

Applying the 80/20 Principle

January 2011

© Cynthia Hancox

www.CynthiaHancox.com

Recently I've read two books about the 80/20 Principle. This principle was discovered by a guy named Pareto. Wilfredo Pareto was an economist, and he observed that 20% of the population in Italy had 80% of the material wealth. Over time, and much testing by various other specialists, it was found that this proportion could be extended to other areas of observation, including:

20% of clients account for 80% of sales

20% of the workforce does 80% of the work

20% of a book contains 80% of the information

20% of your priorities result in 80% of your profitably productivity

At home, 80% of dirt is found in 20% of the total area

and so on....

What the Pareto principle is basically saying is that **80% of results or outputs flow from 20% of inputs.**

The numbers 80 and 20 are not "magic figures" - sometimes the actuality may be 17/83 or 25/75 or whatever. This is a general principle though, and it does remain approximately true in most situations.

Perhaps now you're asking yourself "So what?" Why should you care are about the 80/20 principle? Let me tell you why - because once you grasp this concept, if you choose to apply it to your life, you will find it makes it MUCH EASIER TO DECLUTTER, and helps you to focus your time on things that really matter. In short, this principle can help you turn your life from one of chaos to one of calm and productivity. Let me explain:

If I were to count every single book in my house (a number doubtless in the 1000's), and if I were to diligently mark each book we actually USE over the next year, and then count them, are you willing to believe that the second number will probably be around 20% of the total number of books? I am! How about in YOUR house?

If I were to really look at all my cookware and kitchenware, I sure it would be true that 1 in 5 of the items would get 5 times as much use as the other 4! Take my pots for example: I have 5 pots in various sizes. 1 of them gets used ALL the time - usually every day, and often many times during the day. Because it's the perfect size for me to cook potatoes, stews, pasta, porridge, bulk lots of whatever used in other recipes and so on and so forth. Most of the rest of the pots have really only a couple of things I use them for, and so are used much less often. So it would be true that 20% of my pots (1 in 5) produces 80% of the cooking done in pots in my house. How about in your house? Do you have any pots that are used so seldom they are really not needed at all?

It's probably also true that.....

20% of our clothes are worn 80% of the time...

20% of our DVDs/CDs etc produce 80% of use and enjoyment

20% of toys get played with 80% of the time

20% of makeup, lotions, personal care products etc etc gets used 80% of the time
1 in 5 cookbooks in my kitchen get referred to regularly
etc

So, if 1 item out of 5 similar items produces most of the results, do we need the other 4? Good question! It depends. If we still do use the other 4 reasonably often, and there is no double-up in what they can do, then yes, probably. (For example, I do need all 5 of my pots, and some days have all of them in use at once). In other cases, that other 80% is mostly excess - clutter - stuff clogging up our lives! Can you wrap your mind around that:

80% of the stuff in our homes has very little benefit!

If this is true, then wouldn't it make sense to let go of most of that 80% as soon as possible, so we can find and concentrate on benefitting from the other 20%? Yes, yes, I know you can't really get rid of ALL 80%, but surely we can realise that most of the 80% is simply not valuable and important, and let go of a good deal of it?

I don't know about you - but I'm totally fed up with living in a home with TOO MUCH STUFF, one where it takes too long to clean up, too long to find things, where too much of my time is spent dealing with STUFF. I want more freedom - freedom to focus on my family, freedom to have folk over on short notice, freedom to serve my Lord in other areas, freedom to begin to disciple others as I'm called to do, freedom to LIVE!

There are three principles I'm working on implementing into my home as I declutter and re-arrange:

- 1 item in 5 is very beneficial - the rest are optional and most should be cut down as much as possible
- We only have the space we have - and we need to live comfortably (not cramped) within that space. How much we keep of anything must be limited by the amount of space available to keep it in.
- In every room of my house, I should think about all the activities that room is supposed to be used for (according to our family goals, plans, intentions). Then, all the items needed to carry out those activities should be kept IN that room, if at all possible, or as close to it as possible. That way we're not having to carry things back and forth to other parts of the house. Plus, I've always found that if the place something belongs is close by and easily accessible to all family members likely to use it, it's much more likely to get put away.

There's an example of how I've been applying this recently:

In a hallway off my living room, I have what I call "my library" - this is an entire wall of 6 foot high shelving full to overflowing with books. There is also another unit of 9 shelves which is used for school supplies etc. Craft and stationary are down there too, and junk there's nowhere to put also tends to migrate into this area "until I deal with it".

Now, the wall the bookcases are against is due to be demolished, along with another wall, to create a more open living/dining area and give us some much needed light and space. The room behind it and the "hall/library" together will become our new living room. So, I've needed for a while to move those bookcases and sort through the books again, and reduce them back to fitting properly.

But, armed with the above principles, I decided to think about this a bit differently:
Those bookshelves will be lining one wall of our living room, which is also part of our dining room.
What activities are or will be carried out in that room?

Playing games

Reading books

Doing jigsaws

Knitting

Sewing

Watching DVDs

Listening to music

Relaxing

Snuggling on the couch together

So, what items are needed for these things to happen, and DO THEY HAVE A HOME IN THE LIVING ROOM? (Or can I create one). Now, I have a small house with VERY limited storage. So I decided my wall of bookcases should contain not only the books, but also the games, my knitting wool/needles, sewing machine and supplies, DVDs, puzzles etc etc. Obviously, this requires that I eliminate some books (ok, a LOT of books) to make room for the other things.

And that is what I have done over the past couple of weeks. I emptied and moved one bookcase at a time to it's new wall. Then I went through the books that came off it and identified the ones that REALLY get used and enjoyed or constantly referred to and put them back on the shelf. Then I went through the rest and ruthlessly asked myself WHEN they would get used, and for WHAT and how, truthfully, likely it was I would NEED them in the next year or so. I also asked the kids which ones of "their books" they really cared about or where interested in reading. Doing this I didn't eliminate 80% of our books, but I did eliminate about 50% - leaving 15 bookshelves now free to house other things.

As a bonus, I'm advertising those books I removed that are worth selling online, and have gained a couple of hundred dollars so far which will go towards the costs of my kids going to Student Convention. :-)

Now I'm working my way through the rest of the house, looking for the 20% (or 1 in 5) of really useful things, then eliminating as much as possible of the rest.

I find this principle freeing! Only 1 item in 5 of all I own (on average) is really very beneficial. I can let go of the rest!

How about you?

Love

Cynthia