

Claude Olson

A Guide to Swedish Death Cleaning

Remember that you will die. Remember that you have to die. Put death at the top of your to-do list. Put it above the pile of dirty dishes, above the stack of unsent letters, above the oversized garbage can you wheel to the curb every Tuesday evening. Put it above all else. Keep it there. You take out the trash every week, but you only die once. Better make it count.

You will die and your possessions will outlive you. They will no longer be yours. The purpose that you gave them will vanish alongside you. Forever after, they will only be objects. Every precious object will eventually, inevitably vanish into dust.

You will leave behind your memories when you die. The electricity in your skull will shut off, the wires holding your memories together will be cut, and your brain will cease to function.

Before you die, keep one box of memories for yourself.

Collect every memory you can find. Look everywhere. Peel back the dusty brown wallpaper in the attic. Stick your hand between the couch cushions. Empty out the lint drawer of the dryer. Hold onto every shred of recollection, anything small and tangible enough to fit inside the box.

There are only two rules: One, no one else may open the box. Two, the box must be thrown away. Not now but later, after you die. Give these instructions to whomever you love: tell them to open the lid of the oversized garbage can and place the box inside. Tell them to close the lid and never think of the box again.

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You will start with an abundance of things. There will be far more on the table than can ever fit into a single box. Sweep up the remnant memories and sort them into piles. Donate what can't be kept. Throw away what can't be donated. Keep what can't be thrown away. Keep things in spite of their worthlessness. Keep things because of their worthlessness. Keep the uncoupled pull tab of a zipper. Keep the cork of a popped champagne bottle. Keep every scrap that once was sentimental. Keep all the useless things you ever loved.

You will want to treat this box as a time capsule. You will want to hold each item like a fragment of immortality, an hourglass defying gravity. You will want to hoard each grain of sand in your clenched fists. But you will not be able to stop it from seeping through your fingers. Let go of the pieces of your past. You cannot stay in the peace of what has passed. You will pass away and leave it all behind. So fill your box with what you can put to rest. Leave behind whatever lives on.

Keep what fills you with life. Fill your box with the natural world. Collect what you can in this brief earthly existence. Gather the shells and scattered sea glass by the shore. The striated stone that once shined by the side of the sidewalk. The shriveled-up stems of spring daffodils that once shouted boisterous yellow.

Keep the remnants of abandoned passion projects. Crumpled pages torn from a long-discarded scrapbook. Magazines so cut to pieces one might mistake them for moth-eaten. Construction paper valentines, sonnets never delivered, envelopes torn open and stamps gone to waste.

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Keep what is broken. The photos split by spider cracks. The shards of antique tea sets. The buttons that disentangle themselves from thread. You will want to replace every picture frame, glue together every puzzle piece of porcelain, stitch all your scattered buttons onto the coats from which they came. You will want to disguise the breakage but it won't be worth your time. Save your time for it is precious. Save every broken thing because it is precious. Save everything that resists repair. Fill your box with the damage left intact.

Ignore the urge to keep your box in pristine condition. Do not put it on the highest shelf in case of floods. Do not keep it from candles in case of fire. Do not adhere it to the table at the first tremor of an earthquake. You will want your box to survive disaster. But you must survive before your box can die. You will be buried before your box but you will both be buried nonetheless. You will die and the box will outlive you. Your box will be buried alive. Your memories will find a home in the dirt of the earth.