



## Shaking the House

By [Ellen Waterston](#)

Who knew... the last week of March is National Cleaning Week? Get out your brooms, stock up on elbow grease. Spring cleaning time is here! Whose idea was this? Apparently, everyone's.

Regardless of religion, culture or climate, the sweet air of spring has always prompted us to clean up our houses and our acts, to ready for the fresh starts implicit in the season. Since the 11th century CE, the Iranian New Year or Nowruz has been observed on the March equinox and includes the practice of *khaneh tekani* or "shaking the house"—cleaning from ceiling to floor to ready for the new year. In the 13th century BCE, at the moment of their frantic escape into the desert, there was no time for the Israelites to let their bread rise, only, to use current vernacular, "Grab and Go." Now, even one morsel of leavened bread (*chametz*) in the home during Passover week is prohibited out of respect of the Jews' flight from Egyptian slavery—houses vigorously scrubbed to make sure there are no overlooked crumbs. Eastern Orthodox traditions begin the first week of the spring Lenten season in March with Clean Week during which the faithful scour their houses and, through confession, their consciences. Catholics and Protestants observe similar rituals. In the 19th century, before vacuum cleaners were invented, the warm and blustery winds of March were recruited to blow winter's accumulation of dust out of northern households—windows flung open wide after the long, dark, dank months of cold.

But cleaning and organizing has exceeded the bounds of seasonal, cultural or religious practices. There's money in them thar cluttered cupboards and minds, from California Closets to meditation retreats. Marie Kondo's 2011 book, "[The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up](#)" had every 30- and 40-something throwing out baby *and* bath water. Her litmus?

"Discard anything that doesn't spark joy." The Japanese author credits the [Shinto religion](#) as inspiration. "Cleaning and organizing things properly can be a spiritual practice in Shintoism, which is concerned with the energy or divine spirit of things and the right way to live."

Referred to as "the Marie Kondo of death," an advocate of elders getting things in order sooner rather than later is Swedish author and grandmother Margarita Magnusson, her stated age "somewhere between 80 and 100." Her debut book, "The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning: How to Make Your Loved Ones' Lives Easier and Your Own More Pleasant," resulted from the painful process of sorting through 48 years'-worth of marriage after her husband died. Building on the Swedish concept of *döstädning*, literally "death cleaning" or getting things in order before you die, Magnusson urges readers to get off their duffs and start the process at age 65 or before. As Michael Stevens, the founder of the Natural Mind Dharma Center in Bend, says, "Don't put off death until the last minute."

[Things sorted and cleanly in place is as much about living, about survival, as it is about readying for the final farewell. tweet this](#)

I have definitely benefitted from Margarita and Marie's advice, but caution that too much of a good cleaning-up-and-cleaning-out thing can have its downside, leaving your house or apartment feeling more like a hotel room or designer décor store. Leached of the uniqueness of those who live there, a home is reduced to a house, lacking in a different Scandinavian concept: *hygge*, the Danish and Norwegian word for coziness, contentment. Think of homemade brownies, hugs, crocheted throws, cozy slippers, picnics by the river. Personally, I like feeling (figuratively) wrapped in familiar knick-knacks, photos, books, even the errant dusty sill or cobweb. I have experienced seller's remorse after yard sales too hastily organized when a move was on the horizon. Now I am more careful. So, I confess, my garage boasts its fair share of boxes and bins, my closet is jealous of its prized oldies and not-so-goodies. Who knows? Maybe children would get to know more about their parents and, more importantly, about themselves going through old mementos and photos, slipping on a father's red wool cap with ear flaps, a mother's pair of outrageous bell bottoms.

This time last year I had many more boxes lining my garage walls. I wish I could credit the delirium of early spring for snapping me out of my decluttering denial. But it came later. In May. That was the month Oregon was hit with the first of the many devastating forest fires of 2021. Things sorted and cleanly in place is as much about living, about survival, as it is about readying for the final farewell. It's about having that Grab and Go box ready in case of an emergency exit...at any age. I'm overcome watching Ukrainians, the young and the old, forced to flee their burning homes, with no time to wait for the bread to rise, no window to open to spring's sweet promise, no time to grab, only to go.

