

Are You Ready for *Döstädning*?

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As I write this article, do you know what book is a bestseller on Amazon with the following ranks and descriptions?

#135 for all books

#1 in Books under the category Self-Help, Relationships, Love & Loss

#2 in Books under the category Self-Help, Death & Grief

#2 in Books under the category Home Improvement & Design; How to & Home Improvements; Cleaning, Caretaking & Relocating

You may be puzzled why a book listed under Home Improvement & Design would also be described within themes of love, loss, death, and grief. I certainly would have been if I hadn't read an article in *Time* magazine by Margareta Magnusson with the intriguing title "How to start 'death cleaning.'" The article is based on her recently released and bestselling book *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*. I also discovered after "googling" the words "death cleaning" that her book has triggered a spate of articles in major magazines and newspapers in addition to the one that appeared in *Time*.

Magnusson's description of death cleaning assumed special interest for me given the publication of my most recent book *Reflections on Mortality: Insights into Meaningful Living* that I co-edited with my colleague Glenn Wilkerson. Both Magnusson's book and ours encourage readers not only to contemplate the inevitability of our own death but also actions we might take in consideration of our mortality—although none of the contributors to Glenn and my book specifically address the theme of death cleaning.

The Process of "Death Cleaning"

Magnusson, a Swedish artist who describes herself "somewhere between 80 and 100 years old," begins the *Time* piece by writing, "I am in the process of 'death cleaning,' or as we call it in Swedish, *döstädning*. It is a term that means that you remove unnecessary things and make your home nice and orderly when you think the time is

coming for you to leave the planet, to save precious time for our loved ones after we are gone.”

Magnusson suggests that we look around our apartment or house and assess what we really need and what we value. “Sometimes you just realize that you can hardly close your drawers or barely shut your closet door. When that happens, it is definitely time to do something, even if you are only in your 30s.” To emphasize the point that death cleaning is not restricted to people in their senior years, Magnusson asserts that *döstädning* can occur “even if you may be many, many years away from dying.”

Dwight Garner, in a review of Magnusson’s book in *The New York Times*, writes that it is “a surprise international bestseller, and is actually a fond and wise little book. It’s about how to sort through and dispose of many of your possessions before you die, thus sparing your family members of an unpleasant task.”

In an article posted on businessinsider.com, Shana Lebowitz notes that Magnusson personally experienced the importance of death cleaning after being left with that responsibility following the deaths of her parents, in-laws, and husband. “And it’s something that many millennials and Gen Xers are experiencing today, sometimes paying up to \$5,000 for people to haul away their aging parents’ furniture and other possessions.”

Magnusson appreciates that undertaking death cleaning at any age may seem like a Herculean task, especially if we have collected many objects over the years. She recommends that good places to start are the attic or basement. “Many 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 realize that you will not miss anything you throw away.”

My Early Efforts at *Döstädning*

I can certainly relate to this last observation. Little did I realize that when I left my full-time position at McLean Hospital almost 22 years ago I had begun the process of *döstädning*. As I surveyed all of my books in my office at McLean I realized that I had very little room in my home office for them. I had the fleeting thought that I could store them in my attic, a thought I dismissed for several reasons including the challenge of carrying heavy boxes of books up to the attic and the recognition that once in the attic

they would remain there for years. I decided to select the few books that had special meaning to me, such as those written by colleagues and/or with inscriptions in them; I donated the remainder to the McLean library. I wondered if I would miss them, but quite honestly I cannot even recall the titles of almost all of the books I gave away.

My seeming act of generosity at McLean prompted me to examine the contents of my attic at home. It is a walk-up attic that stretches the length of our house, although one does have to bend a little to avoid hitting beams. It provides much storage room, but 22 years ago almost no empty space remained. A vast section of the attic was filled with all of my psychology journals dating back 25 years. I kept accumulating journals, guided (driven?) by the belief that at some point I might have an urgent need for a particular issue or article. How often did I actually look for a journal? Once or twice in 25 years. And, of course, after several years even if I wanted to locate an issue the task became increasingly problematic as boxes were piled on boxes.

I decided the journals had to go. I soon discovered that libraries—both public and university—showed no interest in receiving a gift of these treasured publications. With assistance from my sons we carried the heavy boxes down from the attic to my car in the garage. I brought them to our town's recycling center.

Once cleared of the boxes of journals, I assumed the attic would look relatively empty. I was in for a rude awakening. So many more objects remained. Again, with the assistance of my sons, we spent parts of a weekend bringing a host of items from the attic to the garage. By the time this phase of *döstädning* was completed, I was stunned to see that almost half of our two-car garage was filled with items that had little, if any, emotional (or financial) value to me. This time I called a “junk” removal company; they cleared the garage of things that I didn't even remember we had and were not missed.

In reading Magnusson's article and the reviews of her book, I was happy that I had started death cleaning even before I knew my actions represented that label. I simply viewed what my sons and I had accomplished as “cleaning up” or “decluttering.” In respect for decluttering, my wife Marilyn and I agreed years ago that any time we bought a new piece of clothing, we would donate a similar piece that we possessed and was still in good condition to our local community council.

And just a few days ago, perhaps motivated in part by Magnusson's *Time* article, I began to examine all of my bookshelves at home and realized I had not read or even glanced at many of the books in years nor did I have an interest in re-reading them. I am pleased to say that the process of bringing them to our town library has begun. The library has sales several times a year, and I would not be surprised if there are buyers for at least a few of the books, earning the library some funds.

Guidelines Offered

Magnusson provides guidelines when deciding to engage in *döstädning*. She suggests inviting loved ones and friends to help with the cleaning and asking them if there is anything they would like to have. She adds, "I've discovered that it is rewarding to spend time with these objects one last time. 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 when and how it came into my possession. Each item has its own history and remembering that history is often enjoyable."

Another recommendation is not to begin the cleaning process by examining photographs or other possible emotional items. Magnusson cautions, "You will definitely get stuck down memory lane and may never get around to cleaning anything else. Better to begin with your wardrobe." Of course, with photos increasingly stored on smart phones, tablets, or digital cameras, large photo albums may soon become part of what one of my grandchildren calls the "dinosaur age."

The topic of photos is an interesting one. Marilyn and I have boxes of slides (I'm not certain if my grandchildren even know what slides are) that we have not looked at in years. Yes, I still have an old Kodak slide projector, but for some reason it seems like such a chore to set it up. Fortunately, as we took slides we always selected a few to be made into photos and placed in albums; I've gone through these albums from time to time but not very frequently. We moved our many slide carousels, which consumed a great deal of space in our house, to our garage years ago. I don't know if the slides will ever be viewed again. Perhaps it is time for the slide carousels to become part of *döstädning*, especially since we still have the selected photo albums, which take up little space in one of our closets.

The most popular albums in our home are those Marilyn started for each of our four grandchildren. The photos chronicle their lives from the time they were born until the current day. Even today as teenagers the grandkids gravitate towards these albums, which are prominently placed on one of the kitchen counters. Our grandkids encourage us to keep them up to date with recent photos. I sense that after Marilyn and I are no longer here, they will each take their own album to someday show their children who will probably display little, if any, interest in photos of their parents as children. History repeating itself.

Deserving More Attention than *Döstädning*

The fact that Magnusson's book is a bestseller indicates that the topic has resonated with many people. The process of *döstädning* is one that certainly deserves our consideration and involvement. However, before ending this column I want to emphasize another domain that I believe warrants as much, if not more, attention than death cleaning. I would place it under the umbrella of "significant financial, health, and related information."

In many instances the tension and stresses occasioned by family having to dispose of clutter after the death of a loved one pale in comparison to the stresses generated by a lack of knowledge about such financial questions as:

What stipulations are included in trusts and wills (in some instances, there is not even an existing will)?

What bank accounts and portfolios exist?

Who are key people to contact, such as a financial advisor or lawyer, following the death of a loved one?

What are the passwords for different bank and financial accounts?

Who has access to these accounts?

I have heard grown children lament that they were clueless about what bank accounts or retirement funds their parents had. Others had no idea if their parents had a life insurance policy or a life insurance trust or who were listed as the beneficiaries. Some didn't even know where to begin to locate some of this information.

Having listened to many stories of adult children spending countless (and frustrating) hours in an attempt to find their parents' financial information, Marilyn and I

were prompted years ago to create a document for our sons that listed among other details our bank accounts, insurance policies, and the name and contact information for our financial advisor as well as the lawyer who drew up our will; I even included the titles of all my books and their publishers should any future royalties be issued after I was gone. We up-date this document on a regular basis and keep it in a safe deposit box to which our sons have access. We created a separate document that is also placed in the safe deposit box that lists credit card numbers and password information.

Two other very essential documents Marilyn and I have on file are (a) a “living will,” which specifies our wishes in terms of the medical care we want and don’t want to receive when close to death, and (b) the name of a healthcare proxy or agent, who is the person we choose to speak for us when we are unable to do so ourselves. And let us not forget preparing information and instructions related to such matters as our funeral, gravesite plots, or cremation.

I am aware that many people do not like to think about these details, but if we don’t, our children and other loved ones will be left with the burdensome task of sorting out many issues during a time that they are dealing with the emotional impact of our death.

I am not advocating that we begin at an early age to spend an inordinate amount of time preparing for details our families will confront when we die—that could certainly contribute to a depressing life. Rather, I am advising that even in our 30s as Magnusson states, we take small, reasonable steps that will help to reduce stress in ourselves as well as our families as we come closer to facing our own mortality.

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