

Why I Go to the

Death Café

by Holly Pruett

When brain cancer ended my father's life just shy of his 65th birthday, I made a bargain with the universe. You took my father, I said, but no one else. No one else I love can die. Of course, that's the kind of bargain the universe is no good at keeping. I know that I will die; so will everyone I love. And that's what brings me to the Death Café.

Death Cafés are part of a global movement whose aim is to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of our (finite) lives. At Death Cafés, people drink tea, eat cake, and discuss death. It's as radically simple—and deeply complex—as that.

According to deathcafe.com, the international website that supports this all-volunteer social franchise, over 700 cafés have been offered since Jon Underwood and Sue Barksy Reid created the first one in London in September, 2011. Inspired by the ideas of Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettaz, Death Cafés are now taking place across Europe, North America, and Australasia.

I first heard about Death Cafés from Kristine Bentz of Sweetgrass Ceremonies in Tucson, AZ. My funeral celebrancy instructor (through the Celebrant Foundation and Institute), Kristine is a self-proclaimed “rites of passage activist.” After her Green-Burial Meet-Up group had run its course, she was looking for a more dynamic format to engage with others in her community. She connected with Jon Underwood, a British web designer who had co-created the model, and with Lizzie Miles, a Columbus, OH, hospice social worker who'd brought it to the United States. I also got in touch with Jon and Lizzy.

I had been talking with a hospice chaplain and a death midwife about how we might combine our talents to offer something in Portland, OR—a workshop, we assumed, or a training. But a Death Café? The name was just offbeat enough to fit our community's “keep it weird” vibe. But a time to talk about death without any agenda, without experts, without any program or content except what participants brought to the table themselves? As we recruited other co-hosts, experienced facilitators who were comfortable with death, we were all humbled by the notion of leaving our credentials at the door and getting out of the way of the conversation rather than controlling it.

In the Death Cafe there are no hierarchies. We all meet simply as people who are going to die.

“There's an art to providing a Death Café well,” says Jon Underwood. “The egalitarian nature of it is unique. Death Café hosts should make the event safe without being controlling; you need to straddle those polarities in a creative way. The model is non-directive. We don't have any answers around death and dying. We all just come to this with our questions.”

If we build it, will they come?

Armed with Kristine, Jon and Lizzy's advice, we decided to take a step into the unknown. I recruited an iconic Portland breakfast spot as our first location and scheduled the event for a Sunday afternoon when they were not open for regular business. As co-hosts spread the word through their own networks, an

astonishing 100 people expressed interest in attending—this

based on zero advertising and no media coverage. The PDX Death Café was born. [PDX is the accepted abbreviation of Portland, OR.]

Before we knew it, 60 people were seated at tables of four, sharing why they had come to the Death Café. If asked to go indoors to talk about death on a gloriously sunny springtime day in notoriously soggy Portland, would you expect to describe the experience as fun, exciting, inspirational or enlivening? But those were some of the words participants used to recount their experiences.

The format consisted exclusively of sitting with three or four strangers and sharing why they chose to come to a

Death Café. About half the tables included a host, but many were entirely self-facilitated, following the

few general guidelines offered in our opening. Some chose to draw from the conversation-starters provided on their tables, and others generated their own flow from topic to topic.

When commenting on the most enjoyable aspect of the event, the majority mentioned some variation on “meeting new people and hearing their stories” or “feeling commonality and deep compassion.” One said, “Talking about death in such a matter-of-fact way was a great way to connect on a touchy topic.”

Nearly everyone filled out our two-page evaluation form, with 100% saying they would recommend the Death Café to friends or family. Ninety-five percent were interested in returning and 91% reported that “the event had a positive impact on me.”

The Death Café is not intended to change people's views or even to make them more comfortable with the idea of death. Consistent with evaluations done by US Café pioneer Lizzy Miles, we found that many participants did not cite big changes as the strongest measure of their experience. While 52% agreed that they felt "more comfortable talking about death and dying now" (27% strongly agreeing), 35% were neutral on this statement, and 12% disagreed—several commenting that they came in already comfortable with the topic. Only 28% reported a change in their perspective on death and dying. Eighty-seven percent of participants reported that it "was helpful for me to meet people with different viewpoints," and 55% strongly agreed with this statement.

Since that first café, I've organized five others on a quarterly pop-up basis in locations including an urban winery, a residential social justice center, a Unitarian church, and a bistro (where the owners contributed a full meal). Each subsequent café has had 70–80 participants and a long waiting list. Without any systematic outreach, advertising, or news coverage, we have an email list of 450 and as many following us on Facebook. Over 70 volunteers have expressed interest in serving as café facilitators; we're now offering regular workshops to deepen our relationships with one another and practice the skills needed for this subtle role. New organizers have come forward, with another sizable café sharing our list and others proliferating in communities around the state. With interest seemingly still on the rise, we're now planning a Festival of Life and Death for 2015.

Death: the conversation stopper?

When Jon Underwood shared what he had in mind with his father-in-law, the

response he got was: "The problem is, no one wants to talk about death."

Jon says, "He was wrong. For whatever reason, we're shifting as a society. The Death Café was the right thing at the right place at the right time." At the end of January 2014, the tally of events logged on the global site topped 500; the prior year's total had been 50.

"What has enabled it to grow," Jon says, "is the number of people who are passionate about talking about death, are willing to come along, and have enough energy to put into making it happen."

Jon's motivation for doing this volunteer work is personal. "It helps me to recognize that I won't live forever. This time is all I've got. Cherishing time with my three-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son—the stroke of a cheek or a cuddle is so much richer, knowing one day we'll be parted."

Kate Brassington, another young parent, was the very first person to contact me when I put up the PDX Facebook page last year. She wrote, "Earlier today I saw the story about Death Café on NPR's website and was immediately compelled to seek one out. I'm fairly young and fairly healthy, but death has always felt very important to me, and I've always been extremely concerned about the stigma surrounding the topic. For me personally, contemplating death is an essential part of leading a holistic, healthy life."

All volunteers have skin in the game. We recently asked a group of Death

Café facilitators to write a few lines on why they chose to step forward. One said, "I was totally lost the first time I had to face the death of a person I was close to. Rather than the chaos and helpless feeling, I want to face the dragon and befriend it and enjoy or at least experience the ride when it is my turn to pass."

Another said, "I have worked as a hospice nurse, and now in elder care. I'm interested in deepening the conversation with others and for myself." Another said she seeks this role "because the conversation is important, life-affirming, validating,

empowering, healing, and community building."

Not everyone is well-suited to holding the space for a truly participant-generated conversation. Jon spends much of his time these days in difficult conversations with

well-meaning organizers around the world who stray outside the bounds of the model by offering specific topics, set questions, and guest speakers. As the thorough "How To" Guide offered on the web site explains, "Our view is that, when it comes to death, people have enough to discuss already."

Who attends?

Every Café we have organized to date has had a strong cross-generational component. The largest segment attending are those aged 55–74, but participation is not limited to the baby boomers you might expect. Women generally outnumber men by three to one. Typical of this least-churched corner of the country, most people



describe themselves as spiritual or mark the faith/religion/belief system question on their evaluation form in individualized fashion such as: Unitarian/Buddhist, “became a witch at 30 while maintaining a cultural identity as a Jew,” “interfaith Catholic,” “naturalist/hopeful,” and “Christian/questioning.”

In a show of hands during the introduction to our first Café, roughly half to two-thirds indicated they worked in a professional or volunteer capacity with grief, death, or dying. Several reported afterwards how much they welcomed the opportunity to “let their hair down” and share their personal experiences and beliefs rather than those of their employers or clients. The students in the mortuary sciences program at the local community college are now encouraged to attend for extra credit.

As the Death Café Guide says, “In the Death Café there are no hierarchies. We all meet simply as people who are going to die. As such any facilitators who work around death and dying should be willing to leave their professional identity at the door.”

One PDX facilitator cites this as one of the best aspects of the Café. “I enjoy conversations that have truth and meaning for me and others. Since death is a great equalizer and nobody actually can be an expert, we can explore our thoughts and ideas without being wrong.”

To Jon, the notion that conversation about death “is the domain of professionals is completely wrong. Professionals have a vital role in the provision of services, but for the rest of us to think that we need to seek professional advice plays into anxiety about death being too scary. It makes people put it back into the closet. As death is pervasive, we all have a role in dealing with it. To deny our role is to push death into the shadows. That does damage to us.”

Empowerment emerges as a strong theme from each Death Café experience. There is a sense among participants that we are engaged in an act of courage—breaking a taboo perhaps, isolation,

certainly. We laugh, we listen, we nod in recognition. Sometimes we cry. We witness for each other our fears and our sorrows and our attempts to get our arms around what has aptly been called “the full catastrophe” of life.

Why I talk about death

After our third large Café, Kate Brassington went home and made a video called “Why I Talk about Death,” now posted on deathcafe.com. Featuring

visuals from the fill-in-the-blank writing prompts that had been on the walls of the venue, Kate’s voiceover explains, “I am interested in death and in dying, yes. And I want more than anything for us to talk about it. But this doesn’t come from a morbid place. ...No, my focus is on LIFE and on the living.” And then she offers a few examples:

I focus on the closeness brought to relationships of all kinds when people talk about their feelings surrounding death, an experience that invariably unites any two people on earth.

Optional Conversation Starters

Compiled by Kate Brassington, for a recent PDX Death Café

- 1 What should someone say, or NOT say, to someone who is grieving?
- 2 What life experiences have most influenced your current perspective on death?
- 3 If you could have a talk about death with anyone in the world (past or present), who would it be?
- 4 What are some ways in which death influences your daily life?
- 5 Before I die, I want to _____.
- 6 Imagine yourself on your deathbed. What would you feel proud of? What would you regret?
- 7 If you knew exactly when you were going to die, would that change anything for you? What?
- 8 It’s easy to think of ways in which death is “bad.” See how many ways you can think of in which death is “good.”
- 9 What do you want your legacy to be, and what are you doing to make sure you leave the legacy you envision?
- 10 If you could control one aspect of your death, what would it be and why?
- 11 If you could live forever, would you want to? Why or why not?
- 12 What’s the most recent realization or new thought you’ve had about death?
- 13 What’s something you know for sure about death?
- 14 What are things you do now to prepare for your death?
- 15 What aspect of death, if any, do you struggle with most?
- 16 Do you have any thoughts or feelings about death that you find particularly difficult to talk about with your friends and/or family?

I worry about the crushing fear I see people suffering through as they approach their own death after a lifetime of seeing death as the enemy (if seeing death at all).

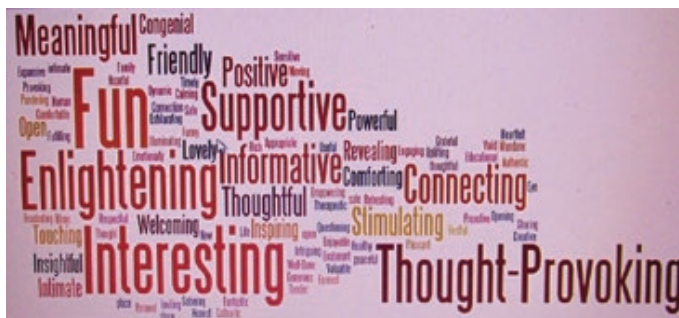
I worry about the elephant in the room, not just haunting the adults who choose not to talk about it, but also haunting, and often terrifying, the children who see it. And who know they're not to mention it. And who are left to their imagination to explain why.

I look to my own death, seeing it as a call to LIVE my life fully, like it's a giant billboard with the words, "You Are Alive!!" on it.

I look to the death of each person in my life, seeing it as a call to LOVE that person with all my heart, like it's a giant billboard with the words, "This is your chance!" on it.

For me, organizing the PDX Death Café has been one of the absolute highlights

of my 25+ years as a community organizer and professional facilitator. Now that I've crossed into the latter half of my own life and become a Life-



Cycle Celebrant providing ceremonial support at the end of life, I'm hungry for connections with others willing to look this topic squarely in the face. That hunger, clearly, is shared.

We all need community, especially around loss and mortality. Seeing so many people willingly open their hearts and minds to each other and the great mysteries of life and death is a profoundly moving experience. I am grateful to all who give themselves to it.

More than anything, though, I go to the Death Café to get ready. Ready for my death, the deaths of those around me, the deaths of those I serve, the death of control, the death of certainty, the death of regrets and fear, and all that holds me back from the full embrace of life. 🌍



Holly Pruett, co-founder and primary organizer of PDX Death Café in Portland, OR, is a Life-Cycle Celebrant who has completed Final Passages home funeral guide training and is currently enrolled in Stephen Jenkinson's Orphan Wisdom School. Contact: holly@hollypruettcelebrant.com.

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