The Five Lists

Make these before you throw a single thing away.

Kati Spaniak · A free guide for anyone facing a house full of a lifetime

Real decluttering is not about getting rid of the stuff. The stuff is easy.

You can pay somebody. You can donate it. That has never been the hard part.

Decluttering is about leaving direction. It's about deciding what *you* want done with the things in your home — so those decisions don't get left to your kids, or to a moving crew, or to a weekend that never comes.

That's why almost everybody starts in the wrong place. They start with a box. **You start with a list.**

If you're standing in the garage or the basement thinking *I have to do something about all of this* — I want you to put the box down and pick up a pen instead.

Five lists. Then, and only then, the stuff. And the lists are the part that makes the stuff possible, because by the time you're standing over a pile you've **already made the decisions.** You're not deciding anymore. You're just moving.

Take your time with these. You might be a year from moving. You might be ten years out. You might not be moving at all and just want your family to know what's what. All of that is fine. **No one clears a lifetime in a weekend.**

1

DO THIS ONE FIRST

The Keep List

The things that cannot be replaced.

Before you pack a single box, write down what actually matters. The photographs. Some jewelry. A piece of furniture. The things you don't want thrown away and could never get back.

You already know most of what belongs on this list. You don't need to open every box to find out. **That's exactly the point** — going carton by carton and deciding as you go is what makes this take four years.

- "Where it should go" is the one people skip, and it's the one that saves your family. A name is enough.
- This isn't only for after you're gone. **It's for you.** This is the list that tells you what you're protecting while you clear everything else.

LIST 1 · KEEP

WHAT IT IS	WHY IT MATTERS	WHERE IT SHOULD GO
Mom's wedding ring	*Only thing of hers I have*	*Sarah*

The first row is an example. Cross it out and start on the next one.

2

THE ONE THAT LETS YOU BREATHE

The Let It Go List

Everything you're genuinely okay releasing.

This is the list that gives you permission to breathe, and gives your children permission to breathe too. It's the things that aren't important to you anymore — and once you write them down, every decision after this gets easier.

Something happens when you put it on paper. You look at eleven boxes of Christmas decorations and you think: *I'm not decorating like that anymore. I don't need this. It can go.* You couldn't have arrived at that standing in the attic holding one ornament.

> *And I'm going to tell you the thing nobody says out loud.* ***Your kids do not want your stuff.*** *Not because they don't love you. They have their own homes, their own furniture, their own taste, and they are set in it.*
>
> *But keep this in mind, because it matters —* ***your grandkids might.***

LIST 2 · LET IT GO

WHAT IT IS	WHERE IT GOES — DONATE, SELL, GIVE, TRASH
The good china, service for 12	*Offer to grandkids, then donate*

3

THE HARDEST ONE, AND THE ONE THAT WORKS

The Sentimental Story List

Worth nothing to anyone else. Worth everything to you.

Your daughter's drawing from when she was eight. The program from a concert. The thing that has no value to a single other person on earth and that you cannot make yourself throw away.

Here's what to do, and it genuinely works.

- **Write down what it is and what's meaningful about it** — what you'd want somebody to know if they found it in a drawer.
- **Then photograph it.** Or talk about it on video. You can walk around and do a whole shelf in one recording; it doesn't have to be one at a time.
- **Keep it all in one place** — one folder, one album, one file.

Once it's documented and it's all together, letting go of the object becomes possible in a way it simply wasn't before. **It was never the stuff. It was the memory** — and the memory is now somewhere safe.

LIST 3 · SENTIMENTAL

WHAT IT IS	WHAT I WANT SOMEONE TO KNOW ABOUT IT	PHOTO TAKEN
Blue clay bowl	*David made it in 4th grade, gave it to me for Mother's Day*	✓

4

START IT NOW, KEEP IT FOR YEARS

The House Knowledge List

The things only someone who lived here would know.

This one is different from the others, and it's one of the smartest things you will ever make — whether you're moving next spring or staying right where you are.

How old is the furnace. How old is the roof. Who services the air conditioning. Who cuts the lawn. Which breaker is the one in the garage. **These are the questions you get asked every single time**, by an agent, by a buyer, eventually by your own family.

Start it now and just keep adding to it. It becomes the behind-the-scenes guide to your house, and it is worth real money and real goodwill when the time comes.

> This is the single most useful page to hand an agent the first time one walks through. When you get to that point, **I'll find you the agent** — TruthInRealEstate.com.

Furnace — age, brand, who services it

Air conditioning — age, brand, who services it

Roof — age, who installed it, any warranty

Water heater — age, location, who services it

Electrical panel — where it is, anything unusual

Main water shutoff — where it is

Lawn, snow, gutters — who does them

Plumber, electrician, handyman we trust

Appliances — ages, anything with a quirk

Work we've had done, and roughly when

The things you'd only know if you lived here

5

THE MAP, NOT THE DOCUMENTS

The Important Documents Map

Where everything is. Not what everything says.

My uncle did this for me, and he did it beautifully. He didn't hand me a stack of paperwork. He told me **where everything was** — the safe, the accounts, what was where. When the time came I wasn't hunting through a house.

That's what this is. Not the documents themselves. A map to them.

- **You need this as much as your family does.** Most people don't actually know where all of it is either.
- **Do not write passwords or account numbers on this page.** Write down *where they are kept*. If you use a password manager or a sealed envelope in a safe, that's what goes here.
- Something useful happens while you make it: you realize you've been keeping credit card statements from five years ago. **The map starts decluttering the paper by itself.**

Will, trust, estate paperwork — where

Power of attorney, healthcare directive — where

Deed and mortgage papers — where

Insurance policies — home, auto, life, long-term care

Bank and investment accounts — which institutions

Safe or lockbox — where it is, where the key or code is kept

Safe deposit box — which bank, where the key is kept

Passwords — where they are kept (not what they are)

Attorney, accountant, financial advisor — names and numbers

Anything else somebody would need and never find

NOW, AND ONLY NOW

The stuff

Six steps, in this order, once the lists are done.

1 Start with the easy areas

A junk drawer. One shelf of a closet. The towels. As simple and basic as you can possibly make it.

There's a book I loved called *Atomic Habits*, and I didn't expect to. The idea is that you do one tiny thing without stressing yourself out, and that becomes a habit, and then you build on it. That's exactly what I want here. **This stage is about easy wins and no emotion.**

2 The ten minute rule

Ten minutes on the junk drawer. Set a timer. When it goes off, you're done.

You are not required to be a hero.

3 One category at a time — not one room

Shoes. Mugs. Books. All of one thing, wherever it lives in the house.

Rooms don't finish. Categories finish, and finishing is what keeps you going.

4 Four piles: keep, donate, trash, sell

Only four. And be honest about the sell pile — **no one wants your stuff if they have to pay for it.** Free moves fast. Facebook Marketplace will clear a garage in a weekend if the price is nothing.

If you have a spare room, make it the donate room and physically separate everything out.

If you hesitate on something, it goes to donate. And don't start calling your kids mid-sort to ask if they want things — now you're waiting on a phone call to finish a shelf. You already made these decisions. They're on your lists.

5 Sentimental items last

You've already written them down and photographed them on List 3. Now you can actually go through them.

This part is hard. Keep hold of the thing that's true: **it's the memories, not the stuff** — and you've already kept the memories.

6 Work in waves

Wave one is simple and easy. **Wave two** is lightly sentimental. **Wave three** is heavy sentimental.

Nobody clears a lifetime in a weekend, and going through your children's boxes on a Saturday because you decided it all had to be done is how people give up entirely. If you're emotional, stop. Wave three can wait.

Two shortcuts for the days you can't face it

The 5 × 5

Five items a day, five days a week. That's **25 things gone every week** and about 1,300 in a year. It doesn't sound like much. That's the whole idea.

The paper slide

Take a stack of paper about two inches thick. Sort just that stack. Put it down. **Done, and it counts.**

READ THIS PART TWICE

You might not have to do any of this.

Everybody will tell you that you have to declutter the whole house before you sell. If you physically cannot do it — and plenty of people genuinely cannot — **I don't want you carrying that.**

Every home sells at a price. If getting to the top dollar means an amount of work that is going to cost you your health or your peace, then price the house correctly instead and get it sold. Talk it through honestly with your agent.

Your stress is worth money. You do not have to sell for the highest number on the block. You have to sell for the most money with the least stress — and those are not the same goal.

You don't have to be the hero.

ONE MORE THING

Get somebody in the house earlier than you think

Especially if you can't lift the boxes yourself.

A lot of people get stuck here for a reason that has nothing to do with willpower: they're older, and they physically can't move the boxes. If you don't have family or a friend nearby who can help, **this is when to get a good agent into your house** — not to list it. To look at it.

Most agents will happily come and talk to somebody who's thinking about moving at some point, even years out. They have the resources to get things physically out of a house. And here's the part that surprises people: **they'll often tell you that you don't need to declutter nearly as much as you thought.** Some houses don't need it at all — the market's hot, or the house needs work anyway, and you were about to spend months of your life on something that wasn't going to change the outcome.

5 years out	Absolutely fine to have someone come look. Start the House Knowledge List.
3 years out	You should be talking to somebody.
1 year out	It's time. Get them in the house and find out what actually needs doing.

WHEN YOU'RE READY

Let me find your agent for you.

This is the part I actually do. You tell me about your house and where you are in all of this, and **I go and find you the agent** — a local agent I have vetted and approved myself, who will tell you the truth about what needs doing and, just as often, what doesn't.

It is **free to you**, there is no obligation, and there is no rush. If you're three years out from moving, that is a perfectly good time to start the conversation. You are not committing to sell anything by asking.

TruthInRealEstate.com

Or call 847.713.1556. If you'd rather just send the House Knowledge List and ask what you'd actually need to do — do that. That's a real question and it deserves a real answer.

SCAN TO START

> *When people invite me into their homes I treat it as an honor, and I mean that. People trust me with things they haven't told their own children. Watching someone struggle under the weight of their own belongings is genuinely hard to stand next to.*
>
> *So please hear this from me:* ***go slow, and go one step at a time.*** *You already know how to physically get rid of things. The hard part was never physical. Be patient with yourself about that.*

ONE LAST THING

You did the lists.

That is genuinely the hard part, and most people never get to the end of it. The boxes are just labor now — and labor can be hired, borrowed, donated, or simply left alone if you decide it isn't worth your peace.

What you have now that you didn't have before is **direction**. Your family knows what matters and where it goes. You know what's staying and what isn't. And you know things about your own house that you'd never written down in forty years of living in it.

THE NEXT STEP, WHENEVER YOU WANT IT

I'll find your agent.

Not a list of names off the internet. A local agent I have vetted and approved myself, for your house and your situation — whether you're moving next spring or in five years.

Free to you. No obligation.

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SCAN TO START

> *And whatever you do with the house — go slow, and be patient with yourself. You already know how to physically get rid of things. The hard part was never physical.*

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