

From the Editor: On Death and Bucket Lists

“The only thing we know for sure is that we will die one day.
But before that we can try to do almost anything.”

– Margareta Magnusson, *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*



Sharon Dardis

I suppose most people have bucket lists. Whether written in stone or only verbally shared, these are things we realize, especially as we age, we'd like to experience before we die. I suspect they are fluid and ever-changing. As we age, our values often shift. Holding a grandchild may well supersede a trip to Paris. Our bucket lists morph and change. And sometimes, we stumble onto an experience or suggestion to add to our own bucket list that we didn't even realize existed. Such has been my experience this past January, in both expected and unexpected ways. Not surprisingly, what connects them both relates to the topic of death.

After the busy holidays, reading is a favorite past time. What's not to love, curling up with a good book. A happy discovery this January was a short, sweet, wise book written by "somewhere between 80 and 100-year old" Swedish artist and author Margareta Magnusson.

In *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning: How to Free Yourself and Your Family from a Lifetime of Clutter*

she tells us that in Sweden, the act of "death cleaning" is called "döstädning." In Swedish: "Dö" is "death" and "städning" is "cleaning." Actually, she had me at the word "clutter," especially as I sat there, surrounded by all our still-everywhere holiday decorations! Clutter, indeed! I mentally, at least, added "döstädning" to my bucket list!

I wish I were a better declutter person! But alas, in my mind, stuff is attached to memories and try as I may, tossing out the tattered ornament, clothes our kids wore as newborns, or an old book I know my father once held, is hard for me to do. After reading Magnusson's charming book, however, I felt a tiny, tugging, persistent twinge to add (in permanent ink!) "start purging" to the very top of my bucket list. As the author reminds, our kids will certainly be eternally grateful if we can accomplish this monumental task before we die. Onward!

But wait! Before I could begin this now-inspired decluttering or even take down the tree (oh dear!) there was that bigger bucket list trip to South America. The itinerary included Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile. Sadly, my resolve to learn Spanish hadn't happened. But, confident in my theory that smiles can overcome language barriers, and that the undecorating could wait, husband Stan and I pressed on.

The trip was all we'd hoped and more. In Chile, we toured vineyards and tasted epic wines. In Uruguay, the quaint town of Colonia offered the respite of ancient courtyards and friendly people. An Argentina barbecue under spreading sycamore trees

had me sampling empanadas and waltzing with handsome gauchos. We also visited Iguazu National Park, the jaw-dropping, beautiful, widest water falls in the world. Breathtaking!

The next "death" bucket list connection (never mind the turbulence at 40,000 feet over the Andes on our flight south!) came when we toured Buenos Aires. Of course, we learned about Eva Peron, (Evita) renowned 1st lady of Argentina, who died tragically at the age of 33. And sadly, we heard of the disappearances and deaths of so many during Argentina's "Dirty War." But when our guide said we were going to tour Recoleta Cemetery, I could tell the rest of our group weren't exactly dying to go there! As far as I could tell, this wasn't on anyone's list. Stan looked at me and rolled his eyes. He knew the drill; I was intrigued!

It was raining as we climbed out of the van and put up our umbrellas. Entering through massive columns, we learned that the 14-acre cemetery grounds is completely surrounded by a towering wall. It felt like a city, laid out in neat, tree-lined streets and filled with 6,400 tombs, monuments, statues and mausoleums. Among notables interred here is Eva Peron (Evita) whose inscription on a flower-covered family vault reads, "I will return and be millions." Established in 1822, Recoleta has been called "one of the worlds best cemeteries" and also, one of the "10 most beautiful cemeteries in the world." Certainly here was another "surprise bucket list" venue to be gratefully acknowledged.

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MCDES is a nonprofit 501(c)3 volunteer organization whose purpose is to promote and provide education, opportunities for networking, and support to individuals and groups involved with the care of persons confronting death and their families and friends, and those who are bereaved, regardless of the cause of death.

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Safely home, unpacked, and rested, the holiday clutter finally got boxed up and put away. Freeing myself from “a lifetime of clutter” will begin in earnest perhaps, right after this latest newsletter goes to press. As always, the present day business of MCDES finds its way almost magically into my (also very cluttered) email box every quarter. This issue seems especially full of educational, inspirational offerings that you may want to add to your calendars; a sort of immediate bucket list. Please note that online reservation for our spring conference with Serena King begins March 1st. Don’t miss this sure-to-sell-out event regarding the intersection of addiction and grief.

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Chairman Ben Wolfe addresses transitions and change in his “From the Chair” column, reminding us that MCDES has weathered many developmental ups and downs and survived. Hurrah! We’re also happy to introduce our newest board member, Peter Thoreen, whose transition to treasurer from retiring Paul Johnson, was successfully executed. We remain in well-qualified financial hands with Peter, who was, by the way, a founding member of MCDES in those early years. Welcome, Peter!

Ted Bowman bravely shares more of his loss experience through original, exquisite poetry. Thanks, Ted, for reminding us of the power of the written word and its important role in

the process of grieving. Along similar lines, our book review this month from board member, Eunie Alsaker, gives a tender accounting of Vice-President Joe Biden’s recent memoir about the death of his beloved son, *Promise Me, Dad*. Thanks, Eunie for another poignant review.

If you took in even half of the events listed under “Sundries and Resources,” and “Mark Your Calendar” posting this issue, I’m afraid you’d find little extra time for reading or de-cluttering. And even though our life-clocks are always ticking, perhaps those tasks can wait just a little longer. Apologies to Margareta Magnusson who suggests we “start death-cleaning early, say, at sixty-five!” Already I’m behind in that regard but thank goodness bucket lists

do allow us to “try to do almost anything” while we still have the time!

How fortunate we are, in the Minnesota death, dying, and bereavement services, to be surrounded by wonderfully diverse resources and well-experienced colleagues. This might well be yet one more wonderful bucket list item of which I was unaware...until I actually just said it now! I am most grateful to be part of such an organization as MCDES, to be able to be of service to and make a difference in the lives of others. Thanks again for all you do, so well, for so many. The entire Board and I look forward to seeing you at the May conference.

