



METRO

Baker's moving talk was in 2009



OPINION

Baker's story should cause him anger, not tears



LIFES

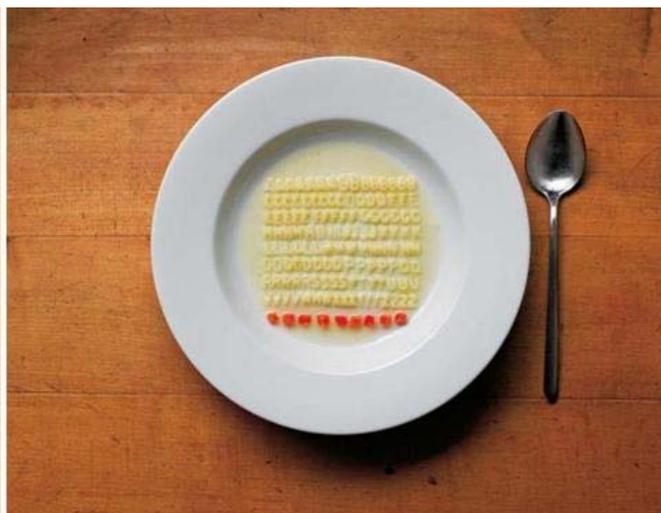
Anger real

The man who organized everything

To Robert J. Glushko, the world is one big opportunity for arrangement.

By Chris Wright

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CHRONICLE BOOKS

Soup, organized: "The Art of Clean Up: Life Made Neat and Tidy," a recent picture book by Ursus Wehrli, shows the kind of scenarios that unfold when the organizing instinct is pushed too far.

“MY WIFE AND I DISAGREE on condiments,” says Robert J. Glushko. “We

disagree about where they should go.” In most marriages, ketchup-placement quibbles might not be cause for too much worry—you make a concession on throw-pillow arrangement and move on. But in the Glushko household, observations like “she explained that I shouldn’t mess with the pantry” carry additional weight.

Glushko, a professor at University of California Berkeley’s School of Information, wrote (or at least edited) the book on the organization of things. “The Discipline of Organizing,” published last month by MIT Press, is a textbook for those who store and inventory things for a living, including librarians, computer scientists, and museum curators. But while the book itself is considerably more abstruse than civilians require, Glushko insists that its lessons apply to pretty much every professional under the sun: homicide detectives, convenience store managers, zookeepers, candlestick makers.

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In fact, Glushko will go further than this. His treatise, he says, all 540 pages of it, could serve as a handbook for living. As the professor is fond of pointing out, our daily lives are marked by a constant, overlapping process of configuration, an effort to impose order on chaos, which is evident in everything from baby names to bus timetables to the piles of paperwork on our desks. The way we order our shoes in the closet involves a complex process of deliberation, as does the order in which we unload our groceries. “People don’t realize it,” Glushko says, “but these are the kinds of decisions we make every moment of our lives.”

The decisions referred to here are described in the book as “intentional arrangement,” which boils down to where we put things and how we go about putting them there. The intention part emerges from a slew of considerations about properties, provenance, ease of access. On page 297 there’s a chart showing how we might classify the various shirts in our possession: color, size, style, type of occasion. We might also, though, think about our shirts in terms of their resource value (how much we like them), their extrinsic dynamics (how often we wear them), and the organizational architecture at your disposal (the length of your closet rack). Figure out how to prioritize these factors, and you need never

go rooting around your closet again.

As Glushko points out, even something as simple as how we organize our kitchens carries a set of implicit values, and the ones we choose say something about who we are. If you put a bottle of soy sauce next to your wok, for instance, you're abiding by the principle of *task relevance*, perhaps suggesting that you tend to be driven, focused on the job at hand. Putting the soy next to the mustard (that is, by the *properties of object*) suggests a more abstract, analytical approach. Or maybe you simply decide to put the soy sauce next to something else that happens to be brown, like cocoa powder (using a *perceptual* sorting system), which suggests...well, that maybe you don't cook much.

These organizational decisions have implications beyond how quickly and efficiently you can whip up a plate of twice-cooked pork. At the heart of Glushko's book is a quest to break the pieces of our lives down into their constituent parts; how you do that represents a kind of worldview. And, as with every other form of worldview, not everyone is going to see things the same way. "If you share a kitchen and organize items by frequency of use, you'll be fighting," Glushko says. "If you use a more robust system, like alphabetization, you won't be fighting anymore." The what and how of organization, in other words, are only part of the equation—we have to take into account the who, too. Sometimes, getting along with those around us may be as simple as explaining to someone that he shouldn't mess with the pantry.

Those human relationships come up again in a chapter in "The Discipline of Organizing" that tackles the question of naming versus description, a biggie in the world Glushko occupies. When talking about this subject, he likes to tell the story of how, when asked for his name at Starbucks, he tends to say "Osama bin Laden" rather than "Bob," for the simple reason that it'll make it easier for him to be matched with his cup. This rather odd example highlights the semantic challenges of organizing (and perhaps, unwittingly, the discomfort that might result when a person ignores all implications of a name except the need for a good marker). It also points to the fact that sometimes the thing being organized is *you*.

Most people, of course, don't generally approach the world as an organization problem. But Glushko—who admits to having a somewhat “compulsive” personality—has been pondering this stuff for as long as he can remember.

“When I was growing up, if I badgered my sister, she would pull the drawer out of my desk and tip it on the floor,” he says, “knowing I had spent hours organizing it.” As we speak, he's on holiday with his wife in the Côtes du Rhône region, on a wine tour. “I went out to a patisserie this morning and I could see the vineyards from this little hill,” he says. “Vineyards impose structure on the land, and I've always liked that.”

Chris Wright is a writer and editor living in England.

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