



Smart and Simple Matters 015:

The Forces of Order and Simplifying with Dan and Vanessa Hayes

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In this episode you'll learn about:

- How many *hundreds of thousands* of items the average American household has...
- ...And what this says about our relationship with "stuff"
- Ways other than 162 items on your fridge to honor what's important
- Why most people need to organize and simplify their physical space before they tackle their digital landscape
- How getting into "listen mode" leads to less resistance and better results (in Professional Organizing and life)
- How the OODA loop helps with your clutter and chaos issues
- Why digital file organization should be taught in school
- The problems of being **overly-orderly** and simple ways to combat it
- How to be the catalyst for starting your own community and movement
- Who's the "Director of Common Sense" and why you need one
- Why I got reprimanded for **not** talking about spreadsheets and curating (that's a first!)

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Now for the transcript.

Joel: Hey there, and welcome to the [Smart and Simple Matters](#) show with your host, **Joel Zaslofsky**. Does anyone else feel like skipping rocks on the water and letting the day wash over them like a cool breeze? OK, maybe it's just me. This is episode number fifteen.

Well hey there everybody! Welcome to another *smokin'* episode of the Smart and Simple Matters show! The sparks for your mental fire will be courtesy of **Dan and Vanessa Hayes** today as they join me from their home in San Antonio, Texas. This is the first episode of the show where I have the pleasure of interviewing not just one person, but two people at the same time. Is it too soon to call this cool couple a dynamic duo? I will let you be the judge of that.

Let's start with an intro of Dan and then let you all know a bit about Vanessa. Dan provides business development services to business owners and leaders in niche markets by helping them build an integrated approach to enhancing their company's web presence, customer and community engagement, content development, search engine optimization, media platforms, and branded videos. Basically, my interpretation of that is he rocks a lot of stuff.

Vanessa is a Professional Organizer and the Chief Simplicity Officer of [Get Simplified](#). She provides hands-on professional organizing services for residential and business clients, and is also available for virtual consulting, if that's what your thing. Together, they co-host [Simple Life Together](#), a podcast dedicated to leading a simple life in the modern world. Currently, the show is listed in the new and notable section of four categories in iTunes and lately has been consistently listed in the top 200 podcasts in iTunes. You can find out more about them and what they do at [SimpleLifeTogether.com](#).

I would like to extend an incredibly warm welcome to you two, Dan and Vanessa. Glad to have you on today.

Vanessa: Aw, geez, thank you! That was really nice. Thank you.

Dan: It's great to be here, Joel. I'll tell you what: We've followed your work since you started, and it's been a great inspiration for us and we love what you do so – we're thrilled to be here today.

Vanessa: Yes, thank you.

Joel: We'll all be rosy-cheeked by the end of the show. I may be blushing here; you can tell me if I am. Well, I want to give everybody a little bit of a heads-up about some of the things that we'll be getting into today. We're going to be talking about some of your background, maybe even going back to the childhood days and some of the sparks that created where you are now in life; your groovy "[Edit & Forget It, 2013 Fewer Things in 2013](#)" challenge, which I'm really excited to talk about with you; a whole host of things related to organizing, but not the typical kind of stuff that is discussed frequently, whether it's on the Internet or in person.

I'm going to enjoy this one. Hopefully, everybody else will, too. It's going to be my first "How Crazy is Joel" segment, and although people may be sick of hearing me write about and talk about spreadsheets, maybe we'll go into a question about them as well. How's that sound to you two?

Dan: That sounds good.

Vanessa: Sounds fantastic. Let's do it.



Joel: Cool. Alright. First up: I'm going to give you both a crack at this one since I know that I'm going to get different answers, and perhaps some cool contrast between your two answers. Can you each tell me one major event growing up, or some kind of prominent family philosophy, that set you on your path to where you are today as individuals?

Vanessa: Well, I can probably hit that first. As far as individuals, as far as my profession, or just how I am today? I mean...

Joel: You can take that any way you like.

Vanessa: Okay. Okay. Well, I think a couple of things. I grew up in a military family and part of that stereotype of the military family is that you move around a lot, which we did. And because of moving around a lot, we had to pick up and go, and you had to – you know, in part the pick and go was not just the moving part. You had to leave friends that you'd met behind, and so what happened there is that it really internalizes the value of family.

That family – you friends come and go; family is forever. That is something that has stuck with me my entire life. That's a very important part of my life, is just spending time with family and doing meaningful things with them, and spending time with them. That's part of what... part of my growing up that had a big impact on me personally.

Now, as far as work stuff, too, because a lot of people are always interested in professional organizers, and like, "Have you always been organized? Have you always just been this super clean freak?" I would tell you, "No," and my mother would say, "No." I was the messiest of four kids growing up, believe it or not. But what happened was, as I was on my own I realized that things were so chaotic in my mind – when you step out of the house, you're responsible for so many things. You know, going to school, trying to make a living or figure out what that is, trying to balance a checkbook, and all that stuff was so crazy to me that I figure out early on that when things were – when my physical environment was clear, I was able to concentrate better.

So I started to adopt this idea of having an organized space, an organized life. But when I look back, I realize that a lot of what I learned was from my mom, and my parents, but specifically my mom. She always had a very organized home. She was always a planner when it came to family stuff, too, and was very big about having responsibilities. Everyone had a responsibility in the home. So yeah, I guess growing up, I had influence from both my mother and my father for the profession that I'm in today, and also some of the things that I value and try to share with my family, as a wife and as a mother. Is that about what you're looking for?

Dan: Wow, that's awesome. I have to follow that?

Joel: You do, Dan, I'm sorry to say. You can punt on this one if you want, but I'd be really interested to hear...

Dan: No, I'm good. Yeah. I'm from a large family, seven kids in the family, and any time you have a mom and a dad and seven kids in the family, things have the potential to be pretty darn chaotic and I'm really impressed – we only have two kids – I'm really impressed with my parents' ability to get us all through that and all of us be sane.

But one of the things that goes along with that – that may folks in your family – is that you tend to like order because it can be a bit like that old saying, "herding cats." "Well, let's go grab something to eat. What do you want? Well, what do you want? How about we do this? How about we do that?" It's like, "Okay, somebody make a decision and let's go."

And so, I think I do gravitate towards order because of that, but I also know because of the example that my parents and my brothers and sisters set, that no matter how many different opinions you have or goals, they can't all be unified. In the military, they used to say. "Get everything in formation, and get it going in the same direction." I think my family did that exceptionally well.

One other thing with that is, you share everything when there's that many people in the family. It's kind of communal property in a lot of cases. So one thing I did cherish was we all had a small area where we could keep our stuff, and I kept that area spotless. I mean, everything was perfectly organized and I maintain that, for the most part, to this day. I do like



that part of order. I know where something goes. It's there when I need it. I think that really shaped my life and what I do today with Vanessa when talking about it on *Simple Life Together*.

Joel: It's interesting to hear you frame it that way. A lot of people talk about either organized or clutter, and two ends of the spectrum, or on different levels of the equilibrium. To hear you talk about order, and on the opposite end, I think of it as chaos.

Chaos is this big scary thing. You fall off a cliff into a void of chaos and into dark shadows. And to hear you talk about order in that way, maybe you don't have the mental images that I do. Who knows where those came from, but that's a cool way to look at it. I guess I have a similar take on that, too. I know you two, maybe we might even have hit it, too. Vanessa, you talked about all the times when you moved – stats are impressive. Which one of you has moved 27 times in your life? The other one of you has moved 19 times, is that correct?

Vanessa: Right. That's me. I moved, and I count even when I was in college moved from apartment to apartment, or things like that. But that stuff is a major event, and yes I've moved 27 times in 38 years, and yes that is my age. I am not shy about it. Yes, I moved quite a bit when I was a child and then, or course, as adult because I obviously was in the military, too. A lot of moving.

Joel: Wow. Well, perhaps all that moving was some of the inspiration for the first thing we're going to be chatting about and one of the main reasons – well, I guess there aren't "main" reasons – there are a lot of reasons I'm excited to have you on the show today. You two recently created what I think is a pretty nifty concept, and for those of you who listen to your podcast, they're already familiar with it.

But those who aren't, it's called, "[Edit & Forget It, 2013 Fewer Things in 2013](#)" I'll let you two do justice, or course, by describing what it is, what the catalysts were for creating it, but when I viewed the show notes on your podcast introducing everybody to "Edit and Forget It" – I'm going to link to it in the show notes - I saw a stat that can't be true and we've already talk about stats a little bit here. It said that the average American home has around 300,000 things in it, and I thought to myself, "How can that be?" And is that the reason why having 2,013 fewer things in the year 2013 is doable?

Vanessa: Yeah. I'll let Dan handle it since this is Dan's brainchild, this whole idea of this "Edit and Forget It Challenge", but yeah.

Dan: We thought the same thing, and still do, about that 300,000 number and I mean, that's an incredible number and we've heard it briefed, between the two of us, at least five different times by different colleagues and they've been sourcing a local periodical here in town. We've actually reached out to the person that has supposedly put that number out there to get more background on it because (**Vanessa:** Its startling.) it's amazing.

It's an amazing number. What we concluded, really, was – and we're very careful about this when we talk about it on the show – is that that has got to include every single, tiny little thing in a home. Like – for instance, if you have a box of Q-Tips, you don't count that as one box. You count that as the 250 Q-Tips, or a jar of nails, or what have you. I know I'm a do-it-yourselfer guy. I've got boxes of nails; they come a thousand to a box.

When you look at it that way – one ream of paper is 500 things. It has to include that number. I don't think it's a fact, and like I've said, I've done a lot of research on it. One of the most pervasive studies – I don't know if you've heard this – **UCLA's Center For Everyday Life** has done a study called, "[Life at Home in the 21st Century: Thirty-Two Families Open Their Doors.](#)" Joel, you should take a look at that one. It will blow you away.

Vanessa: It was crazy.

Dan: What they did was they sent a team of archeologists, anthropologists, and other social scientists, to do a no-kidding systematic study of thirty-two dual income, middle class families in the Los Angeles area; two to three kids - not the people that you see on *Hoarders* – just thirty-two suburban families. I have a couple of stats I want to cover on this. They're just amazing.



When they visited, they called them Family Twenty-Seven, they found 2,260 visible possessions in the first rooms recorded and that didn't include, and I'm quoting; it says that didn't include, "untold numbers of items tucked into dresser drawers, boxes, and cabinets, or items positioned behind other items.

In Family Number One, they looked at one display shelf in her room and one shelf they found 165 Beanie Babies, thirty-six human or animal figurines, twenty-two Barbie Dolls, twenty other types of dolls (three specifically porcelain dolls), one troll and a miniature castle. If there's a troll, there's probably a bridge in there, too. And this will be the last one of the stat from this that I throw out – unless you want more – but they evaluated the fronts of refrigerators through these thirty-two homes and the average of all the homes had fifty-two objects stuck onto the refrigerator.

Joel: Does that count the magnets?

Dan: That counts the magnets because that was some of the decorative stuff, but the worst one had 166 different objects. And what they're finding out is that these like shrines to people's daily existence that – they broke it down into personal information, practical information like calendars and so forth, and pretty information (**Vanessa:** Like the magnets.) – like the magnets. When you look at that, that 300,000 doesn't seem so unrealistic. One of the statistics that the [National Association of Professional Organizers](#) puts out is, a simple four-drawer filing cabinet holds 18,000 different files, 80 percent of which, they quote, will never be looked at again.

Vanessa: Right.

Dan: When you consider all – wrap all that stuff in, we're thinking, "Well, maybe that 300,000 isn't that far off."

Vanessa: Like how many photos you have, how many Legos you have, how many poly-pockets, how many just different types of toys, and just paper and all that. It may not be too unreasonable, it's still starting.

Dan: You remember those games where you guess the number of M&M's in the jar? I was always terrible at that. I was always low. If the 300,000 is 100 percent accurate, we can't back that up. I don't think anybody's actually ever counted, but we quote that as the statistic that's been put out there, if nothing else, but for its initial shock value to get attention.

Joel: Yeah, and I know it's not about the stats for you. I know it's going deeper, and being introspective and questioning, "What's my relationship with stuff." (**Dan:** That's it.) Completely independent of any numbers here, and the fact that you want to encourage people to reduce their numbers of possessions, what is it mean to you to have people participate in this challenge?

Dan: The 2,013 things, we just made that up because we brought it out the first of the year, that was the number, and that's a number that's realistic, but it's also going to stretch you a little bit. Right, Vanessa? It's a...

Vanessa: Right. We just had an interview with **Joshua Becker**, and he was saying that that was a really good number. He's [Becoming Minimalist](#), but he was saying that that's one that's going to test you. That's a good number. You have a year to do it is the challenge, but as far as what it means to us – I guess it just tells me that – and I've seen this with my clients – is that there is a need to simplify.

There is a need to just get detached from all that physical clutter that's just overwhelming you, and it's really controlling you. To me, it's amazing that these folks are, one, listening to us and they're hearing the message, but two, that they're like; "I really want to do this." The feedback we get is great too, saying, "It felt awesome." I even put a question out there, "Hey, has anybody had any trouble getting rid of stuff?" And the thing is, the one was, "Yeah, I kind of had a hard time getting rid of my Doctor Who Entertainment Weekly magazine." You know, this one thing, he was just kind of making a funny, but I guess it, to me, just means that there really is a need out there to simplify, and it's really neat that there are folks willing to step on board and challenge themselves with it.

Dan: And the one thing that we stress is, it's not about the number. If you don't get to 2,013, no big deal. But we want you to really evaluate – just like you said – your relationship with things that you own, and I think that to a person, they're going to find out that either they bought into the consumer society that we're subjected to as we go through our day-to-day



lives and our hit is five thousand different ads in a day on average and they're going to realize that, "Wow, I don't need this to be happy. This will never make me happy." We ask the question all the time, "Would twice as much stuff make you happy? Would three times as much stuff make you happy? Well, how about half? Well, how about a quarter?" It's really that relationship, and that's what's important.

Vanessa: Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up, Joel, as far as – it really isn't about the numbers there and 2,013. It's really about going through the process and being a little bit more mindful of what you allow into your home, and the decisions that you make as far as purchasing and spending money, or spending your time doing things you really don't want to do. It stretches to a lot of different levels.

Joel: I know that you take it even beyond the home. I mean, this is beyond the scope of the *Edit and Forget It Challenge*. Dan, you can certainly field this one too, but between the three of us only Vanessa is a Certified Professional Organizer. This gets into something that I'm always curious about, and as much as I love a Spartan, clean physical environment, and that puts my brain into a good place, I'm very cognizant of my digital landscape and what that looks like, too.

So Vanessa, I'm really curious to hear your thoughts about differences in tackling digital organizing and removing digital stuff versus physical organizing and physical stuff. For example, if I came to you with a computer desktop and I had more icons and shortcuts than you could shake a stick at, how would your approach to helping me differ than if I came at you with a physical office of Post It Notes on a computer monitor, the walls and desks, like maybe even my one of my dogs if I ran out of surface area?

Vanessa: Actually, I love the question, and actually, I'd tackle it a lot the same. There's a few things I might do differently but I do tackle it the same. The first thing I do is I say, "Let's get rid of all of this that you absolutely know you don't need." And actually, before I do that, I always start my questioning with, whether it's physical or digital clutter, whatever the case may be, "What is causing you the most pain? What is driving you the craziest? Is it because you can't find stuff on that desktop? Is it because you have too many of those shortcuts and icons up there? Okay, do you necessarily need to have them there? Okay. Or are you just overwhelmed by your Inbox? Is it just too many emails? I mean, what is causing you the most pain?"

Or are you having a hard time finding the documents that you have saved on computer, but you just haven't organized them right and so you're just getting lost, and you just don't know where to start to get things kind of orderly?" Well, I just start with the pain factor; what's causing you the most pain, and that's what we usually tackle first.

Once I get an idea of that, it's just kind of what I do with physical organizing too. Let's start trashing things that you know you don't need. What do you not need anymore? Let's get rid of that. Let's get rid of that extra stuff that you know you don't need. That's the easy thing. And then what I do is I start to do a general sort of items whether it's in their Inbox, I try to categorize things into general areas, whether it be your household stuff, your bills. Maybe it's medical information, tax information. Maybe it's business information, school stuff, whatever the case may be. We just do a general sort first.

That alone really helps people clear their mind and get things sorted. And then I go on to the next step, and that's what I call the fine tuning. That's where we can do sub-categories on each one of those items. Your taxes, you can divide those up into tax years, and even further sub-divide it if that's your thing, if that's what you need. Dan, I think, has a little bit of a different approach to digital organizing, but you know what's funny about this, about when you do the digital stuff – especially with my clients? I find that I have to actually physically deal with the physical clutter first before they can even attempt to tackle the digital clutter.

They're like, "I have all this paper. I need to figure that out, get rid of that stuff first before we can even tackle the digital stuff." It's like taking it to the next level for my clients because I can't even talk to them about scanning and doing stuff until they know what they have as far as the hard copies of stuff is absolutely what they need. Then we can move on to the next step, and talking about the next step as far as digitizing things. Once we get things organized, whether it's their email or their files, what I talk to them about is, "Okay, that's great. We just organized stuff, but how are we going to keep you from preventing this digital pileup again?"



It's all about the maintenance and what system are we going to put into place. I find that, without getting into too much specifics, is that I have to find systems that follow their natural tendencies to do stuff whether they check their email throughout the day or just one time a day, or how they naturally bring in the paper into their home and what is more natural to them as far as scanning that stuff and getting it digitized. I have to look at their natural tendencies first, and then figure out a system that's going to be easy and convenient for them. It has to be easy because if it's not easy, they're not going to do it. And so...

Joel: Let me ask you about that though, because that's, I think that's something we need to drill just a little further down into. You're talking about needs and tendencies. These are unique to everybody.

Vanessa: Yes.

Joel: Is it your role, or your goal, when you go into someone's house or someone's business to try to change their mindset about what's appropriate and to help them not defeat themselves. To give them, not just a system, but to give them a mindset? An internal mindset, whether it's internal or mental, to distinguish between needs and wants and desires or what their tendencies could actually be?

Vanessa: It's a great question. What I do is I do what I call a needs assessment with my clients. I spend anywhere from an hour to an hour-and-a-half talking to them about trying to define what is their needs. I'm always listening to the client. I mean, you're in listening mode pretty much the whole time, and then you start to analyze. You start to hear what they're saying, and you can pick up on the pain factor.

And then looking around and hearing how they do things, you can pick up patterns on how they actually do certain things. From there, I'm able to differentiate or at least kind of – I'm not trying to push them toward any one way of doing things because you're just going to get resistance. That's all you're going to get. You have to figure out what their needs are, and what I do a lot of times is listen to them and they can say that – “Ah, this living room is really a mess, and I really want it to be family friendly.” And, “This is driving me crazy, and this is.”

But the reality is, as I dig deeper and start talking to them more, I find out that really it's probably something else altogether. And I talk them through that, but I try to have them come to that conclusion, again because they need ownership of what's really causing them the pain. It can't be me telling them – it's like a kid. You try to tell them that this is how you need to do it because I said so. No, you try to work them to their own conclusion on where they need the most help.

I find that's usually the most effective. Now as far as guiding them to certain systems, sometimes I do. I will recommend it based on what I've learned from them as far as through the interview process, and even working through it with them as we organize. Every session, I learn a little bit more. Every discussion we have I learn a little bit more about them, and I can really pinpoint certain systems that will work better for them. Some people are more visual. Some people are more auditory. There are different types of learners out there; that have different types of systems for them. I don't know if I answered that quite clearly or not, but the bottom line is I don't every try to drive them to one way. I try to have them express to me what their needs are. We discuss that, and then I try to just evaluate through interviews and observation what would be the best system for them.

Joel: Yeah, you answered it clearly to me. You answered it more clearly than I asked the question. A lot of times I ask questions that people have a difficult time unpacking because there's about five aspects of it. I've really got to work on that, don't I?

Vanessa: Oh, it's all good.

Joel: Dan, we don't need to necessarily alternate and turn it back to you, but of course I'm interested in all your views on everything. We could literally talk for hours because what we've talked about so far is fascinating, and I don't want to focus exclusively on simplifying and organizing. We're all much more than that, and we all represent more than that.



But I promised everybody that we'd get into – I don't think this will be a recurring segment, maybe it will – the "How Crazy is Joel" part of our chat here.

Dan and Vanessa: Okay.

Joel: And this goes down a similar path that we've been going down right now and I could find at least a hundred ways that I, or other people, think that I'm a bit wackadoodle, shall we say? I'm going to ask for your insight on one of them today. Feel free to bring up your own later, if you like of course.

Anyway, I wrote an article on **Value of Simple** last year called, "[How Simple Heroes Ditch Clutter and Master Chaos](#)" I had a serious axe to grind at that point in time. The premise is that clutter is just a crude manifestation of much greater force: chaos – which, Dan, we were just talking about a minute ago... that distinguishing line between order and chaos. Do you believe like I do that clutter is just a form of chaos, and that we need to focus on rooting out the source of chaos in our lives instead of just the clutter that it generates?

Dan: Yeah. I think – I don't know if one necessarily derives from the other, but without a doubt I know that both exist. Alright? And I think that everybody's level of tolerance is different on that, so how would I deal with that personally? Like I said, I'm a military guy – or was for almost three decades – and I would immediately say, "Okay, they're both targets that I need to take care of." Alright?

In this situation, I would immediately go through a decision making process. We called it OODA Loop – the Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act Loop. There's a saying when we're out on the firing range that you shoot the fifty meter targets before you shoot the 300 meter targets, and in life – that's easy on paper, but in life it may be a chaotic thing or a clutter thing that is an individual threat to your productivity at the time.

So you have to differentiate on those. I think that as long as you can be deliberate in your process, to have some sort of control if your goal is to have a simpler life, I don't think that means a carefree life at all. I think it does mean controlling your environment, being deliberate about what you let into it. And what you let into it includes, not just the things, not just possessions, but relationships, things that you sign up for. Are all four of your kids playing soccer? They're all at different parts of the city on the same night for practices.

Those are all things that, while they may clutter your schedule, they cause chaos in your life. So maybe it's a chicken and the egg kind of thing where one feeds off of the other. I think that you have to really, introspectively, look at how they affect your life and what your end state is – what your goal is in the end. But I do believe that they're mutually supporting.

Joel: So how do you do that? How do you take that internal journey, especially for somebody who's clearly hung up on terminology like I am. How do you reframe an issue by simplifying and organizing so that – somebody like me, when I hear clutter, I sort of tune it out and I think, "That's not what it's about." It's about chaos and it's about something deeper. It's about something more nefarious, if you will, that is more difficult to conceptualize and grasp. People have this emotional... Vanessa, you were talking about, resistance. How do you move people past the resistance of terminology or a certain word to get them to go forward on what they've declared to you they want, which is simplifying and organizing.

Vanessa: Well, it's interesting because a lot of times I say "purging" a lot it's not this offensive word or anything, but that can be offensive to some people. Clutter. When you call their stuff clutter, that can be offensive. A lot of times, depending on my comfort level with a client, because every client is different and you build this comfort level, I'm very cautious about how I approach terms.

It is something deeper. Clutter is – that clutter's caused by something a little bit deeper, and whether it be a little bit of chaos in their life or something else, a lot of times what I try to do – and not really what I'm trying to do. I guess I just have this way of communicating with my clients and trying to get out of them, "Why do you think you have all this stuff? You must be feeling some void in your life."



And I don't say that to them. They come to their own conclusion. I'm very careful about that. But I'll say, "Why do you feel the need to have every new Coach purse or pair of shoes that comes out? Yet, you're struggling to live paycheck to paycheck. There's something else there." Eventually, depending on that comfort level and that trust that I build with them, it will usually come out that, "I am filling a void in my life. That is what gives me temporary satisfaction at this point in my life because I'm missing – I don't have a very close relationship with my spouse or my kids. I can't connect with them right now." I'm probably going off on a little bit of a tangent here, and maybe not even quite answering your question but I do think –

Joel: You're talking to the king of tangents, by the way, so go right ahead.

Vanessa: Well, thank goodness. I think you're right. Clutter's not just that physical object. It is something deeper than that, whether you have the thrill of the hunt and getting the best deal on things, and so you love it. You just saved ten bucks on this item, so you absolutely have to have it. No, you don't. What is that? I'm just getting all animated and passionate over here. Dan's looking at me, but it is something deeper. There is something that is causing that.

Dan: I think I would ask one thing too is, a lot of the things we deal with in simplifying, and Vanessa, and organizing or when we're talking about digital files, is did anybody ever sit you down and show you how to do that or teach you the good way? (**Vanessa:** Nope.) No, you just kind of go with it. You learn it. For digital files, for those of us who – in my generation, computers were new and, especially, getting a home computer – that was all new, so I think there was maybe a natural tendency to think, "Let me use the same files that I use in my physical filing cabinet and I'll name them the same thing."

There really is something different, especially with newer technology. I would say that if you just follow these – take the path of least resistance on a lot of things because they weren't taught, and you just figure it out as a human, as you go – it can cause the chaos. It may not be this nefarious outside force, like you're talking about, but you actually kind of cause the situation yourself.

And not tapping into new ways of doing things – where I differ from Vanessa on my personal style is when I deal with my clients on digital files is, I rely solely on search in most programs. I have a few folders in – or I think they're called "labels" in Gmail – I have a few labels in there, but I rely on the search function. That's what Google does best. Same with Evernote. When I first got it, I naturally went through and made all of these different folders, and then I got in a massive amounts of tags and I caused my own confusion and chaos.

So if I went to tag something, say it was "camping", but I already used "camping gear", I just caused myself two tags when I only needed one. Now I use keyword-rich titles in my notes – just a for-instance, to save myself some of that chaos – I was looking for my son's shot records for his Boy Scout physical this year. When I titled that – I don't do a natural title that you would read the title of a book. I titled it, "[My son's name], Shot, Immunizations, Inoculations." And so, no matter what search term I use in the future, it's going to pop up. I use the inherent power of so many of these tools to cut the chaos out for me because I think I have a natural tendency to cause over-order, in my opinion, but that causes confusion.

Joel: You'd make a really good curator, Dan. (**Dan:** Well, thank you.) Maybe you already are. We'll have to explore some other ways...

Dan: I'm sure we'll find out. Yeah.

Joel: Yeah, we will.

Vanessa: I'm learning from him, that's for sure.

Joel: This message that you're telling everybody on Smart and Simple Matters today, for one, personally I love it, and it speaks to me. Is the reason why you created a podcast in the first place so that you could reach more people with this message, and with this collective mission that it seems you two – although you might take different stances, it seems like there's a shared philosophy in terms of what the end goal is. Is that the reason why you created the podcast?



Vanessa: I personally am. That's the reason why the driving force for me is for the podcast. Of course, Dan's the brainchild behind it and he comes up with these great ideas, and I'm either, "yea" or "nay." But I was totally on board with it. The reason why I was on board with the podcast is because my message was going only so far as whoever was interested in my blog, which I do – I like my blog. I've got a good following there.

But there's millions of blogs out there so it's really hard to reach a big group of people. As far as my one-on-one conversations, as far as my message goes, it went as far as my client and that was it. I knew that there was a need because I could see a look in their eyes as soon as I started talking about how Dan and I were on a journey to a simpler life. Their eyes just totally lit up, and their brows went up they're like, "What do you mean? You're trying to downsize? What do you mean? You guys are working from home? You're not relying on these huge corporate jobs, or whatever?"

And I was like, "Nope, and we are happier than we've ever been." And so I knew that there was a need, there was an interest, and so when Dan said, "Let's start talking about it," I've got the gift of gab. I was like, "Awesome. Let's do it." That was very motivating for me, yes, to try and reach a bigger audience and the podcast, it seems like it's doing that.

Dan: Yeah, and like Vanessa said, we do call this a journey to simplify our lives. It's not – we haven't reached it and we are on it, and that's fine. We looked at – we start everything with a military planning term called a "Desired End State." What do we want it to look like? There's lots of productivity folks out there that says, "Begin with the end in mind," all sorts of different things but the message is the same.

It's tough to figure out how to get there unless you know where you're going. Like Vanessa said, when we said we wanted to do this, not many people really get us. We wanted to be part of a community that gets it, that we can bounce ideas off of. When we really didn't find one, we decided to start one of our own, you know, no guts, no glory. Let's do it. Let's be the catalyst for it.

We've, individually, spent lots of time reading blogs like yours and listening to your podcast, and tons of others out there, talking to all the minimalist folks at up at the [World Domination Summit](#). We go to that every summer, and talk to them, and interacting with them. When we didn't find this community, we decided to start one ourselves. The great thing about podcasting is you don't have to be the absolute expert. It's more about sharing your experiences.

So far, we have been amazed at the results, and a lot of people have reached out to us. We're learning from their experiences probably more than they learn from us, and we have an absolute blast doing it. We were blown away with the whole "Edit and Forget It" thing; how many people signed up for that initially and continue to sign up. I guess there's a lot of people out there in this global community that are like us and want to be part of the journey, but they're not immediately in our neighborhood or in our circle of family and friends. We don't have to just rely on that. We can just reach out, so that's a big reason why we started, I think.

Vanessa: Right.

Joel: That's awesome. It's good to hear, Dan, that sometimes you're the ideas guy and that Vanessa's the Director of Common Sense when you pitch it to her and she says, "Naaahh. Okay, sure – well, maybe..." Yeah, I like that. The Director of Common Sense; by the way, that's copyright **Bill Simmons**, also known as The Sports Guy for Grantland.com.

I'm a huge fan of his. I've been reading his work for a decade and he's big on talking about on sports, and how a sports team should have a Director of Common Sense or a sports league where he would fill that role or he would serve for all the ideas that somebody threw out there, run it by the Director of Common Sense first and then move forward if the director says it's okay.

Vanessa: I love it.

Dan: Nice.



Joel: Maybe that's an unfair impression to make between the two of you.

Vanessa: We do pretty good together.

Dan: We balance each other out pretty good.

Joel: And I like that, too, about moving from a place where nobody seem to get it, nobody seems to get you, and this internal fire you seem to have for simplifying, for becoming a minimalist. And the connotations that are associated with that term, there's still a lot of misperceptions about it, or organizing and what that brings to peoples' minds, and moving into a community of people who do get it, or who want to get it.

And it does seem like that's expanding and that's really exciting to me, too. I did want to talk about some things that – well at least seemingly on the surface not much to deal with two of the major themes that we're talking about here, simplifying and organizing. Vanessa, I noticed – and Dan, I was checking it out too, that on your website for the podcast – I noticed two charities: [Kiva](#) and [Charity:Water](#). Some of the profits that you make from your business, or businesses, go to one of those two organizations. Can you tell us why, specifically, are [Kiva](#) and [Charity:Water](#) so near and dear to you?

Dan: You want to take Charity:Water and I'll take Kiva?

Vanessa: Yeah, I'll talk about Charity:Water yeah, because Kiva is just – Dan introduced me to Kiva. We were both exposed to Charity:Water at the World Domination Summit last summer in Portland, and... **Scott Harrison**, I believe is his name, he's the CEO of Charity:Water. He gave this just amazing presentation about what his charity is about; and basically, in the bottom line, he helps build wells for different villages and communities that need fresh water.

Basically, he does it with his donations, and a hundred percent of the donations go to building those wells. It's amazing, his business model, how he made that work. I won't go into a huge amount of detail. You can just go to [charitywater.org](#). Here's what's interesting about that, Joel, is that before we even went to – we were on our way to that conference, and Dan and I were having this conversation – it's just crazy, what happened. Dan and I were having this conversation about – he dropped the bomb on me about, “I want to live a simpler life.”

I've always wanted that, but he really said, “Yeah, we're going to be giving up the dream home now, we're going to move down...” You know – and he wasn't forceful like that but he was just presenting this idea to me. He was planting the seed but it had finally sprouted in my head, and I was like, “You know what, I'm on board with you.” At the same time, we're talking about, “You know what? I also want be... I want to give. I want to give more...” because, I honestly, and just being candid here, is that I've always liked the idea of volunteering, but I'd never done it that much. I've done it occasionally, but I've never been real deliberate about it.

I felt like it was time because I get so much satisfaction when I help my clients. Yeah, I'm getting paid, for the most part, for that. I wanted to just give. And to me, when I listened to the CEO of Charity:Water talk, I was in tears in the audience. I was like, “I am doing that, and I am going to” – and he has this program, too where you can give up your birthday. And so basically you just say, “Hey, I'm giving up my birthday.” If you want to donate anything to me, or give me anything, just make a donation in my name to Charity:Water, then that goes forward, and your name to – for the donation.

Anyway, that's what inspired me to do Charity:Water, and so Dan actually had the idea. He was like, “Well, why don't we just any proceeds that we get here will go to Charity:Water,” and I was like, “Oh, thank you! Thank you so much.” That's where – that's why I support them, because it was just funny how it all happened; like it was just meant to be. I was already talking about how I wanted to get involved with – you know, I wanted to give locally, and I wanted to give globally, and that's the global option there for me. That's what inspired me. I got to hear him talk and I got to ask him a few questions, and meet him personally and it was really inspiring.

Dan: All of the – any of the money we make from affiliate sales, from our resources page, goes to directly to Charity:Water on Simple Life Together.com. The other one that we do, on Vanessa's business site, Get Simplified, and



all of the affiliate sales money from that goes to Kiva. We give to Kiva personally as a family, and the reason we went with Kiva is, if you're not familiar with Kiva, is they help budding entrepreneurs with micro-finance loans.

A lot of places – I've been blessed, and so has Vanessa – we've been blessed at really travel the world, all over the place, so we've seen a lot of the benefactors of people who would be the recipient of a Kiva loan. It's a crowd-sourced, micro-financed loan that's managed by Kiva and some of their subsidiaries, that they loan money to people who ordinarily wouldn't be able to get a loan because of their credit history or because of the exorbitant rates of interest that is charged in some countries. They don't have fair lending acts and things like that in some of these countries.

And so we lend almost entirely to women, and almost entirely in Africa and the Middle East or Central Asia where we've both spent a significant amount of time. We do some in our hemisphere as well. But when we first started that, we had – at the time it was just our son and when we looked through it, our daughter was too young to comprehend anything – but we looked through the profiles, and you pick who you want to lend to – and again, we choose mostly women and mostly ones who are looking to deal with food products, or some type of daily sustenance.

We don't subsidize the makeup ones, or whatever – not that they're not important, too. It's just, we want to make sure the basic needs in life are met. And so, we kind of read through the profiles and I think there's a lot to be learned for kids, and us; to look through these profiles, and in some ways they are not as financially fortunate as we are. In other ways, they're just as fortunate.

They have people that they love in their family, they have kids, or what have you. But we want to do our little part to help, so we've sponsored almost – well, between our family and the proceeds that Vanessa's raised on her site – over twenty people on Kiva. The goal for Charity:Water is to someday be able to slap down a check for a well, which is \$5,500, a well for a village. That's something that's on our scope and we hope we attain those goals, that's for sure.

Joel: That is inspirational stuff. I love this concept of this partnered charity for your business. I was talking to **Scott Dinsmore** of Live Your Legend.net, a few episodes ago, about his partner charity, impossible2Possible, and we were comparing that a little bit to my partner charity, Second Harvest Heartland, and it's just – I've got the idea from Scott, and other people have told me that they are implementing the idea of a partner charity for their business based on me, which again I take no credit for.

I just mention it because it's important, and I love hearing other people's stories about their partner charity, what it means to them, what they're trying to do, how it aligns with their values, their core beliefs in life. That's great to hear you talk about that. I guess the only other thing that I'd ask you here is, is there anything that we didn't talk about that you would like people to know?

Vanessa: Joel, we didn't talk about spreadsheets.

Dan: Or curating.

Joel: Oh, man.

Vanessa: I can't believe it.

Joel: We could. I was; I was going to intentionally cut that off because, not that we're running out of time. The Internet is an unlimited place, and people's attention, of course, isn't unlimited.

Vanessa: Sure.

Dan: Of course.

Joel: We could talk spreadsheets here. You know what? Let's save that one for a while.



Vanessa: Okay, sure.

Dan: Sounds good.

Joel: We'll talk about the spreadsheets that you use to keep track of all the stuff in your "Edit and Forget It Challenge" and some folks can follow my spreadsheet journey with my Spreadsheet Spotlights and all the other stuff.

Vanessa: Well, you have inspired me. I just have to let you know. I was kind of a novice spreadsheet person but now I'm starting to get a little bit more deliberate about it, so thank you.

Joel: Sure. Okay.

Dan: I wasn't sure what they were. I took linen out of the closet and laid it around the bed, and I called that spread sheets, so I wasn't sure.

Joel: Can I use that one?

Dan: Sure, you can.

Joel: Wow. That's good. I'll make sure I do a copyright, Dan Hayes 2013 every time I say it. Okay, well thank you for mentioning that Vanessa, but throwing it back in your corner, is there anything you'd like to leave our listeners with today?

Vanessa: No – I always say, "No," but really yes, there is something. I just want to, first of all, thank you for having us on the show today, but as far as the listeners out there, that there really can be some happiness and joy – or at least more happiness and more joy in your life when you do simplify. Don't beat yourself up and wrap yourself into this tight definition of what simple is, or what minimal is, or anything like that. It's a journey, like Dan and I say that we're on, and that it's a continuous process of learning. But bottom line is that less really can be more.

Dan: You know, I'd like to say that – to take some time to find a community that fits your ideals and goals, and become a part of it and contribute to it. If you don't find it, maybe start it yourself. Guys like you, Joel, and there's so many great bloggers out there, and podcasters out there, that if your listeners take a moment and go make a comment on iTunes for them or comment on the blog, share it with somebody who may not know they need the information.

We do that a lot with friends. We've forwarded your stuff lots of times to other folks and said, "Hey, check this out." It's kind of a way of spreading what you believe in, and maybe helping somebody out who's – you know their life is a little chaotic and they just maybe haven't faced it yet. It's a way to help a buddy out.

Joel: Well, thank you. I try to reciprocate as much as I can, and I appreciate any small thing that you're doing for me and some of the ideas behind my business. That's really cool. Remind everybody real quick though, if they want to know more, and based on our fascinating chat, I'm thinking people are going to want to read and hear more from you, where can we find you online?

Dan: SimpleLifeTogether.com. It's as easy as that.

Vanessa: And I'm at – if you want to learn a little bit more about the organizing side of the house – it's GetSimplifized.com.

Dan: And there's links to that from SimplifyLifeTogether.com as well.

Vanessa: That's right.



Joel: I'll have all this in the show notes, too, so that people don't have to hunt around for it. Well, if you did the whole professional organizing thing like Vanessa does, you can, of course, dive into my [Professional Organizers Hand Guide](#) on Value of Simple. It's on <http://valueofsimple.com/professional-organizers-guide>.

It will also be in the show notes. Perhaps you're more likely to be interested in visiting the brand spanking new Refuge of Simplicity that I've created over at Value of Simple. I just launched it this week. It is January 29th of 2013, for those of you who are listening in the future, and it's a free online sanctuary, and that's the image that I want to hand people when they enter in a place of refuge where they can get resources that will help them simplify, organize, and be money wise. [The Personal User Guide](#) is in there.

There is some pretty wicked spreadsheet templates that aren't the typical ones floating around the Internet, and there's going to be some groovy new resources that the boys in the backroom of the Value of Simple labs that are working on right now. You can find that Refuge of Simplicity at <http://valueofsimple.com/newsletter>. No need to dilly dally. Check it out, assuming you don't get distracted by leaving a review of this show, or Dan and Vanessa's show, on iTunes first. Dan, Vanessa, I just want to thank you again. It's been wonderful, and I'm grateful and appreciative of the time that you've given me, that you've given everybody here today. Thanks.

Dan: Thank you. It's been our pleasure.

Vanessa: Thank you.

Joel: Alright, everyone. It's time for your partner in simplifying to sign off again. You've just listened to the Smart and Simple Matters podcast with Joel Zaslofsky, creator of all things Value of Simple.

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