

# WINGS OF A BUTTERFLY

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You've probably heard the theory about how something as minor as the air movements caused by the wings of a butterfly can begin a chain of events resulting in weather changes on the other side of the globe. One such butterfly created a bright, sunny Saturday after Thanksgiving last year. The setting sun in the cloudless sky blinded a driver who ran a red light and hit my car as I headed home from the library, having given myself a day working on my own ancestry for a change. This in turn led to unrelated major surgery in January, which caused a significant volume of paper and books to migrate from my upstairs office to the downstairs living areas.

I'm not sure how a butterfly caused the next event, but in February a light bulb in a downstairs ceiling fan burned out, and when I replaced it, the circuit breaker tripped, so I called in the ceiling-fan repairman. This prompted many, many trips lugging the aforesaid books and paper back upstairs, filling every available surface with unsorted piles. The repairman also determined that the office ceiling fans needed replaced, and we set an appointment to do so.

In the meantime a hyperactive butterfly somewhere in the world (I envision the Andes) had started a meteorological chain that resulted in an East Coast snowstorm that ultimately led to my favorite laptop computer having to go live at the repair shop for several days preceding the return of the ceiling-fan repairman. This computer-free interval seemed like perfect opportunity to organize my office while getting the piles of papers out of his way.

## THE PROBLEM

I began filing. It wasn't long before I realized that filing was not going to be a solution. There simply was not enough room in file drawers, storage boxes, shelves, and closets for the massive stacks of paper. I had been living with the situation for some time before the November accident, because most of the stacks were categorized as work-in-progress.

## TAKING MY OWN ADVICE

In my lecture, "Time Management," that ultimately appeared in *Professional Genealogy*, I stated, "Clear your desk of *all* paper except that related to the top priority item. Put those other projects out of sight. If your eye can see them, your mind will wander from the task at hand. Your to-do list, not the stack of paper, should be your reminder." Hmmm. Somewhere over the years, I'd forgotten my own advice.

## THE BIG PICTURE

The task at hand was daunting. It wasn't just putting stuff away, it was finding a place to put it. I found it useful to step back—literally—and look around my office, with closet doors and file drawers open. Then I asked myself "What haven't I used in the past year? What haven't I touched in two years?"

I decided that anything in the two-years-or-more category needed to exit my office and either be disposed of or move to storage in the garage or attic. I also decided that anything in the one-to-two-year category could go into storage boxes in the office closets. File cabinets and credenza drawers should be reserved for currently or recently active materials.

## MAJOR PROBLEMS, MAJOR SOLUTIONS

For a habitual "keeper," these were tough decisions. I had grown accustomed to certain things always being in certain places, even if I didn't use them. I would also have to rearrange my storage and filing systems. The back-away-and-look technique proved invaluable in giving me perspective.

At the end of the first twelve-hour day, I had made major progress. Six boxes of papers had been packed up and carried downstairs to be relocated to the attic. Three boxes of my books were now in garage storage. An old printer had gone to Goodwill. A box of books was mailed. The bookcase that had been in the middle of the floor was now in the closet, as was the cart holding the microfilm reader.

## SETTING GOALS

My major accomplishment, however, related to paper. As I carried the first round of bags of shredded paper and stacks of old periodicals to my recycling dumpster, I weighed them. Thirty-six pounds! Wow! And I wasn't done. Surely I could make it to fifty. I would then call all my friends and brag. I made fifty pounds with plenty over. Was one hundred pounds achievable? I again tried the step-back-and-look technique. I saw a candidate.

## TAKING MY OWN ADVICE (AGAIN)

My candidate for paper poundage was almost four linear feet of syllabi, programs, and handouts from various conferences and workshops. In my lecture "Winning the Paper War" I present approaches for managing both family files and the myriad of other paper we acquire as genealogists. I'm pretty good at following the family-file suggestions, but haven't done as well on general information.

In the lecture I suggest creating separate file folders for individual localities and for subjects such as court records, immigration, newspapers, religion, ethnic groups, and so on. Articles, book reviews, and lecture handouts should then be clipped and filed in the appropriate folder. I have the folders, I just haven't been keeping up my clipping service.

As I began going through the collection, I realized just how wise my original advice was. I spotted several resources in bibliographies that I wished I had remembered to include in resource lists in my lecture handouts and books. They are resources I am familiar with, they'd just slipped my mind. I would have benefited from a quick

review of the folder before I hit print. The same was true of several terms I wished I'd remembered for glossaries. I'm sure I will also find items I wish I had consulted during earlier research.

#### STAYING FOCUSED

An important guiding principle was to stay focused on the macro goal of identifying and creating appropriate storage space and not getting distracted by the micro detail of organizing file folders and documents. This got even more difficult when my computer returned and I was tempted to begin computer tasks related to the paper I was finding. My poundage goal helped keep me on track.

#### CONTINUED GOALS

The newly uncluttered office and extra room for future filing is a great help to my productivity. There is more to do. Because I couldn't attack the details, I have many file drawers that need to be organized. But these are discrete. There's also one closet precariously stuffed with various odd-shaped items that requires extreme caution when opening the door.

And, yes, I achieved my goal, putting 117 pounds of paper into last week's recycling collection. Now I'm wondering if it is possible to recycle my own weight in paper (number not to be disclosed). I'm working on it, although the going is slower. My new target helps me spot more opportunities to optimize my office space. And just in case, I've gone on a diet so the two numbers will converge more quickly.