I Believe in Lists

By Diana Weis

I believe in lists, and I’m not talking just the everyday lists but all kinds -book lists, bucket lists, grocery lists, and places to go lists. You name it all - lists. Don’t get me wrong I make the more traditional practical lists religiously as they tend to define and drive all others, but honestly these are truly the most concerning to me. For instance, the dashboard on my computer has well over 15 digital stickies worth of To Dos plastered all over it containing books I want to read, websites I don’t currently have time to visit but know, just know, that “someday” I will and the forever beckoning “do this when you get home” lists.

This last list, I engage in routinely with zeal. Generally as my day progresses, I dutifully make my dashboard “To Dos” with full intent of their demise, but it never fails and always seems that my computer is never on when I need to access them or even worse, I forget to check them until the battery warning screen interrupts my time carelessly spent on Facebook, email roulette, or Grammar Ninja.

None-the-less I still faithfully write them. Especially the grocery lists which either get left on the counter or seemingly flutter away when I get out of my car only to be found a week later jammed into the back of the check book, stuck to the side of the counter, or plastered to the garage floor. One even made its triumphant reappearance attached to the bottom of my shoe.

Yes, it is my battle with these more practical lists that has waged a long continuous war with me dating back to college when my mind was fresh, and I was determined that efficiency defined adulthood. There I began making weekly lists categorized by day chronicling the most strategic attack on surmounting tasks. Large tasks were quartered so attention was equally paid to each, smaller ones were prioritized with numbers off to the side, and occasionally a few precious life events were sprinkled down below. It didn’t take long to learn that my mind does not work well on prescribed command, and I have had to rethink the structuring and deployment of my lists frequently. Regardless, none have fully survived the routine of engagement. Though occasionally some have had a short stint on life support.

When it became evident that accomplishing a full day’s list was near impossible, I tried listing everything I accomplished in addition to everything I planned, just to prove to myself that time hadn’t been wasted and progress was somehow made. When that didn’t work, I took the advice of a famed magazine’s article and tried the opposite approach- limiting the daily number of To Dos to 7 which in retrospect really is not a logical answer as most anyone -even an infant- has more than seven things To Do.

I’ve tried prioritizing which only leads to a miserable inner struggle and discussion involving a comparison rating system of the item’s life importance vs. its urgency. That train of thought had to jump track when the consideration of graphing this was brought into paper. I’ve tried separating lists first by location: What needs to be done for school - What needs to be done for home - What needs to be done for the car; and later by urgency, which lasted only through the planning stage as any item placed on a list is urgent and just plain needs to be done.

The planners I have owned seem to routinely schedule a trip to the Bermuda Triangle in their truest moments of need, and telephoning myself with reminders has only found that I have a genuine talent for screening phone calls. For a few hours one lazy Saturday morning, I attempted a more motivational version of the To Do list, in which I placed in a few reward items before cutting it up and dropping them into a bowl to draw from. It took me 20 seconds and four pulls to get to my nap.

Over the years I’ve outlined, I’ve webbed, and I have even illustrated these lists forsaking all prior attempts of list management, but it wasn’t until lately it dawned on me exactly why. These lists too often mirror the authoritative voice telling me what needs to be done and by when. Nobody likes someone telling him or her what to do, and nobody, and I mean nobody, wants a daily reminder in their own handwriting staring them down in an orderly fashion. Or at least I don’t. The pressure is unbearable as I find I am rather demanding. So I am pleased to report, I am a more fluid list maker now. Today my lists are haphazardly strewn across loose papers, various notebooks, copious electronic devices, and more recently the sporadic wet wipe packet in my car or a marker on the sliding glass door. Very few of my lists are linear, fewer items share a page or design. They are random notes on random papers containing cryptic messages that will never be fully assembled nor are they meant to be.

Yes, chaos rules now like a Laurel and Hardy routine mixed with perplexing efficiency and bouts of serendipitous laughter. And I embrace it, as I know that although list strategies will continue to change with time; one thing will not. I will still believe in making lists. Not because I hold fast to the belief that I will actually someday complete a To Do list as scheduled, but because it is more a matter of memory than productivity. I simply need to clear space in my mind, which the writing and design of these lists provide. The items remain documented, the expectations set upon me are simply acknowledged and released, and more importantly, the stress and strain of presiding over them has been crossed off.