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Conscious Cluttering Clearing

In Sweden, there is a life philosophy called *Döstädning*, literally meaning death cleaning. It is one of the most loving and considerate things you can do for our loved ones while giving you a sense of peace, control and active participation in a natural process of life. It is the “gentle art”, as coined by Margareta Magnusson, of clearing clutter and creating conscious inheritances before you die.

There is no real formula to this process and it can be done at any time in your life. You don't have to wait for a critical diagnosis or a negative prognosis to revisit and reassess your belongings, and decide what you wish to keep for a little longer and what you are ready to let go of. Many people go through a “down-sizing” of a sort when they move from a large home into a smaller place. Conscious Cluttering Clearing is very much like that, but with a twist. Going through your precious things and deciding who you would like to gift them to, especially if they are valuable, hold a special memory or if you have a significant attachment to them, opens you to new thoughts about legacy, assigning ownership and conveying stories and meaning to those people, organizations and even charities that you care about most. Carefully and intentionally going through your belongings allows you to see and understand the impacts and meaning of your own life while honouring your history and experiences. This holds the potential for profound spiritual contemplation and awareness, and creates space for deep personal healing.

Before you begin, consider if this is something you can do alone or will need support from others, either continuously or just periodically. It is also important that you understand your own decision-making process. If you can only handle making decisions for 5 minutes before taking a 1 hour break, honour that. The most important thing to keep in mind and in your heart is this is personal, it is your process and there is no formula, no right, no wrong. Stay present to your thoughts and feelings, and to the items that you are connecting with as you make your decisions. I can pretty much guarantee it will be emotional so be kind to yourself.

There is no time line either. You can do this quickly or you can do it slowly. I do suggest, however, that once you start on a category that you stay with it until you are done and do not jump to another category because you came across an item that caused you to stop and walk away. Again, allow yourself the time and space to go as deep as you need to... just come back to where you left off when you are ready.

It can feel overwhelming, going through a life review, so be gentle with yourself, and be gentle with the people around you. As the memories arise, you will see how you touched so many people, how your life stories are intertwined and how your story goes on after you are gone.

Here, I offer some ideas and questions – in no particular order – and a few personal anecdotes, to assist you as you consciously declutter. Most of the suggestions capture ways to give, donate, upcycle or sell your belongings. If none of these are really an option, consider shredding, recycling or tossing them as the case may be.

- **Clothes and shoes.** This can be an easy place to start. Are there vintage items that could be sold on consignment, or given to a heritage park or museum? Do you have special shirts or garments that would be perfect for a quilt or other up-cycled purpose? Clothes that no longer fit or are out of style might be good for a child’s tickle trunk or dress-up closet, or donated to places like Goodwill or Value Village. Coats, sweaters, blankets and other winter/outdoor wear are collected regularly by homeless shelters and disaster relief agencies.
- **Jewellery and Family Heirlooms.** The beautiful thing about jewellery is the stories that come with them. Often, they were given as symbols of love and devotion, and handed down amongst the generations to keep a family history alive. If you have siblings, children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews, assigning these inheritances may be straight forward. If, however, you have no one to pass them on to, here are some ideas:
 - Contact an antique jewellery dealer or a jewellery appraiser for a valuation first. It’s a good idea to understand exactly how much it’s worth, but keep in mind they may give you the replacement value, not the resale value. They may be able to point you in a direction to find buyers as well.
 - Contact local period costume dealers, theatres and playhouses – they may be in the market to expand their collections.
 - Decide if you are okay with the jewellery is dismantled and redesigned. The gems can be reset and the gold can be melted down to create new pieces. This option may make the older pieces seem more enticing to younger generations.
- **China Collections and Dishware.** There was a time when every bride registered a pattern for china and silverware then collected all the pieces to create an entire service for 10 to 12 guests. Ultimately, the intention was to pass along this massive service collection on to a daughter or daughter-in-law or niece, and if you have someone to pass your collection on to, this one is easy. But these days, with the variety of designs and the desire for everyone to express their own unique style (with a latent rejection of almost everything “old school”), antique stores and estate auctions are flooded with Grandma’s china and no market to buy them. But thanks to websites like Pinterest and Youtube, and the How-to craze, new uses have been created from old dishware.

- Birdfeeders and garden ornaments from tea pots, coffee pots, teacups and saucers.
- Mosaics from shattered dishes for stepping stones, backsplashes, table tops, floors and tiles, headboards and footboards, and more.
- Mix and match table ware.
- Bracelets and necklaces from broken china pieces.
- And more – just Google “Upcycled broken china”

If your collection is particularly rare and valuable, and you’re ready to give it a new home, contact an estate auction house to have it valued before making any decisions. If you have an everyday set you are ready to let go of (kitchen appliances and other housewares as well), women’s shelters and disaster relief organizations (Canadian Red Cross for instance) are always taking basic household items to assist those who have lost everything.

- **Art and Significant Collections.** My brother-in-law’s father was an amazing artist. During his 92 years, he created hundreds of pieces of art in many different mediums. After he passed, his sons chose their favourite pieces for themselves, gave a few more to other family members, and with the remainder, they created an art show of sorts at his memorial service. Everyone in attendance was invited to select a piece to take home as a remembrance of their friend. Perhaps you have already assigned new ownership of your art collection, and family members and close friends have made it known which piece they would like most. For what remains, local art museums sometimes curate private collections, as do major corporations. This presents the opportunity to donate or sell the art and keep the collection intact. The total value of the collection will dictate the direction you go. Consult a reputable art dealer and a lawyer. For other collections – figurines, albums, antique tools, vintage toys & games, stamps, coins, comic books, etc. – and if no one in the immediate family is interested, contact an estate auction house. This is their area of expertise!
- **Precious Childhood Artwork, Toys and Books.** Also known as the sentimental heart’s mine field. We moved across the country twice, and both times I prepared myself to edit through my son’s art that he created from preschool to high school. Both times I asked him if any of it was meaningful to him. He’s now 20 years old and has other things on his mind. He could care less about the stained-glass plate he made for me when he 6. The sentimentality I had to work through was all mine. Here’s what I suggest. Photograph the favourite pieces of art, then let them go. As for toys and books, you may feel that it makes sense to keep a few on hand for small children who visit. For the rest, if they’re not the type you can hand down or sell as vintage pieces, disaster relief shelters take gently used toys and books, as do Sick Children’s Foundations, preschools, daycares and teen drop-in centres.

- **Books and VHS/DVD's.** The stories and messages in books and DVD's that you have collected over the years truly reflect who you were, the phases you went through and the genres you appreciated at every turn. If you are ready for conscious cluttering clearing, you are also ready to assess where you are now emotionally, mentally and spiritually, and you are ready to determine if those books and DVD's still strike a positive chord within you. The stories and messages that still resonate may still have a place on the shelf; the ones that make you say "what was I thinking?" or "I never did get that story line" or "that was so 1985" are probably ready to be released. There are used bookstores that will take books for cash or in exchange for store credit, and some accept DVD's as well. The market for VHS tapes is slim – the Black Diamond Collection of Disney Classics, for instance, still may hold monetary value. If your book collection contains first printings of rare editions, consulting a dealer will be a wise step. Again, Sick Children's Foundations, preschools, daycares and teen drop-in centres will often accept gently used, age appropriate books and DVD's.

A note about old magazines and newspapers. I've met many collectors who have amassed issues capturing major events of our time, but it's rare that items like these have been stored properly over time. Mold and natural deterioration are very common, and for this reason, plus the use of digital record keeping, libraries rarely accept these items. Only items in pristine condition have any monetary value. The only place for these may be the recycle bin.

- **Furniture and Linens.** When we lived on the east coast, we lived near a city that has the highest generational poverty statistics in Canada. When we moved back west, we made a conscious decision to sell (for a fraction) or donate most of our large pieces of furniture, including mattresses, sofas, chairs and cabinets. The first stop will be to check with family members and friends to see if they're interested. Estate agents will sell the antique pieces, disaster relief agencies and the Cerebral Palsy Association, and the like, accept and pick up furniture, and homeless shelters accept clean linens that are in good shape. Some animal shelters will take towels and small blankets.
- **Your Online and Digital Life.** In the age of social media and online shopping, you probably have accounts on many various sites. The timing of closing these accounts is up to you. You can delete the account entirely, apply to the website to have the account deactivated, remove all credit card information and/or let them expire. If you've kept the login information to your accounts completely private, this may pose a challenge to the family members who are charged with protecting your identity and privacy later on. I have a small file box with alphabetical tabs and flashcards. I have written down the user id and passwords for every online account I have – 77 at last count. My husband keeps a Word document up to date with his login information for his various accounts.

Your cell phone device and your computer also contain a lot of private information, applications, photos and account access details. If there is information and/or photos that you do not wish anyone for any reason to have access to, delete those files and apps permanently. An alternative may be to begin sharing that information now.

- **Photographs.** A difficult and final category. In the boxes of photographs are the memories of major and minor events, ceremonies and celebrations, portraits and parties. The people and places in these photos have meant something to you, though now some faces may look unfamiliar, and the dates and occasions are a bit of a blur. If you plan to keep them for now and/or pass them along, I suggest taking time to write some details on the back of each photo. Scrap booking is a wonderful hobby and many companies some offer services where they can take the photos and scan them to create digital files and movies. With music! Also, online family trees (Ancestry.ca for example) allow for photos to be scanned and significant dates and events to be recorded and saved to people on the tree. The faces, names and stories don't have to end with you.

Additional category – paperwork (cards, letters, legal documents, statements and tax returns) – a rule of thumb is to keep critical documents for the current and previous 7 years. Shred the rest. Cards and letters can be another emotional mine field. Good luck!

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On a final note, I hope these ideas and suggestions help you to see how gloriously wonderful your life is! That through the process of conscious cluttering clearing you saw how many lives you've touched, how many amazing experiences you've had, how deeply you can feel all the complex human emotions and how every life created by God is meaningful and purposeful. Each decision you have made is wrapped in courage, integrity and dignity because of the power of choice and your willingness to fully participate in the inevitable reality of mortality that we all must face. My hope is that you feel lighter, clearer, uplifted and more peaceful both in the midst of this project and after its completion.

Yours in grace & gratitude –

Gabriele Campbell