*LONG READ: IF YOU’RE SCROLLING THROUGH THIS WHILE STANDING IN THE “8 ITEMS OR LESS” LINE AT SAFEWAY, YOU’RE GOING TO NEED A LOT MORE GROCERIES. MIGHT I SUGGEST A BEVVIE OF CHOICE TO SIP ON WHILE YOU SAVOUR THIS PIECE.*

*[HEADING TO COME]*

*“Death and dying are some of the scariest words out there. What do we do when we find something scary? We avoid it like the plague. We don’t talk about it. We don’t think about it. We don’t wish it on anyone. (Well, we might. But we shouldn’t.) And we certainly don’t plan for it.”*

Sobering words written by Michelle Unsworth-Foote, author of **How to Get Your Sh\*t Together (So Your Loved Ones Don’t Have To Do It For You)**. Just released on March 3, her gem of a book is a guide to help people get their stuff in order – *before* they shuffle off this mortal coil - and prioritize what needs to be looked at or changed. That could be everything from wills to powers of attorney to guardianship of children, to executors, managing assets, and funerals. And a bunch of etceteras you may not have thought of. Michelle writes about all of this masterfully – and with wisdom and wit.

Don’t wanna have to think about any of this? Me, neither. Then I read Michelle’s book.

Right now, you might be thinking *“geez Tracey, this topic sounds depressing. What happened to your usual light-hearted topics – like getting married by the Swedish Chef and confessing your talent for killing perfectly healthy houseplants?*” If you’re still with me – and I really hope you’ll stick with this one, because it’s a beaut. I can explain.

Michelle – who lives in Toronto – and I have a mutual friend, Colleen. Colleen contacted me earlier this year to ask if I’d consider reading a book her friend had just written with an eye to potentially writing an endorsement. I mildly protested, mostly because I didn’t think the author – Michelle – would be hugely dazzled by a recommendation from a humble blogger/children’s book author. But, Colleen was insistent (and ok, maybe I was a more than a little flattered with her gushing comments about my writing and my “cred” – I’m easily swayed), so I agreed to read and provide a review for Michelle’s book.

Shortly thereafter, I got my hands on the manuscript and tucked into this slim but mighty volume. And holy cow! Call me impressed! Michelle writes from experience (more on that in a hot minute), with flair and dollops of humour that make talking, thinking, and planning for our eventual demise accessible. I even laughed out loud when I read her advice about documenting who gets the parrot (an important decision, because they apparently live forever).

Her book is truly a great read – an *important* read – and I found myself curious to know more about the subject and the author.

Michelle doesn’t shy away from sharing her bona fides: she’s experienced great losses in her life that have, as she puts it, *“allowed me to carry the mantle of ‘lay expert’.”* No one wants to be a maven on death and grief, but when two of her three husbands died far too young and she had to pick up the pieces, she figured out a lot of stuff along the way.

We had a chat about a lot of that stuff, captured in the following interview. Yes, it’s a longer read than a typical “Call Me Curious” post (so grab that big mug o’ tea or glass of wine) but Michelle is a bright light who has some brilliant nuggets to share about getting our sh\*t together so we don’t leave others to do it for us.

***What’s your story, Michelle? I’d love to know more about you, where you live, your family, what makes you tick.***

I grew up in Vancouver in Kitsilano and got married young. At 30, I decided I needed to “find myself” (does that sounds Kits ‘70s hippies or what?) so I left my first husband and moved to Toronto. Met a great guy at work, moved in with him after one date and we did all the “well, here we are, mid-30’s” stuff. We got married, bought a house, and had our daughter, Paige. We both had jobs with banks. We were the typical “5-year fixed mortgage” people. Worked like crazy during the week, tried to get our sh\*t together on the weekend. Life was really good.

And then my “move-in-after-only-one-date-what-was-I thinking” husband was diagnosed with liver cancer and died in nine months.

So, I rebuilt my life, met another amazing man, married him in a vineyard. Life was good. Until I heard a thump one morning and he’d had a massive stroke. And here I am, rebuilding my life, part two.

I live in Toronto near Lake Ontario. It’s the closest I could get to reliving my youth in Kitsilano. My neighbours are kind and always look out for me. I feel very fortunate to live here with my toothless 11-year old cat, Rosie. She’s a great roommate – she lets me spout off about whatever’s on my mind and only asks for three meals a day and a good belly rub in the morning.

I’m an enthusiastic cook and am happiest when there are people standing around my island (in my kitchen, not in the Bahamas, although I’d trade my kitchen for my own island in the sun in a nano second). I have a really good life for which I’m grateful every single day. Even the days that start out with me getting on the scale.

***Twice widowed – geesh. That’s a sh\*tload of loss and grief to carry, Michelle. Was writing this book a way to deal with both?***

I guess I’m a follower. If I’m told to do something, I do it. I was treated to a wellness retreat by three girlfriends for my 60th birthday and was gifted with a session with an energy healer. After knowing me for two minutes she asked if I liked to write. I said, “Oh, I love to write.” And she said, “You should write a book.” And I said “ok.” And then I wrote a book.

There’s obviously more to it than that, but the more I thought of it, the more I realized that losing two great guys, and learning how to navigate the crazy world of having your stuff in order so those who are lucky enough to survive you have as easy a time as possible, deserved a word, if you like. And that some people needed a helping hand with that. That’s where I, and this book, come in.

***Why do you think so many people are generally reluctant to think about this stuff, to have the conversations – in your words, get their sh\*t together? A lot of the material you cover in your book are things that nobody wants to talk about. We’d rather push them to the side than dwell on – or deal with – the heaviness.***

There’s a part in the book where I tell the story of my dad not wanting to write his will because he was sure that as soon as he did, he’d die. I honestly think that as a society, we feel that any time we prepare for anything, good or bad, it will happen. It’s coming to grips with the fact that you’re not going to live forever, and that you have to now think about winding things up. Not that you’re wrapping up your entire life, but rather that you’re coming to terms with the fact that you won’t need all the stuff that you’ve accumulated.

What I would say is there is *huge* emotion in this stuff! Even those who are just trying to get their sh\*t together have that moment of “wow, this is our *life!*” that comes with going through these steps. I talk about it in a way that hopefully makes it more palatable, and a bit easier to swallow. Like when you figure out that the gel tabs are easier to swallow than the hard pills. This is my take on these painful, awkward topics.

***As you dove into the writing of this book, did you have anyone – a particular audience - in mind?***

I took an amazing trip last summer with 27 friends and I talked about the book a fair bit (ad nauseum, I’m sure they’d tell you). When I originally thought about the book, I thought about women in their late 50’s, early 60’s who were all of a sudden going, “holy cow, I better start thinking about what to do with 60 years of life and stuff that I have hanging around.” But then, when I talked to other people about the book, they said things like, “I need this for my aunt because she won’t listen to any of us.”

And I realized that the generation ahead of us doesn’t always listen to those around them, but they listen to the “experts.” An expert can be anybody who writes, has “Dr.” in front of their name, or was recommended by their neighbour. Just not anybody in the family - they don’t know anything. So, I’m speaking to people starting in their mid-fifties to those who are much older and need an “expert” (read: someone not related by blood) to help them figure out what to do.

***In your experience and observations, is it mainly women who find themselves struggling after the death of a spouse and needing access to help and this type of resource?***

So, here’s what I can tell you about being a widow. We are a dime a dozen! I don’t want that to sound flip, but the harsh reality is that women often outlive their male partners, and by many years. You know the movies you see where the man is left a widower and all the women in the neighbourhood come out of the woodwork and start making him casseroles? I swear that’s what actually happens.

You know what happens when a woman’s husband or partner dies? Our dear friends stand around us and love us and protect us, but they know we can do it all, so we do. There are no men bringing over casseroles or knocking down our doors asking for dates (at least in my humble experience). We just do it. So yes, I suppose I had women in mind when I wrote this because even if it’s a man left behind, he will most likely have a woman there to help him. That is a **huge** generalization, and I’m painting with a very broad stroke, but that’s what I’ve seen and that’s what I’ve lived.

***You use humour liberally throughout your book (which for me, made it a page turner!) Can you speak to the reasons you lean into humour when discussing such weighty issues and emotional experiences?***

When my husband Peter passed, my daughter and I used humour to get through some pretty dark days. We spoke of him often because we loved and missed him, but also because he was just so *funny*, it made talking about him so easy. Almost every topic I cover is met with groans depending on the situation. People really don’t want to talk about this stuff, and they certainly don’t want to read about it. I wanted to call it “The Book Nobody Wants to Read” but believe it or not, that title was taken. We have to find ways to make these topics, these actions, these must-do’s, achievable. Often, humour helps make hard topics palatable. It can break down walls to allow us to even contemplate something that may seem insurmountable.

***I devoured your advice on culling our stuff so our loved ones aren’t left to do it. We don’t want to saddle the next generation with sorting through our multiple sets of china, our collection of prized baseball caps and the like. And we need to get real: they don’t want our stuff, and don’t have the space for it anyhow. Can you sum up your recommendations on what to do with the stuff that just doesn’t have a place in our lives anymore - but we can’t bear to part with?***

Oh man, if you’d seen the stuff my parents accumulated over the years. And the fights we had when they had to move to smaller and smaller places as they got older. “But that’s my *stuff!*” my Mom would yell as I tried to explain that lead Easter bread molds were not only toxic, but would never find a home with anyone else. What she didn’t understand was that keeping a whatever in a box, a cupboard, a trunk, didn’t make it more valuable. It just made more eventual work for us kids.

Throwing out stuff, getting rid of pictures, recycling cards, doesn’t mean we’re getting rid of the person. It’s a remembrance of them. It’s not who they are or what they are. It’s a symbol at best. That’s what we all need to remember. I recommend that people take pictures of things they love and are getting rid of. That can be the new remembrance. Even if you print the picture, it’s a heck of a lot smaller than that giant antique vase that Uncle Harold wanted you, and only *you****,*** to have.

Stuff is just that. Stuff. It’s not our life. It’s not our soul. It’s. Just. Stuff.

***Michelle, I loved what you had to say about living the good life now. So many people save the good china for “special.” They never light the pretty, scented candle or dampen the rose-shaped soap they received as gifts. Can you say a little more about “enjoying the beautiful glasses of wine, good dishes and Scotch in fancy glasses with those we love” now? If there was a key message you wanted to drive home about the importance of living life fully in the present, what would it be?***

I’ll be blunt. I would give just about anything to share even a lousy bottle of wine with [third husband] Graeme again, much less one of the amazing ones we didn’t drink together, but he saved them for *just the right time*. He had good intentions, and Lord knows we certainly didn’t expect he would die at the young age of 53. But he did. Please trust me. It’s *always* a good time to savour something wonderful.

There are no guarantees in life. I, and so many others, are living proof of that. Use everything in a respectful, loving way. Don’t use it just to use it. Savour it! Celebrate it! Take pictures! Share the memory with friends! Appreciate how you came to enjoy it! That is about as good as life can get.

***I’d love for you to expand on your insights at the end of your book - where you advise, “say the loving words. Tell people you love them and admire their work and let them know you’re thinking of them when you look at something they gave you or shared with you. Write them a letter, or even send them a text. Don’t think they’ll think it’s foolish—I promise you they will love it!” Do you have any examples of when you – or someone you know – has done this, and the effect it had?***

Oh boy, so many. Sometimes I think my friends are clairvoyant; they send me a funny meme or remind me of a crazy time we had together, just when I need it the most. My cousin is great for sending me pictures of us when we were younger as a reminder of a happy time together. The funny thing is, it’s like she knows when I need it the most and sends it just then. The moments when people reach out, when their name pops up on your phone, or you see their familiar handwriting on an envelope, remind us that we are loved and cared for. And doing it for others? That means that we are blessed with people to love and cherish. What greater gift is there than that?

***Michelle, so much good stuff here – and in your book! I really hope people are inspired to grab a copy for themselves or someone they care about. To wrap up, what do you hope a reader’s greatest takeaways are?***

Live life! Don’t let possessions, things undone, things unused, get in the way of living your best life. Don’t put off what you know you have to do. Get it done, free your head of those tasks, and then use your time to do things that bring you joy. Dye your hair purple if you’ve always wanted to. Treat yourself to a crazy expensive meal that you’ve been reading about for years. Take the trip and enjoy every single moment. Maybe even write a book about it.

With tears in my eyes, I encourage everyone to live life. We may believe that “that will never happen to me.” I did not write “twice a widow at the age of 58” in my high school yearbook when asked what I thought my life would look like. But here I am. Rebuilding a life and continuing to savour every moment that I can. And I promise you, I’m drinking the good Scotch in the fancy glasses whenever I can!

***Cheers to that! So, where can we get our hands on your book?***

You can purchase my book at [www.firstfooteforward.com.](http://www.firstfooteforward.com/) I will offer advice on anything I talk about in the book, as well as some stuff that I don't. Contact me with your questions, or if you want to me as a consultant.