

# A Simple Declutter Habit: Leave No Trace

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by Leo Babauta

“When you do something you should burn yourself  
completely, like a good bonfire,  
leaving no trace of yourself.”  
Shunryu Suzuki

Zen master Suzuki Roshi spoke about the idea of leaving no trace – doing something with complete presence, and then moving on to the next thing without holding on to previous activities. His wonderful advice for doing any activity was to do things with “a simple, clear mind”.

One way to apply this is with a simple decluttering habit: clean up your mess when you’re done. This is a more literal way to “leave no trace” ... not exactly what Suzuki Roshi was talking about, as he meant that we should leave no trace in our minds ... but still a very useful practice. For me, this means simply putting things away and cleaning up a bit when I’m done with a task:

- Wash my dish and clean the table and counters after I've eaten.
- Put my clothes in the hamper (or hang them up if they're still clean) after I've showered.
- Put away materials that I've used after I do a work task.
- Make my bed after I wake up.

In practice, this means you have to be mindful of what you're doing, and conscious that you are moving from one task to another. Most of us rush from one thing to the next without thinking about the transition, but when you're done with one thing, this is a good time to appreciate the space between things, to breathe and notice if you're staying present, and to clean up your mess instead of leaving a mess as you traipse through life.

The effects of this simple habit are incredible:

1. You don't leave a huge mess to clean up later.
2. Things are clear, which helps give you peace of mind.
3. Your life doesn't become cluttered, because as you're putting things away you decide whether it's worth keeping in your life.
4. You take time to pause between tasks, taking assessment of how you've been doing and what you really want to do next.

I truly love the "leave no trace" habit. Here's how to form it.

If you'd like to form this "leave no trace" habit, here's what I'd recommend:

1. Put little reminders where you'll see them – a

note on your desk, a little flower on your countertop, for example. These can serve to help you remember to clean up after yourself.

2. For the first day, put all your focus on noticing when you're done with a task, whether it's a work task or personal one.

3. When you notice you're done with a task, pause. Take an assessment of how you're doing with the task, whether you were mindful during the task, and what your intention is for the next task.

4. Wrap up your previous activity by cleaning up after yourself. This might mean putting things away, wiping things down, or just filing away a document and crossing a task off your to-do list.

5. Breathe, and smile.

You'll forget often, probably, and that's normal and completely fine. Just try to remember as often as possible, perhaps setting phone or computer reminders, or putting up more physical reminders, so you don't forget. Eventually, you'll start remembering more, after a few days. You'll get better and better at the habit, and in the process learn a lot about habits and mindfulness. ?