

Death Cleaning Is Not Sad

I am death cleaning, or as we call it in Swedish: *döstädning*. *Dö* is death and *städning* is cleaning. In Swedish it is a term that means removing unnecessary things and making your home nice and orderly when you think the time is coming closer for you to leave the planet.

It is so important that I have to tell you about it. Maybe I can also give you a few tips, since this is something that we will all have to face sooner or later. We really must if we want to save precious time for our loved ones after we are gone.

So what is death cleaning? For me it means going through all my belongings and deciding how to get rid of the things I do not want any more. Just look around you. Many of your things have probably been around for so long that you do not even see or value them any more.

I think the term *döstädning* is quite new, but not the act of *döstädning*. It is a word that is used when you or

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someone else does a good, thorough cleaning and gets rid of things to make life easier and less crowded. It does not necessarily have to do with your age or death, but often does. Sometimes you just realise that you can hardly close your drawers or barely shut your cupboard door. When that happens, it is definitely time to do something, even if you are only in your thirties. You could call that kind of cleaning *döstädning*, too, even if you may be many, many years away from dying.

I think women have always death cleaned, but women's work is not often in the spotlight and should be appreciated more. When it comes to death cleaning, in my generation and those older than me, women tend to clean up after their husbands first, and then they clean up before they themselves are no more. While one would usually say 'clean up *after* yourself', here we are dealing with the odd situation of cleaning up *before* ourselves . . . before we die.

Some people can't get their heads around death. And these people leave a mess after them. Did they think they were immortal?

Many adult children do not want to talk about death with their parents. They should not be afraid. We must all talk about death. If it's too difficult to address, then death cleaning can be a way to start the conversation in a less blunt fashion.

The other day, I told one of my sons that I was death cleaning and writing a book about it. He wondered if it

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was going to be a sad book and whether it made me sad to write it.

No, no, I said. It is not sad at all. Neither the cleaning nor the writing of the book.

Sometimes I feel a little uncomfortable with how unappreciative I am about some of the things I want to rid myself of. Some of these things have brought benefits to me. But I've discovered that it is rewarding to spend time with these objects one last time and then dispose of them. Each item has its own history, and remembering that history is often enjoyable. When I was younger, I never used to have the time to sit and think about what an object meant to me in my life, or where it came from, or when and how it came into my possession. The difference between death cleaning and just a big clean up is the amount of time they consume. Death cleaning is not about dusting or mopping up, it is about a permanent form of organisation that makes your everyday life run more smoothly.

Now, when I am not running around Stockholm, enjoying all that the city has to offer, I have time to enjoy all that my apartment has to offer, which is a reflection of my life.

The world is a stressful place. Floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, fires and wars follow one another. To listen to the media or read newspapers makes me depressed. I would shrivel up if I could not combat the negativity of the world's news with good friends, experiences out in the natural world, music, beautiful things or just enjoying something

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as simple as a sunny day (which can be rare in our northern climate).

I would never ever want to write something sad; there is enough sadness out there already. So, I hope you will find the words and thoughts ahead helpful and entertaining, perhaps even humorous at times.

To do your own death cleaning can really be very hard. Maybe you have to downsize your home for some reason, maybe you have become single, or maybe you need to move to a nursing home. These situations tend to affect most of us at some point.

Going through all your old belongings, remembering when you used them last and hopefully saying goodbye to some of them is very difficult for many of us. People tend to hoard rather than throw away.

I have death cleaned so many times for others, I'll be damned if someone else has to death clean after me.

Once someone is gone, things can be chaotic enough anyway, I can tell you. There are many sad stories about siblings who start to quarrel because they want the same item. This type of situation does not need to happen; we can plan in advance to lessen the chances of these unhappy moments.

I had for example a lovely bracelet that my father gave to my mother a long time ago. It was given to me in my mother's will. The easiest way to avoid future complications among my children was to sell it! That was a very good idea, I think.

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Later, discussing the sale with my children, they were fine with my decision. They had each been given something that had belonged to my father and mother. And after all, the bracelet was mine to do with as I pleased. Taking precious time to discuss one bracelet with my five children seemed unreasonable. Death cleaning is about saving such time.



Why I Am Writing This Book

I am now somewhere between eighty and a hundred years old. I take it as a responsibility of my old age to tell you about my experiences, because I believe this philosophy of death cleaning is important for all of us to know. It doesn't matter if it is your parents or friends and family who are getting older or if it is about time for you to begin death cleaning for yourself.

I have moved house seventeen times within my own country and abroad so I should know what I am talking about when it comes to deciding what to keep and what to throw away, whether you are moving house, moving country or moving to the Great Beyond!

Although it seems to be mostly women who death clean since they tend to live longer than their husbands or partners, sometimes, as with the family I grew up in, my father was left alone first.

If someone has lived in a home for many years where

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children, grown-ups, relatives and guests have stayed and felt welcome, that same someone is often so busy that they never think of reducing the number of things in the household.

And so the number of possessions in the home grows quickly over the years. Suddenly the situation is out of control and the weight of all those things can begin to seem tiring.

Your exhaustion with all this stuff may appear out of the blue one day. When someone cancels a weekend visit or a dinner you feel grateful instead of disappointed, because you may be too tired to clean up for their visit. The problem is that you have too much stuff to deal with. It is time to change your way of living and it is never too late to start!

Precious Time and Helping Parents

Today, of course, things are very different from when I was young. I did not say better. But the pace today is very fast. Many young families have to schedule their lives down to the smallest increment to have time to do what they consider most important.

Do not ever imagine that anyone will wish – or be able – to schedule time off to take care of what you didn't bother to take care of yourself. No matter how much they love you, don't leave this burden to them.

The first time I came across death cleaning was when I had to empty my parents' apartment after the death of my mother. My parents had been married for forty-six years and my father was not capable of taking care of everything himself when moving to a smaller apartment. Together we picked out the furniture, linen, household utensils, knick-knacks and paintings that would make his new home nice and comfortable.

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My mother had been a very orderly, wise and realistic woman. She had been ill for some time, and I believe that she suspected that she did not have much time left and had therefore started to plan ahead for after her death.

As I began to clean up their home, I found messages attached to clothes and many other things: small handwritten instructions as to what should be done with everything. Some parcels were assigned to charity; some books were to be returned to their original owners. An old horse-riding outfit should go to the Museum of History, it said on a note fastened with a pin on one of the jacket lapels. There was also the name of whom I should contact at the museum.

Even if these small instructions were not addressed specifically to me, I felt consoled by them. I felt that my mother was there for me. She had really done some of her own death cleaning. I felt grateful, and it has proven to be a very good example for me of how to take responsibility for your things to make it easier on your loved ones after your death.

My five children were between one and eleven years old at the time so I was very busy. Because I had so little time, we decided to work with an auctioneer to clear out the house and to sell anything that my father did not want or need in his new, smaller home. An auctioneer may sound expensive and a little exclusive but it really isn't. The auctioneer's commission is deducted from the items that are sold, so it was no cash out of my pocket or my father's. Under the circumstances, it was the best option for us.

Precious Time and Helping Parents

Auction houses are generally very helpful if you do not have friends or siblings to help you.

The auctioneer's office had to take care of a lot. I remember that as soon as they started it all went very quickly. I had to stop some of the movers carrying things down the stairs before the objects disappeared out of my sight for ever. But I didn't take it too much to heart if a few too many things went to the auctioneer's. I had so many things to take care of that were more urgent and complicated – such as my children's needs, my father's state of mind about the move, and our grief over the loss of his wife, my mother – that there was just no time to be too concerned with material things.

And besides, I had already made sure that my father had the basic things that he would need in his new home, such as household utensils and furniture. If a few too many things went to auction, it was not the end of the world. The most important objective was to hold on to the special things that my father wanted to have in his new apartment. We kept his beloved desk (where he placed a portrait of my mother), along with his favourite chair and a few paintings that he did not want to part with.



How to Begin

Be aware of the fact that to downsize your home will take some time. Old people seem to think that time goes so quickly, but in fact it is we who have become slower. So, if you are in your later years do not wait too long . . .

This new job of yours will not be accomplished any faster if you wait, but with a little practice and preparation, it will certainly be easier for you to make decisions about how to get rid of things. Trust me, the more time you spend going through your belongings, the easier it will be for you to decide what to keep and what not to. The more you work at it, the less time-consuming it will become. You might even discover the added bonus that it will feel wonderful to visit a rubbish dump and throw worthless things as far as you are able to.

Start by checking the basement or the attic or the cupboards by your front door. These areas are great places to temporarily get rid of excess. Temporarily – well, many

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of the things you have in storage have probably been there for ages. You may even have forgotten what it is you have there. Good for you, because you will now realise that you will not miss anything if you throw it away.

Have a look in these storage areas and start pulling out what's hidden there. It may be a doll's house or ice-hockey equipment, mostly things that you yourself did not want around any more. Sometimes your attic has become so full that you are forced to put things in someone else's attic. Terrible! Who do you think will take care of that when you are no longer here?

Tell your loved ones and friends what you are up to. They might want to help you and even take things you don't need and also help you to move things that you cannot move on your own. You will see that a steady stream of people you like (or even dislike) will come to take things such as books, clothes and utensils.



Perhaps a grandchild or someone else you know is about to move into their first apartment. Invite them over, and you can show them your things and chat about them, tell

How to Begin

them stories about the objects (or perhaps even your life) that they do not know. Meanwhile, have some bags and boxes at hand that you can fill while you are chatting, so they can take stuff with them right away.

– *Pictures and Letters* –

Don't start with photographs – or letters and personal papers for that matter. It can be both a lot of fun and a bit sad to go through photographs and letters, but one thing is certain: if you start with them you will definitely get stuck down memory lane and you may never get around to cleaning anything else.

Pictures and letters that you have saved for some reason must wait until you have arranged the destinies for your furniture and other belongings. In general, when death cleaning, size really matters. Start with the large items in your home, and finish with the small. Photographs carry such a weight of emotion that they will hinder your work, but they are also very important, so I have given them their own chapter later on in this book.