not much more. You need to get out of the swamp and back onto the road. It is as simple — and as difficult — as giving things up.

### From *Someday* to Today

As hard as it is to give things up, it is all too easy to acquire them. The commercial culture around you is designed to persuade you to acquire things — both material things and to-dos — as often as possible. If you are fully participating in the world, you cannot help but have a million things that you intend to do someday and possessions that fill most of your available space — possessions that you look forward to using someday. It sounds like a situation of abundance, and it would be . . . except . . . *someday never comes*. You cannot really take any action *someday*. You can take action only in the present moment, today.

With all the reminders we hear about the past and the future, about learning the lessons of the past and being prepared for what the future may bring, it is easy to forget the importance of the present moment. If you want to learn, prepare, gain experience, or take any other action, today is the day that counts! We

spend too much time thinking about actions of the past or the future when the only potential for action is in the present. You can remember and analyze your past actions, but those thoughts amount to nothing unless you take a different action in the present. You can plan your future all you want, but that too is only an idea unless, when the moment comes, you take the action you have imagined — and of course, when the moment comes, it *is* the present moment. Whatever you want to do in life, you can accomplish it only through present-moment action.

Time is littered with illusions, and so is our vocabulary for it: time running out, no time to lose, time to kill, all the time in the world, next time, every time. Time flies, it crawls, it stands still — except that time does not really do any of this. Time's maneuvers are metaphors — we say them, but they do not really happen.

We know about the past and future through memory and prediction, and these mental processes add their own layers of confusion. To cite just one simple example, our memories and predictions are continually showing us events out of sequence. You can distinctly remember one event happening before a second event, and how the first event helped to *cause* the second event, even if, in reality and in your diary, the second event actually happened before the first event. Predicting a sequence of events is even more perilous: will the rain come before you return to the car, or after? Time is not a reliable guide, and the farther from the present you look, the more unreliable it becomes.

You can avoid all these troubles and maintain a realistic view of time by keeping your thoughts close to the present. My suggestion is that most of your thoughts should have to do with the details of your life today — and by *today*, I mean *just one day*. What you did when you went to bed last night belongs distinctly behind you in the past, and what you do after you get up tomorrow morning is away in the unknown future. This way of looking at time might seem very strange at first, but it is easy, and it works. With your thoughts closer to the time of action, and action closer to the center of your thoughts, you find yourself making more decisions, taking better action, and living a more meaningful life.

When you focus your thoughts on today, you are closer to

focusing your thoughts entirely on what you are doing at the moment. The state of present-moment focus happens when your thoughts and actions become synchronized, and it is in these moments that you experience time for what it really is, without any illusions getting in the way.

Some people say time disappears in present-moment focus, but it is only the illusions that disappear. Illusions are such a part of the experience of time that when you strip the illusions away it is hard to see what is left. It is like tasting pure water for the first time after a lifetime of drinking tap water. You discover that what you thought was the taste of water actually belonged to minerals and gases dissolved in the water. Water by itself has such a simple flavor, it is hard to taste it the first time it touches your tongue. In the same way, if you want to know the true taste of time, you have to get into a state of present-moment focus and stay there long enough to get past the initial surprise that there does not seem to be anything there.

Present-moment focus is much more than just a direct experience of time, and I will have more to say about it later. For now, the important thing to do is to shift your focus from *someday* to *today*. You need to let go of two time illusions in particular: *future decision* and *future action*. These are the two illusions that put your focus on the indefinite future of *someday*.

As I mentioned, it is quite easy to decide that you will do a particular thing someday. When you do this, however, it is important to recognize that the decision and the action occur only in your imagination. They do not exist in reality! In reality, either you take the action right now or you take some other action right now. The only real action is present-moment action, and the only real decisions are those that lead to present-moment action. You can try to make a decision about a future action, but you could always decide something else when that moment comes. As long as it is possible to change your mind before any action takes place, then — regardless of how much time has gone by and how much mental energy you have invested in your “decision” — you have not really made a decision at all.

The imagination can be very convincing, so it is important to

remember that action takes place only in the present. Whenever you imagine you are making decisions and taking action in the future, all it really means is that you are not doing anything right now. To create something real, you need to take present-moment action and to make the best decisions you can make about what you will do today.

You need to shift your focus from *someday* to *today*. One way to make this shift is to consider that there are no obstacles between you and the results you want to create. For you, even time and space are not obstacles, but resources. Given enough time and enough space to work in, you can do virtually anything.

Imagine for a moment that your time and your space are yours to create whatever you can dream for yourself. What would you make of your life? What kind of impact would you want to have on the world around you? Now stop imagining, because, in truth, your time and your space really *are* yours for the taking!

Time and space are part of everything you do. If they feel like obstacles, then every action and every problem will seem difficult.

## Be The Genie

This brings us back to the story of the genie. In a way, there *is* a genie that promises to fulfill your wishes. The “genie” that produces the magical results you are looking for is your own inspired present-moment action. It is the spontaneous action you take whenever you go directly from your desires and principles to action without the familiar pattern of delay and hesitation. This hesitation is the result of *things* — the material things that get in your way and all the other things you need to do.

Give up these excess things. Let go of the clutter that fills up your space and the busy schedule that fills up your time. Take back control of your time and your space. Then you can be the genie.

This is enough of a reason to take on your clutter and your busy schedule — to make that the starting point for improving your life. With your clutter and schedule under control, space and time are yours again, and your life is set up for action.

And there are other reasons that make this an ideal starting

point. Your clutter and your to-do list are not strange new concepts for you to learn. They are right in front of you. They are easy to focus on. They are easy to measure and hard to avoid, and this forces you to be realistic, to address the challenges you face and make real decisions.

If you were to try something more abstract or esoteric, you could pretend that you were making progress while still avoiding the real issues in front of you. It is not so easy to pretend away clutter or a to-do list. Any progress you make in clutter or to-dos makes a difference you can immediately feel. It brings you closer to the present moment in a way that makes an immediate difference in your life.

Finally, clutter and a busy schedule are problems you *can* handle. This is true no matter how busy you are and how crowded your space has become. You can still take control of your space and your time. At times when you are feeling bold, you can make bold changes. When you are feeling more uncertain, you can still advance an inch at a time. You do not need any special skills or new equipment to take on this challenge. Most of all, you do not need to wait for a better day to get started. All it takes is a series of decisions followed by action. Make real decisions, take present-moment action, and keep at it, and that is enough to put you back in control.

### Power Failure or Planning Failure

The allure of *someday* is still there — could your rainy day be waiting just around the corner? The promise of *someday* is that you *will someday* get to each of the things you have been saving up. How realistic is this? To find out, you can look at your actions during the modern rainy-day equivalent — a power failure.

Think back to the power failures you have experienced in the last two years. In a power failure, the electrical supply is disrupted, so you cannot do many of the routine things you would expect to do, but as on a rainy day, it is still possible to make constructive use of your time by doing some of the things you have saved up. So is that what you did? Which of your possessions did you use during the time of the power failures? How many of

your postponed tasks did you complete?

If your experience is typical, you will agree that power failures do not add up to much. A few power failures are no time at all compared to the many things you have been trying to do. My own life is so busy and power failures so infrequent that they do not even allow me time to wash all the windows in my house, never mind my more ambitious goals.

Some people answer that they have not experienced an extended power failure in years or that they have a generator installed that lets them continue most of their ordinary activities. If this is your answer, it should tell you something. It should tell you that every day has its own things to do and that the rainy day you are waiting for will never come.

A power failure is not the only version of *someday* you might envision. These are a few other *somedays* in which people imagine they may find the time to do specific things, along with the reasons why this is usually not a realistic prospect:

- *Vacation.* When your vacation arrives, will you really want to spend your days cleaning the rain gutters and learning a foreign language? Or is it more realistic to expect that you will want to spend your time vacationing?
- *Unemployment.* Many years ago, I imagined that a period of unemployment would give me a chance to finish the novel I had been trying to work on for years. Then I became unemployed, and I found that it was hard to focus for long on anything beyond finding my next job.
- *Sick days.* What can you realistically accomplish on a day when you are not at your best? Certainly you will do something, perhaps even something of value, but you will not suddenly be able to do things that you were unable to do on an ordinary day.
- *After your health improves.* If you have been in poor health, the volume of stuff you save and the pressure of your to-do list contribute to the stress that may prevent your health from improving. You may have to remove much of this stress now in order to get healthy sooner.
- *When you strike it rich.* If financial fortune smiles on you in the near future, I bet you will discover much more interest-

ing things to do than the things you are saving now.

- *If you fall into poverty.* For most people in this age who are experiencing material success, poverty is not a realistic prospect, just a ghost of the last century's Great Depression. Even so, if it were to happen, what will matter most to you then is that you stay healthy and are able to work. Chances are, nothing you are saving is based on those priorities.

I am sure you can think of other examples. Whatever you imagine your rainy day will look like, it will never arrive. There are no rainy days anymore. None.

### Why It Is Hard to Let Go

Unfortunately, simply knowing that your rainy day will never come is not enough. This knowledge by itself cannot clean up your house and clear away your to-do list. You still have to take an action with every single thing that squeezes your space and schedule. To a significant extent, you must actually *do* the things you have in mind — but to a far greater extent, you must *let go* of things. You must *strike things off* your to-do list, deciding that, as far as you know today, you *will never do* them. You need to *give away* and *throw away* many of your possessions, those that, realistically, you will not be using.

This process is not physically taxing or expensive. It does not require sacrifice — in fact, you only need to let go of things that have no value in your life. Yet the mere suggestion is enough to strike fear in the heart of almost anyone.

Let's take a look at this fear. This fear is the real reason you hold on so tightly. It can pop up any time you focus on taking anything away. The fear says that after you take things away you then have nothing. Everyone shares this same fearful thought, though it argues against experience and common sense.

It is a universal fear. I call it the *fear of nothing*. In a sense, it is a fear of *having* nothing, a fear of empty spaces, of hunger, loneliness, and deprivation. At a deeper level, it is a fear of *being* nothing, a fear of making no difference and having no consequence.

The fears we give voice to usually are fears of something quite

specific — high places, large or small animals, public speaking. These fears are easy to explain. A fear of nothing, though equally compelling, is a paradox. It would be easier to justify a fear of the sudden loss of one of the essential materials of life — oxygen, water, salt, or food — but fear of nothing is not about that. This fear is more primal, more simple, more basic than thoughts of food and breathing.

You can come close to grasping this fear of nothing when you come upon a place where you expect to find something and are startled to find nothing there. You go into a store to buy something and all the shelves are empty. You tune in your favorite radio station and hear only static. You open your lunchbox and there is nothing inside. Yet you can hardly explain fear of nothing as a fear of empty lunchboxes and empty shelves, nor can you escape the fear just by accepting the empty space.

You might say there is nothing to be afraid of. Logically, “nothing” is nothing to be afraid of. On the other hand, it is said that you come into this world with nothing and you leave with nothing, and this association with the infinite might help to explain the fear of nothing. Perhaps part of the fear of death is simply the fear of nothing.

If you are like most people, all you have to do to demonstrate the existence of the fear of nothing is to sit with a once-valued possession next to a wastebasket. The possession to choose for this demonstration will depend on what your possessions mean to you. Most likely, it is something you have saved for an extended period, not because you have had a way to use it, but because of what it once meant. It could be a fish bowl that last housed fish some twenty years ago. It might be yesterday’s newspaper. Or it might be the decorations from a party. Whatever the specific item, your rational thoughts tell you that you should drop the item into the wastebasket. The fear, though, tells you to wait — then prompts you to come up with a reason to keep the item. If you listen to the voice of fear, you might as well jump headlong into the wastebasket yourself if you throw this old possession away. Logically you know otherwise, yet the fear is hard to ignore.

Every fear must be directed at something, and the object of

the fear of nothing is called the void. The void is a hypothetical place of complete emptiness that philosophers debate and discuss. It is not a real physical place; physicists assure us that there is no completely empty space anywhere in the universe, and certainly not within the scope of a human life. When the fear of nothing tells you that you are going into the void, you can be certain that nothing of the kind will actually happen.

To live a rich, meaningful life, you have to be able to let go of things. Although you depend on things in your daily life, these same things eventually can become obstacles that keep you from doing what you want to do. You have to be able to let go of these things even if there is a fear that tells you to hold on.

It is hard to ignore the fear of nothing so that you can let go. It is so hard that most people have almost given up trying. Faced with a stack of papers to go through or an attic to try to organize, people secretly wish that a whirlwind would sweep it all away or that they could go away on vacation and never come back — anything to get out of having to face their own stuff.

Unfortunately, despite people's fantasies, walking away from it all or throwing it all away is not a solution. Clutter comes back to get you. Sometimes real people do have their homes destroyed in disasters. Released from clutter all at once, do they live clutter-free for the rest of their lives? Alas, usually not. More often, within a few years their new homes are filled with the same kind of clutter as before.

There are tales of people whose lives became so overwhelming that they just moved away and left it all behind — not once, as you might expect, but several times, as each attempt at a new life eventually became just as overwhelming as the last. Other stories tell of people who suddenly lost everything that made their lives busy — their work, families, and friends, all at once. These stories have a similar ending. The people in them do not find a new quieter life, but one that soon is just as busy as before.

Many people imagine that they will work up a head of steam and rip through their clutter and their to-do list in a short period of time, perhaps a weekend. I have known people who started this heroic venture by drinking alcohol, ironically numbing

themselves in order to have a better chance of making a few rational decisions. Sadly, this headlong attack is no better than the whirlwind fantasy. It might be a way to get through a crisis situation, but the results last for only a short time. The titanic effort is wasted in the long run. People who take this kind of approach make only external changes. They change their space or their lists, but they do not change themselves, so the external change is only temporary.

Anyone can get short-term results by sidestepping the fear of nothing, but as long as the fear remains, it creates the same situation all over again. It is no wonder many people feel that they are doomed to live a life surrounded by clutter and busy with an endless list of things to do.

Yet the fear of nothing will not let you do this either. Fear of nothing cuts both ways. The same fear that recoils at creating empty space in your closets and free time in your schedule is also repelled by the empty feeling you get when unused possessions and incomplete tasks dominate your life year after year after year. The whole world seems gray, every day is the same as the day before, and everything you do seems tedious and predictable. You become restless and feel that you have to do *something* different, though it is usually not obvious what you should do.

The things people try when they want to escape the blahs — a new car, a new pair of shoes, a new spouse — often make things worse, creating new clutter, new debt, more things that need to be done. It is better to take on the blahs head-on: let go of the things that create the sameness, starting with the possessions you are not using and the tasks you are not doing.

Sooner or later, then, you have to face the fear of nothing. You can ignore it for a time, but the longer you try not to think about it, the more it surrounds you. It is easier to face the fear of nothing now than to wait until it has you backed into a corner.

## Looking Into the Void

If the fear of nothing seems beyond your control, there is a reason. This fear is located in the reptilian brain, the part of the brain

that works the same way in humans as it does in lizards. There is no sense in trying to reason with this part of your brain because it lacks the facility for language and rationality.

It is easier to understand your fear of nothing if you consider that this fear is not unique to your experience and is not related specifically to the human experience, but is a feeling and experience we have in common with many kinds of animals. I believe the impulses that come from the fear of nothing are the same as the lizard's reaction to surroundings that are empty of food. These impulses prod a lizard, when it finds itself in a barren area, to move on until it comes to objects and activity it can recognize.

You cannot tell the reptilian brain what to do, but it does respond to your ideas about what things mean and what is important. You create your ideas of meaning and importance by the way you control your focus, make decisions, and take action. You can overcome irrational fear, including fear of nothing, by focusing on and taking action on the things that are important to you.

Action wins out over fear, but for this to happen, you need the presence of mind that makes the action meaningful. Presence of mind, though, means that the fear is present too. This is why it is so important to make changes incrementally. When you look into the void, to face the fear of nothing and take action in spite of it, it is easier to do on a small scale. If you tried to tackle everything all at once, the fear might immobilize you and prevent you from doing anything. You'll make the fastest progress if you set out to transform one thing at a time. You will always find something you can do today to create a permanent change, and these small changes add up faster than you would expect.

*Action* is the magic ingredient, so the chapters that follow guide you through a sequence of actions that will turn your cluttered, busy life into one that gives you room to move and room to breathe. You can make each change you need as you come to it, and the process gets easier as you go along. The more of it you do, the easier it gets. But the longer you put it off, the harder it is to get started — so decide right now that you are taking back control of your time, your space, and your life. Then take action. Don't wait for a rainy day. Start *today*.



