



King of the Road

MY NOMADIC
ADVENTURES OF
ORGANIZING
ACROSS AMERICA

By Mim King

Nearly two years have passed since my life took a different path. On Friday the 13th (yes) in July 2001, I was suddenly given notice to vacate my beautiful, large, and comfortable apartment. For a year I had been the part-time resident manager of an apartment building in Oakland, California. Without warning, the terms of the position changed, and I was being asked to leave. As shocked and upset as I was, I reminded myself of the adage, "It's not what happens to you, it's what you do about it."

*A*s a professional organizer, I had grown so comfortable with the routine of changing others' lives that I hadn't been prepared to step up to the plate myself, and now it was my turn at bat. But I was determined to turn this situation into a positive catalyst, one that would override my devastation.

Within 24 hours I had made a decision that would take my life in a new and exciting direction. I once heard someone say, "Some blessings come in a heck of a disguise." I hoped they were right.

THE FIRST 24 HOURS

I cried. I called my friends. I called my family. They gave me support, consolation, and ideas. But where was I going to live? "Okay, think," I told myself. All at once, the ideas on the back burner of my mind came forward and demanded my attention: I wanted to travel and justify it as a business expense; I decided I was done paying rent—it would need to be cheap or free; I wanted to start to think about buying a home, but not in high-priced San Francisco; I wanted to keep my current clients and expand my business, but not be tied to one place to do it.

How could I reconcile these goals within a timeline of 30 days? It seemed overwhelming.

Suddenly a light bulb went off in my head. This unexpected "blessing" would actually accomplish these things all at once. A new Mission Statement was made on the spot: Take my organizing business on the road as a way to 1) investigate other parts of the country for viable work and relocation potential while 2) banking money to buy a home, and 3) connect with people who wanted my services in exchange for an empty room in their home. I could arrange my schedule to return to the Bay area every couple of weeks to work with my San Francisco clientele, then take off again for a week or two, returning to work with clients, and so on.

Mim's Road Show was born!

ORGANIZING STEPS

For inspiration and motivation, I quickly put together a binder, a portable office if you will, and printed a cover which read, "Mim's Road Show —August 2001-____?" In it were several sections: business cards (mine and contacts); financial information (checkbook and banking forms); office supplies in zippered pockets (stamps, Post-its, pens and pencils, rubber bands, paper clips); return address and blank labels; resource lists (e-mail addresses of everyone I ever write, professional organizer directory); travel documents →

(car rental coupons, passport, airline info); and lots of lined paper for ideas and contacts along the way.

I started packing that night.

THE NEXT THREE WEEKS

The big decision was made, and I was itching to get going. Now that my Mission Statement was written and my goal clear, I was wildly enthused to change. This, I discovered, is the fine line between motivation with clarity and procrastination with despondency.

I'm sure I knew that, but it took having to live it to make it real.

I made a game out of moving: I sold most of my furniture to a guy upstairs. I held an in-house garage sale and sold things to other tenants that just a few days before had claimed a place in my heart. Now each was just going to be another thing to pack, and I wanted them gone. I rented a post-office box, changed my mailing address for everything (thankful that I'd maintained an up-to-date list of these businesses and services), and kept packing. I decided I would not buy any more groceries and would finish off what was left in the refrigerator and cupboards. What I ate, I wouldn't have to pack. Among several compassionate friends I found temporary homes for some furniture and my TV, espresso maker, second computer, and plants, all on indefinite loan.

It occurred to me that I had recently advised a client family to get their home in "move-ready" condition: such that, if they had to move tomorrow, they could simply start packing. Ideally, I told them, you want to have around you only those things that are beautiful, useful, valuable, or sentimental. In other words, the decision-making process to determine what to keep and what to toss was over with, and all that was needed then were

boxes and newswrap. I smiled to myself because here I was doing just that: facing a move. This was a good test of practicing what I preach.

I also settled on where I would live when I was in town ... a huge relief. I discovered a client-turned-friend with a big flat and a spare room. We worked out a mutually beneficial arrangement that included my organizing her entire house in partial exchange for that spare room.

By week three I was sleeping on the floor because I'd sold my bed. You discover what's really important to you when you pack. I found out that what you value most, you pack last. For me, it was my TV and coffee maker (note to self: deal with this values reality check at a later time).

What remained after schlepping my packed things to a storage unit were my clothes, computer, printer, a few boxes of files, food, and various personal sundries that I vowed to use up before buying anything else. It all fit into three carloads, probably still a lot by minimalist standards, but pretty darn good considering three weeks earlier I'd had a nicely furnished two-bedroom apartment.

I was out of there in under a month after receiving notice.

THE FIRST TRIP

As my life was changing, so too were the leaves in New England, something I'd always wanted to see. So, I slotted the first performance of Mim's Road Show for the Boston area. I e-mailed all my friends and used my local professional organizer group-loop to put the word out that I was available to organize any of their contacts. I also e-mailed some of the Boston area organ-



Mim King with organizer trainee, Anne-Marie.

izers, offering my services as a subcontractor. Through these methods I lined up two appointments, one a former client from San Francisco who had moved back to Boston. For three days I unpacked and set up others' homes, a familiar task at this point, and the rest of the time I watched the leaves turn, visited friends, and drank lots of Dunkin' Donuts coffee. Life was good.

I spent two fabulous weeks driving 1,000 miles solo around New England before returning to San Francisco to make money for the next trip. That, I decided, would be the measure of a successful trip: It should pay for itself.

FINDING VALIDATION

Two weeks later I headed back to the East Coast, this time driving south with my sister. I stopped to work with a retiring physician closing down his office after 30 years. He needed help deciding what to keep and move to his home office. I wasn't sure who was facing the bigger change: him or me. It was just different, I reasoned. My sister helped take piles of outdated medical books to the recycle bin, turning the good doctor's dreaded and onerous task into two humorous and entertaining afternoons. At that moment, I felt a renewed confirmation of my calling as "Professional Organizer," an added motivation to keep the show going.

I fancied going to Denver to ski and search out work, as I hadn't been skiing in some time and I had friends and relatives there. I advertised myself again by putting an ad on a free Internet community bulletin board. I got a few responses but only one appointment, which ended up canceling at the last minute. I still made the trip to cultivate potential clients, and I (sort of) got my ski groove back.

As we probably all do at this time of

year, I spent January 2002 refocusing and gearing up for the new year's goals. In addition to the usual physical, financial, and emotional objectives that most of us have, this was my favorite: "Find the next roof over your head."

Two roads diverged
in a wood, and I—
I took the one less
traveled by,
And that has made
all the difference.

—Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken"

The need to change had come again with my current housing situation. My client-turned-friend lost her job (like many others in this dot.bomb city) and needed to rent out her spare room for real market dollars, which was absolutely fair but had zero budget appeal for me. I ran an ad again, this time for "Part-time housing wanted in exchange for professional organizing services." I got a couple of nibbles, and one panned out: organizing a woman's entire home in exchange for a room for the next five months. (Herein might lie a whole new market: live-in professional organizers.)

I became Terry's housemate for the next five months, organizing one room at a time in preparation for a big garage sale. At the same time, I was asked to house- and dog-sit in Cape →

Cod, no organizing services needed. This couple paid me a minimal but acceptable amount to fly there, which was fine with me because I thought the idea of staying in a cute Cape Cod bungalow for a week, with the use of their car, was quite a good gig.

The first thing I noticed when I got to their house was that she was organized (the kitchen being her domain). I mean really organized. In their pantry, all of their cans, bottles, and boxes were lined up, facing forward, and grouped by type (crushed tomatoes,

organization, and that she was probably at the tip of one end of the scale, while I was probably more toward the middle. Not to worry, I thought, there are still plenty of people out there who would be moved by just having their Italian foods grouped together at all!

SPRINGTIME ON THE ROAD

In April, it was back to the South, going for a real vacation (no phone, no e-mail) with a week at a fitness spa in Tennessee. I talked to the spa about doing some organizing for them in exchange for a week (always looking



tomato paste, then tomato sauce; different kinds of rice together, followed by pasta types).

I was humbled. I have to admit that I don't take organizing to this extreme. Then I panicked. Was I supposed to? Am I a bad organizer because I don't care if a can of tomato paste sits between two jars of tomato sauce? Is what I do a farce? Would this woman make a better organizer than me? This really was on my mind for a few days. I concluded that there are degrees of

for a bargain), because I noticed they could really use it. Instead, they wanted to know if I would do a presentation on reducing stress by being organized. Would I? Could I! My mind just raced with the possibilities—maybe this new page of my life roadmap would unfold and take me to lots of fabulous spas here and abroad, getting fit and rested in exchange for talking about something that I love to do!

Next I headed to Lexington, Kentucky, to visit friends and explore business

opportunities there. I remember what one Kentucky organizer said: “People here don’t worry too much about being organized. They just throw everything into their basements.” Hmmm... Maybe there is a geographical angle to my work.

A MOMENT OF TRUTH

The next six months took me to Chicago and back to San Francisco, and I eventually found a client in Lexington. In between traveling and organizing, I had a meltdown. At the time, I was completely out of steam and wondered if this was all worth it. It was a break on the 4th of July that helped put things in perspective. On a day for celebrating our country’s independence, I was also celebrating my own sense of freedom from stuff. Freedom and independence are beautiful things, so I decided to go ahead and see where the road would take me next.

I’m thinking of heading back to Tennessee, Kentucky, and Chicago. I’ve got New York and Texas on my list, and I’m sure as time goes by there will be more places I will want to see and clients I’ll want to cultivate. I’m even thinking of expanding internationally: files in Korea or Spain need culling as much as they do here!

I’m hoping to discover a compelling reason to stay in the Bay Area (and maybe settle into my own space again), or a compelling reason to leave it and settle elsewhere. For now, I’ll keep going.

LESSONS LEARNED

Among other things, I’m learning that professional organizers have portable skills. People everywhere need to get organized. With easy access to cellphones, the Internet, and good old-fashioned storage units, one can live the nomadic life without much

interruption in communication. I said “can,” as I know not everyone “wants” to.

I’m lucky. Losing my housing was one of the best things that’s ever happened to me. I don’t have a husband, children, mortgage (yet), or the need to sleep in the same bed every night. I have my health. I’m mentally and physically able to live this kind of life—at least for the moment. I’m living with less and experiencing more, a message I also try to convey to others.

Maybe I’ll tire of this routine in another six months and be ready to settle down, unpack my plates, and get my espresso maker back. On the other hand, maybe I’ll still be enjoying the nomadic life and decide that I’ve really got something here as King of the Road. What I do know is that it has always been more important to me to *live* an earning instead of *earn* a living, and Mim’s Road Show has given me freedom, control, and flexibility over how I choose to live. I know I march to the beat of a different drummer, and I truly believe that because of that characteristic, I am happier and feel richer now than when I had a 9-to-5 job with a steady paycheck and two weeks’ vacation a year. Freedom equals wealth, in my book.

Despite the quarterly anxiety I experience over finding the next place to live and the constant mobility factor, the benefits of this nontraditional lifestyle have far outweighed the inconveniences. The road less traveled hasn’t always been nicely paved, but that Bob Frost was right: It certainly *has* made all the difference.

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