

Shredding Your Way to Happiness

I have a highly efficient filing system for my family's mail and other important documents. It's on my kitchen counter--just inches from the sugar canister and the toaster. Thus far, I've never toasted anything important, but I have buttered a few things.

Occasionally, when the stack gets too high, I sort through it, shake off the cinnamon sugar and wipe off the butter from the important items, and leave the rest to collect toast crumbs. In the 11 years I've lived in my home, I don't believe I've ever gotten that counter completely cleared off. Forgive me if I missed your wedding. The butter is probably rancid on your invitation by now.

When I do go through the stack, naturally I find some items that should be destroyed in order to protect my identity, such as it is. And BS (before shredder), I tore them up by hand. Then I put half the pieces in the bathroom trash and half the pieces in the kitchen trash where egg shells and leftover tomato soup would render those that weren't already buttered equally unrecognizable. Any self-respecting identity thief would really have to WANT my identity to steal it out of my trash, and speaking from experience, it isn't that great being me.

Obviously this process took a lot of work, so I tended to put it off. But my life changed the day I was inspired to clean the closet in my guest bedroom. I didn't do it--but, I did remove four giant boxes of checks probably dating back to the first checking account I had in eighth grade. As you can imagine, destroying all those checks with my old method would have taken a lot of time and a lot of leftover tomato soup.

Instead I bought a shredder. What an invention! I only wish I'd done it sooner--maybe my counter would be cleaner. Of course the shredder has its drawbacks; the main one being it can't shred everything. Shredders can't handle old tires and worn-out tennis shoes--or at least mine can't. I worry about the effect butter, sugar, and toast crumbs will have on it. I'll shut my shredder down if my office ever starts smelling like breakfast.

On the other hand, if it's paper, it's history. There is no warning: "IRS code requires that you keep this document for at least seven years." Or "STOP! That's your electric bill, dummy!" And documents cannot be put back together once they've been shredded---which I suppose is the point of having a shredder.

Clearing paper jams is intimidating. The shredder grinds to a halt and I can't help but think of every snow blower and table saw mishap I've ever heard about. And it's easy to get carried away when you're shredding. I once jammed my shredder by putting in approximately a month's worth of checks from 1989. And I wrote a lot of checks in 1989. I've hung on to those checks for 20 years and NOW I'm in a hurry?

On the bright side, as you sit before the shredder, disposing of checks, receipts, and junk mail, you can't help but examine your life. I was shocked to learn how much I eat out--we'll maybe not shocked. On the other hand, I was thrilled to learn that I am an excellent credit risk. A surprising number of people who don't even know me are willing

to loan me money. This is amazing considering those of you who DO know me, wouldn't loan me a dime.

And using the shredder can be very relaxing--as long as you keep your fingers out of it. The steady whir of the motor is almost hypnotizing. It's as though your frustrations are being chewed up and tossed away! There they go: checks from 1994, pay stubs from 2001, receipts from last Christmas, buttered credit card offers, cinnamon sugared bank statements . . .

UH-OH! What was that?

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