

Death Cafes: Tea, Cake & Conversations about Dying

Stephanie Schroeder / June 30, 2015



Death has long been outsourced to the healthcare and funeral industries. Death takes away our loved ones and those industries take our money with them.

According to a 2014 article in *Forbes*, “Death is a dying industry with an economic phenomenon. As Americans perceived value of “traditional” funerals diminish, the cost of funerals have increased nearly 1,328% in just four decades. In 1960 the average cost of a funeral was \$706 when only 3.56% of bodies were cremated. Today the average traditional funeral costs between \$8,000 and \$10,000, and about 42% of people are cremated. The US funeral industry accounts for about \$20 billion in annual economic activity, with around 130,000 employees that make a living on the 1.5 million people that go to rest each year.”

However, some folks are taking matters into their own hands to not only

put a dent in the business of dying, but also make death less taboo for both individuals and society.

Enter the funeral consumer movement in the form of Death Cafes, a physical space and an intimate way for people to discuss death and dying in a relaxed manner in a supportive, non-threatening environment. Holly Pruett, 52, is co-founder and organizer of the PDX Death Cafe. A certified Life-Cycle Celebrant, Pruett says she works with people on life transitions and milestones of all sorts. She became interested in the Death Cafe movement after her father died from brain cancer and her friend was diagnosed with Stage IV ovarian cancer. Pruett says she could find no grief rituals in the Pacific Northwest and felt compelled to explore that arena herself. She was introduced to Death Cafes by one of her teachers in Arizona who was active in an early gathering founded in the U.S. She was also in touch with Lizzie Miles, the founder of the first Death Cafe in the US, in Columbus, Ohio.

“Portland’s social and activist scene is a community that can understand death and coffee,” says Pruett, who organized the first PDX Death Cafe in the city’s iconic Bijou Cafe. More than 100 people expressed interest on a causal Facebook page she created. Now there exists a waiting list of folks wanting to attend the PDX Death Cafe.

Karen Van Dyke, 59, founded Death Cafe San Diego, just two years ago. Van Dyke is a certified Senior Living Advisor with a business helping to find places for people with loved ones who can no longer manage living at home. She saw that people came to her in crises and she needed to “rewind and teach them to get them where they needed to be.” That included having discussions about the real issues of death and dying and the accompanying legal, medical and housing plans, along with the emotional capacity to deal with death.

To Van Dyke, “Death is a natural part of the life cycle” and a good one at that. “Can you imagine if no one ever died?” she asks. “It would be pretty crowded in so many different ways.” And, she’s not joking although she does have a sense of humor and reports that laughter is a very big and very healthy part of the Death Cafes she hosts. “You cannot laugh in a funeral parlor or in hospice. Death Cafes give people the space to open up. “We’ve opened the closet door on death, which is fear-based” says

Van Dyke, “totally irrational, a conjuring of our own imaginations.” Remember the episode of “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” where Mary laughed during Chuckles the Clown’s funeral? That would be totally acceptable behavior in any Death Cafe!

Pruett says the kind of people interested in the Death Cafe movement are generally people concerned with their own life and death decisions. “Perhaps they have a chronic or terminal illness and want to talk about it in a place where others want to also talk about death, something most people are unwilling to do as a general rule.”

She says people also come because they are caregivers to others, hospice workers or family members who are caring for someone who is dying. Some people just want to participate in a healthy and open discussion about a topic that has been closed in our society and activists who want to create a holistic practice and break the cultural silence around death along with other taboo topics.

Van Dyke says Death Cafes are not grief support groups and, in fact, tries to discourage people looking specifically for grief counseling from participating. She is proud that one of San Diego’s Death Cafes was recently conducted in Spanish, the first known Spanish-language Death Cafe in the U.S. Death Cafes are held in restaurants, libraries and homes in San Diego and on average each cafe hosts 20-30 participants at one time. “Death is something that needs to be heard,” says Van Dyke passionately.

Susan Paulson, 57, a gerontologist and artist living on the Central Oregon coast who has participated in the PDX Death Cafe says, “First off, I like the name. The juxtaposition of death with the liveliness of café culture struck my fancy. I was also looking for someplace where talking about death and dying were the topics of interest rather than subjects to avoid. All my life I’ve been irritated by the euphemisms people use when talking about death and dying, and I was ready to sit with like-minded people and talk about it frankly.” She went out of both curiosity and based on opportunity. “I was taking classes in end-of-life care and support when I came across the opportunity to attend the second PDX Death Café on a Sunday afternoon in early spring. I knew a few other participants and was curious to hear what they had to contribute.”

Jeanne Staehli, 80, is a member of the board of trustees of the Oregon Memorial Association (aka Funeral Consumers Alliance of Oregon) who says she is thrilled “by the great success of Death Cafes in Portland. We’ve thought people didn’t want to talk about death, and now we know they do! When death, like child birthing, happened at home, and the funeral parlor was a room in the house, Americans must have regarded death as a normal part of life. Now bodies are whisked away in silence and death care is ‘undertaken’ by strangers in funeral parlors. We don’t participate in the death care of our loved ones and their deaths have come to seem dreadful events to be fought against.”

“The current interest in family-based funerals and green burials is a natural and over-due reaction to generations of Americans deprived of hands-on knowledge of death,” says Staehli, a retired CPA. “Death Cafes are the healthy beginning of our recovery from estrangement from nature.”

According to Audrey Pellicano, 62, a Registered Nurse and Grief Recovery Specialist and Nancy Gershman, 57, a memory artist at a local hospice, hosts of the Death Cafe in New York City, there are now 2000 Death Cafes globally. Pellicano initially started a local Meetup group that still gathers every third Wednesday at 6:30 p.m., to find like-minded and interested individuals. Together the women host between eight and 20 folks at each meeting which they hold in a Chinese restaurant in Midtown. The cost is \$11 - to offset expenses and to pay for a meal. Van Dyke in San Diego puts out a donation basket to cover expenses for cake and tea, and says that every single time she receives donations exactly equaling her out of pocket expenses. San Diego’s Death Cafes, now located up and down the coast as well as inland, have various hosts, numbering about two dozen, trained by Van Dyke, who herself trained with Lizzie Miles.

Susan Paulson in Portland has a dissenting opinion about one aspect of the Death Café movement - the idea that only “professionals” should be facilitating the groups. “In fact,” she says, “throughout the death education community, it is still a widely-recognized truth that only social workers, clergy and medical professionals are qualified to facilitate conversations around death and dying.”

She continues, “As a gerontologist, I understand that certain people are called to work with the dying, and that it is difficult work that not all people can do. As a human, though, I know that each of us has the capacity to comfort and care for those who are dealing with death, and I hope that these Death Cafes will encourage people to try to help others while they’re grieving, and not abdicate that responsibility to the ‘professionals’.”