



ELISE GETS CRAFTY WITH ELISE BLAHA CRIPE
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This is a transcript of the Elise Gets Crafty podcast episode 52, “Getting Organized.”

Hey! This is Elise and you are listening to Elise Gets Crafty. This is my weekly podcast where I talk about blogging and small business and creativity and inspiration and motivation. You can find out more about me and about the show at elisejoy.com.

Elise: Hi guys! Thanks for joining me this week. I have Beth Penn, the founder of Bneato Bar, on the show today. We are going to be talking about a bunch of things but one of the biggest is organization.

Sometimes organization seems like the opposite of creativity, but I have found the opposite to be true. I feel like sometimes when I get my thoughts in order or I get my stuff in order, I am able to be more creative, get more accomplished and feel even more inspired.

So I thought that this could be a really interesting episode, and Beth and I could talk about that and share some strategies for finding a bit more organization in your own life, thinking about areas where you could use a bit more extra organization. I am interested to see where this goes today.

Beth, thank you so much for joining me!

Beth: Thank you for having me!

E: Absolutely. So tell us how you became an organizational expert.

B: It started at a young age before I knew that professional organizers even existed. I was the kid that got hired for babysitting repeatedly because the parents knew that I would help the kids put the toys away. And my favorite thing was to go into my friends’ closets and have everything neatly folded. That was my MO, I loved doing stuff like that. As I got older, it just continued.

Then I met someone who knew that I loved organization and she was like “Oh, have you heard of NAPO?” I said, “What is NAPO?” and she goes, “The National Association of Professional Organizers.” I was like, What are you talking about? You’ve got to be kidding me. So I went home (this was 2006), got online and was like, Oh my god, this is what I have to be doing. I didn’t come from an entrepreneurial background — I went to college for theater and film. My dad had always owned his own businesses, but me, I had never done anything. I had never networked or anything like that. So it was exciting, but at the same time I had no idea what I was doing.

E: How did you then get the ball rolling? Were you already doing that, or did you start the business and then build up a resume? Or what did that look like?

B: I had no idea what I was doing. I basically went online and found organizers, and I literally, blindly called people up and was like: “You’re an organizer — what does that mean? Can I come work for



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you for free?”

I finally found someone — she was actually leaving Los Angeles and moving to another part of the country, but she wanted to be able to take on clients up until she left. So, her thought was, “I’ll train you, and then when I leave I’ll offer them your services if you choose to continue.” It was great, I got to get a lot of experience that way.

Then I joined NAPO, and I joined NAPO LA and worked with other organizers, took a lot of classes and read a lot of books. Because what is so important (which I didn’t realize until I became an organizer), there is a difference between being neat and being organized. Like in reality shows you see everything as neat and organized to a tee, but that doesn’t mean it’s efficient or effective.

E: I want to talk more about that in just a sec. But I do want to call attention to the fact that you were like, “Hey, I’m interested in this, I want a job in this,” and you realized that the way to do that was to get some training. That is relevant for so many careers. Whoever’s listening and you want to be a stationery designer, you want to be a photographer. Just reaching out and connecting, being an intern for a while and learning from someone who’s doing it, is probably one of the biggest steps.

B: Absolutely, and I can’t tell you how many times it has payed off to actually pay someone for their knowledge. Finding out more about it and doing whatever that takes to really get in there and learn more.

E: And sometimes these careers — you think they’re going to be one thing and then when you actually try it you realize it’s so different than what you actually thought.

B: It’s so different, yes.

E: There’s value to that for sure.

Talk to us about what you were going to say there, because I think you’re right. I could definitely get something all straightened up and tidy, but that wouldn’t mean that it would make any sense for what I was doing.

B: A lot of times clients will think, “Oh, well the first step has got to be buying the bins. What do I need to have before you come over?” It’s very rare that we will bring bins before the project even starts. A lot of people think: As long as it looks neat and I can see everything – which is part of it, you want to be able to see everything.

But, it’s a lot different. That’s why I don’t really love before-and-after pictures. For me, it’s not always about looking like a magazine — it just has to work. It might not look gorgeous, it may not be the most amazing thing ever. But as long as it works, that’s what’s most important. Sure, having things that are beautiful, you’re going to want to keep it up more. Investing in those containers, if that works



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for you, then great — but it's not necessary.

E: People probably want to start with the storage. But do you recommend that instead they actually think through what they need? I mean what should be the start point?

B: They may not even know what they need until they go through it all. Until I go through, literally, everything in a closet with someone, I don't even know what we're going to need because we may end up getting rid of half of it. We're going to be emptying bins. We might be able to re-purpose some of that stuff. We may realize, I haven't used this in 5 years, it doesn't really serve me anymore. So it all depends. We may think this closet is going to be one thing and it ends up serving a totally different purpose.

So to answer your question: to start it is processing the stuff. Asking yourself, What do you want it to look like? What do you want it feel like? That will help you declutter. But starting it is just pulling everything out and sorting and categorizing.

E: I think that expression "It gets so much worse before it gets better" applies.

B: Absolutely, that's one of the things we have to tell clients because it can get so overwhelming and they are like, "Wait! I thought this was supposed to be organized." But the process does get a little bit crazy.

E: What do you say to people who have so much stuff? I'm thinking, for example, of my parents who have been in the same house for 20 years. I consider myself kind of lucky because I have to move every couple of years and purge stuff because you don't want to take crap to a new place. But when you're on the other end, you've been in the same place so long and you have to use the same amount of storage. What do you tell people to even begin with when there's so much there?

B: It's just starting in one place. You would start in a closet and you would work your way either from top-bottom or bottom-top. If it's a room, you start left and work right or vice versa.

But in a whole house it is just picking a place and starting. For a lot of people it's going to be, what is easiest to tackle first? Because that might help build some momentum. I've had clients call me before saying, "I'm kind of nervous about getting to my clothes." But we're doing the whole house and I'm like, "Let's start on the pantry. What can you easily make decisions on?" It gets you used to the process and you see the good effects that it has, and it inspires you to keep going.

E: I love that example, that's such a strong example for so many areas. When you're dealing with any overwhelming to-do list, if you cross off the easy-to-do stuff first — immediately you feel better.

B: Yeah, and I've also heard, tackle the hardest thing first. But for some people that just need a



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warm up, starting small is good.

E: Your right, you can approach it all differently. I like that example to start left and work right, or to start top and work down — to follow a pattern. When I'm feeling like my kitchen is just so messy or my office is so messy, I like to do that. I start at the door and I work my way around the room. That helps me stay focused instead of getting so overwhelmed. Like, Nope, you're looking at this section right now, you're dealing with this only — that helps keep me on track.

B: You're already overwhelmed so it's like a road map. It's a to-do list for the space and you're just working your way across. I find that really helps ground people.

E: That's a great suggestion. What do you think is the biggest challenge that people tend to have?

B: Not knowing how long things take. I get a lot of phone calls like, "Can we do the whole house — and that will be one session, right?" And it's so much more involved than that.

Just day-to-day lives as well — not properly planning, and thinking a task is only going to take 15 minutes. A lot of folks suffer from poor time management skills. That's the start of a lot of things.

I analogize a lot of getting organized to losing weight and staying healthy because it resonates so much. I don't know if you've ever done one of those food journals?

E: Yeah, I have.

B: You write everything down and you're like, Oh, my goodness, I can't believe I eat all that in one day. It's the same with tracking your time. Starting there, and then going forward you can plan accordingly. But I think that's the biggest challenge people have, is time-management skills.

E: I've thought about doing something like that for one of my workdays — set a timer and see how long I actually spend on email. See how much time I kill on social media. Just to get an idea. Because we think we're super-efficient and when we actually look at it — maybe not so much.

B: No, totally. I don't know if you watch Broad City, but there's this amazing clip where they go into, they call it the Matrix, rabbit-hole of the internet. And they come out of it like a day later and they're like, "What did I do?"

But there are apps to track where you spend your time — there's plenty out there if you're ever curious.

E: That's a good idea, I should. I'm thinking about just using my iPhone timer, but that would be much easier.



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B: Sort of an addendum to that — one of my favorite time management techniques, I don't know if you've heard of this? I know you're into goal setting and efficiency and productivity. But there's this thing called the Pomodoro technique, or the Pomodoro method, and for me that has been life changing. I definitely think it would be great for people to check out. It has really helped me with projects and things like that.

E: Okay awesome, I'll be sure to find something and link to that.

I know on your Instagram you talk a lot about just getting rid of stuff. To me, from the outside looking in, that seems like the biggest thing: encouraging people to be realistic about what they really use, or what's expired, or all of those things.

Do you feel like people struggle to get rid of things, or is it more like they're waiting for permission? Is it a mental thing? What's the issue there?

B: It's a little bit of everything. I will go into a client's house and once the physical presence of someone else is there, it makes it so much easier for people to get rid of stuff. It sounds crazy, but it really is true. It's interesting because it's a part of the process. You could be by yourself getting rid of stuff and you may get rid of, say, 10 things and that feels good. But what happens when you bring someone else in — a friend or an organizer, whatever sort of accountability you can create for yourself — you're able to do it in a way that feels responsible and honorable. You're able to tell the story about a certain thing, and then you can go, "Okay, I'm able to let this go now," and someone else is there to witness it.

E: You get to say goodbye, almost.

B: Right — and you can do the same on your own, but it really does feel different when you have someone there.

Going to back to your thing: Yes, people do have a hard time letting go, but I find that every time I work with a client they see it's easier when you've got someone standing over you. Someone is holding you accountable.

And people are afraid, they think, I might need this. So fear plays a huge part in letting things go; maybe they got rid of something in the past and "Oh, that cost \$250" or... there's so many different examples. I understand the fear. But at the same time, on the off chance that you do need it again, in our consumer society — well, how easily can you get it again?

I put something up recently that said "What happens if I get rid of something and I need it again? ...Well, you'll make do. You'll figure it out." I'm trying to get people to understand that it's not the end of the world. It is hard to let these things go. It's kind of like exercising, when you feel the burn. You



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know that you're doing good when you feel anxiety, because it's going to feel so much better once these things aren't cluttering up your life.

E: That's a good analogy as well because if it's easy, you're probably not doing enough.

B: Yeah, that's the obvious clutter, but what is the other stuff that is weighing you down?

E: I've found when I'm trying to go through rooms or clean my office, I sometimes have to do it in phases. I can do one phase where I get rid of a bunch. But then a few months later I can tackle it again and realize that all that stuff I held onto, it's not like I really need it. That helps me.

Similarly, I'm working on — I'm not sure if you are familiar — the capsule wardrobe idea.

B: Yes.

E: That's been amazing, especially because every season I go through my stuff and I try to pick what I'm going to wear. Every a few months I am able to get rid of another bunch of clothes. I had to hold onto them, I couldn't let them go — but now I can. You've probably heard a lot or even recommend this, is you put them in a separate closet or somewhere, and if you don't find yourself going to get those things for five months you can go ahead and let it go.

B: Right, it is kind of like a safety net.

E: Yes, exactly.

B: I do hear that from clients — they'll hire us, we'll come in and declutter. Then they bring us back for maintenance, or maybe they've moved or what have you, and they're now able to really let go because they know. Before it was their first time processing everything so they weren't sure. But now they're like, "I do know I'm not going to use this."

E: Looking at it in that way is a good idea, because you're right: That first one is so overwhelming and you're like, I don't even know! But once you get rid of some stuff it does feel so much better. Sometimes I get in such a tizzy that I start getting rid of stuff I really need because it's just satisfying to throw it out.

B: That's awesome. I did the capsule collection, finally — it took me months. I got in there like last week and got rid of four bags of clothes. My friends know me, I wear literally the same thing.

E: That's how I feel, I don't wear that much stuff. And I'm like – What is in here? It's embarrassing.

For me it's a mental thing. It's hard to know I spent money on this — sometimes I remember exactly



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how much I spent, and that's difficult. All I try to remember as I'm getting rid of this expensive stuff: Don't make this mistake again. Don't buy the thing that's just going to sit there and be expensive. I don't know if I can stick to it but that's the plan.

B: I don't remember where I read this, but if you look at the things you spend money on but then you never use them, it is like a sunk cost. You can't re-coup that money (unless you can resell it), so for the most part the money's gone. It's just sitting there making you feel guilty.

It's kind of like a parking ticket. I want to pay that as soon as possible because I don't even want it around to remind me that something bad happened. I just need to get it out instead of forgetting about it and letting it incur more costs. I'm just going to re-coup as much as I can and get it out.

E: I saw something a long time ago on the blog Oh Happy Day, she talked about how in a small space, nothing is worth as much as the space. You have this chair that you kind of like, you're better off with the space there than the thing you only kind of liked taking up the room. I thought that was brilliant, I've thought about that a lot since.

B: Interesting. I'll have to go over there and read more about that – that sounds pretty cool.

E: I'll look for the link., it was a good post. She lived at the time in a small apartment and so it was about making the most of that room and it was pretty brilliant.

Now we have our lives and we have our homes, but we also have a lot of clutter online. I would love some of your thoughts on clearing email, clearing bookmarks — whatever it is that people can do to make some space online as well.

B: Being efficient with email — I have to have it efficient. It would be so overwhelming if I didn't. So email is a good place for a lot of people to start. Everybody has to come to terms with how often are they checking their email and what the limit on their inbox number needs to be, and all of that good stuff.

But it's so important, it's similar to the stuff in your house. It can be just as overwhelming. Even though it's virtual or digital clutter — it's just as overwhelming. And people hang onto stuff even more because it is digital. They are like, "I've got the space. I don't need to delete this." But we've got to look at it the same way and realize it's not good to have all this stuff. The search features are great, but it does clog up our experience online.

E: If you dread checking your email or you dread checking your inbox, it almost makes everything that you need to do online or you want to do online — you don't even look forward to them or it's even harder to get started. It's like, Ugh, my email is going to attack me.



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For people who have thousands of emails that are unread, do you recommend just deleting them all?

B: Well, yes and no. Sure you can delete them all but you'll be right back there a couple months later. You need to address why you have all these emails in the first place, and there's some easy ways to deal with it.

There's essentially only three things you can do with email. You can reply — if it's going to take five minutes or less, just go ahead and reply. Or you can delete it if you don't need it, or archive it. With that, you can set up rules so you never see it again, or use apps like Unroll.Me or SpamDrain just to get them out. Or you can say, I can't respond to this right now so I'm going to write it on my to-do list and get to it when I can — and then clear it out of the inbox. It doesn't have to be complicated.

There are programs like Mailstrom.co, if you have a huge backlog and you want to be able to look through them and not just declare email bankruptcy, I definitely suggest doing that. It's \$5 a month and you're only going to need it that first month to get back to square one. So you cancel the membership and pay just that \$5. I definitely recommend that app to go through a huge backlog.

E: That's a good idea. Unroll.me, I've done that one right when it came out, and it was definitely good. Sometimes I sit at my computer and unsubscribe all the way down the list.

But email is hard. I like that you say there's only three things you can do. That simplifies it, it's not like there's so many choices here. The problem with email sometimes — email really is just making decisions. You have to sit down and you have to make decisions, no matter what. Even if it's a friend sent you something, you still have to make a decision about whatever you're going to say back.

It helps me, I've started to just do my email on my computer because then I'm in that zone. I'm going to just make these decisions as quick as possible and get through them, instead of having to toggle mentally and go back and forth between "email zone" and "life zone." Just staying in "email zone" can help me.

B: For me, I have to respond only on my desktop because I know I've responded, I can see everything. And sometimes I do respond on my phone, but for the most part I am only checking and doing things on my desktop. There's something I was going to say...

E: What about anything else — unsubscribing to blogs or limiting the amount of apps. Is that something that you do? Is that something that you feel like you need?

B: I don't subscribe to blogs, I don't read a ton of blogs. If I see something on Instagram that I want to go check out, I'll click through. I know a lot of people follow blogs and all that good stuff. But if you're doing your time management thing and you're realizing how much time you're spending on stuff — that has to be limited in some capacity.



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For apps, I have quite a bit of apps. I'm always checking stuff out because it's part of my job. But people get distracted by the bright, new, shiny app. They're like "Oh, I've got to check that out. Let me download that!" They're searching for the next best thing when they probably already have something great, it's just applying that in real life. It's the same with exercising and eating right. I know what works but then I see this new diet and it is like, What's this new diet? Maybe that'll be easier. But, no, it really won't — it's the same thing. I just need to do the other thing that I know works.

E: I think that's right for everything. You look in your closet and you think you have nothing to wear. So you go out and buy something because this will be the thing. Or with anything — craft supplies, tools or books — it's always the next one. Sometimes being able to see what you currently have, realistically see it and use, it is so much more valuable.

B: That's where it comes to like investing in the really great pieces: Buy the app that is awesome. Buy the piece that you're going to be able to wear over and over.

Even with kids, they've found limiting what they have to play with — that's going to make them more creative and be able to come up with different ways to play. Instead of giving them a thousand things where they're going to be overwhelmed and have decision fatigue.

E: That's a perfect segue into the creativity aspect of this. So often we think of the creative genius as in this chaotic space, everything's happening — and that does happen, some people do work best in that environment. But many others do well and feel they're most creative and inspired when things are clean or they know what they have. Have you found that that's true? Do you have any examples of clients who have learned that?

B: For me, the to-do list helps because it helps me think better. If I'm too overwhelmed and I don't know what is next, then I can't focus on what I really need to focus on. For me, it's important that I've got my daily list and I know what's next. When you have that it gives you more room to be creative.

But on the side of that, sometimes we use that as procrastination — like, "It's got to be cleaned and ordered for me to work, so I'm going to spend time cleaning or getting things perfect and then I'm going to start!" So you have to find that balance. That's how I used to be: "I'm going to procrastinate and get everything super clean." But that's not how it can work anymore. I just have to get to work, but at the same time having that good base to work out of.

E: It's easy to focus on the to-do list. "Let's color code it now. Let's reorganize it based on how long it's going to take me." There's so many things that you can do just with your to-do list that you don't have to do anything.



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It is an interesting balance and you have to just try something out. If you're listening right now and you're like, "How I work right now is working great" — then you're set. You don't have to be less or more organized to feel like you're working well. But if you're listening and you do struggle with any of these things, then I think it is important to try some different aspects on the scale and see what helps. Do you need to be a little bit more? Do you need to cut yourself some slack? What side do you need to fall on?

B: Right. You talk a lot about that, that your to-do list has to work. You had a quote —

E: My quote is, "Your to-do list should work for you. You don't work for your to-do list."

B: That is so great. I don't know if you're familiar with Merlin Mann, the creator of Inbox Zero. He talked about, your to-do list shouldn't be that fun. You're going to get too caught up in, Should I write this down? and I'm going to check this box. It should be usable and you should want to use it. But at the same time, if it has too many frills you're just going to be busy writing out the to-do list and not actually doing them.

E: There's this trend right now to make it fancier, decorate it. And I get that it's a form of memory keeping. But for me it's counterproductive because I want my to-do list to just be the stuff, I just want to cross it off. It's not something that I want to think about and dwell on. I just want it to be a place that holds my thoughts until I'm done with them. There's many ways to think about it, but that's interesting, I'm going to check that out. You say Merlin Mann?

B: Merlin Mann. He has a famous Google Talk where he talks about Inbox Zero (which refers to the amount of time you are actually in your inbox), and it is the best talk on email workflow. It's so good.

E: I will definitely link to that, too. Did you read the book — I think you may have Instagrammed it — The Japanese Art of Decluttering

B: Okay, so I started to read that — it's by Marie Kondo. It's uber-popular right now. I posted that on Instagram and all of my professional organizing colleagues were like, "Meh." Just not stoked on it. I have not finished it. I'm sure she's got some good advice in there because people love it, but I have not finished it.

I will tell you my favorite book that I read recently on organizing and minimalism is Do Less. I read it in an hour and it was amazing!

E: Awesome. I'll make sure to make a note of that too.

B: Have you read Marie Kondo's book?



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E: I haven't. Sometimes, if it's something that I feel like I have down already, it's hard for me to read because I get stressed out. I get too in-my-head about it. When I think things will be similar to what I already do, I sometimes don't even read it because it weirds me out a little bit.

B: No, I get that. If you may have incorporated some of that other stuff, and you are like, I don't want to seem like we're saying the same thing —

E: It's more that I feel like I have my own processes and I don't want to second-guess them too much, which might be a weakness. Maybe I should be looking for the next best thing. But if I'm feeling content I don't want to rock the boat too much.

B: I know what you mean. I read a lot of this stuff because it's in my field and I want to be able to recommend stuff if I think this might work for a client.

E: That's important, you have to be able to. I read a ton of craft books because I want to make sure that I know what's interesting and what's actually good. But that's great that Do Less was readable in an hour.

B: I even think there are parts that are skippable. No disservice to the author, but I liked it for the stuff part. She talks about all different aspects of your life, but I feel like there's a couple chapters which are just amazing.

E: Cool, that's awesome. I'll make sure to make a note.

Well I want to thank you. So tell us what's coming up. Anything new and exciting? I know you just taught an in-person workshop.

B: Yes, which felt like a marathon. I don't think I've ever talked for three hours before! But it was amazing. I did that workshop and next I'm doing a workshop for — there's a place in Los Angeles called The Unique Space which is great, they have a co-working space. I have a workshop there starting, I think, in April, which I'm going to post about soon.

And I'm starting to work more with creative businesses with their email and paperwork in their space.

E: Fun, that sounds exciting.

B: I want to talk to you really quick, I know we're finishing up. But your to-do list book — your goal book — I don't know if you're letting people test that or test-run it, but I would love to.

E: Awesome, right now I am still getting the first proof, the first official one, in-hand. At this point it's done and if there's tweaks they'll be made for the next round. But I would love your feedback on it.



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I'll be in touch once I have that going.

B: That sounds so exciting!

E: Thank you! It's been a really fun process. It's been a lot, because I want it to be a to-do list that is motivating but I also think a to-do list is a tool — it's not something that you want to frame. It's an interesting process to find the balance for that.

B: Yeah, absolutely. But it's so cool that you're doing that.

E: Thank you. There will be links for people to find you everywhere, but just a personal plug: I recommend following Beth on Instagram because she posts practical, real tips for how you can declutter and how you can get things more organized. I always appreciate your insight there.

B: Oh, thank you.

E: Absolutely. All of those links will be available on the website. And Beth, I just want to thank you so much for your time.

B: Thank you!

And that's it folks. Thanks so much for listening as always you can find out more about this show at Elisejoy.com. If you like what you heard please tell a friend and consider subscribing on iTunes. Thanks!