What Is Death Café?
by Tom Koberstein

Editor’s Note: Tom Koberstein worked as an HIV/AIDS program manager in Oregon before moving back to his hometown of Minneapolis in 2010. He is a board member of the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Minnesota, www.fcaofmn.org.

You may have heard of Death Café. If not, it might bring to mind a place you go for your last meal on earth. But it’s not a place, in the usual bricks and mortar sense, though a Death Café is typically held in a coffee shop. Rather, a Death Café is a two-hour group-directed discussion of death with no agenda, objectives or themes, according to www.deathcafe.com. At a Death Café, a group of people (attendance is limited to about 15) come together to “drink tea, eat cake and discuss death.” The aim is “to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives.”

Death Café is an international movement begun in 2004 by Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettaz, who began hosting “cafés mortels”—death cafés in Switzerland. The popular events spread to Belgium and France and the UK and then to the US. There are now over 450 Death Cafés worldwide.

On the Menu

So, what’s on the menu at Death Café? Basically, there is no agenda. The facilitator asks members of the group to introduce themselves and, if they want, to say something about why they’ve come to Death Café. Since there is no topic—except death—the conversation continues along whatever lines are suggested by the participants. People reflect on and share what is important to them. There is no pressure to speak, and if the topic strays, or if one participant seems to be dominating the air space, the facilitator will gently redirect. There is no urgency to tie things up, draw conclusions, or summarize the conversation. Death Café ends when two hours have passed.

Off the Menu

What’s off the menu? Death Café is not a grief support group, a counseling session, or an educational forum with a speaker. It is not meant to steer someone in a particular direction or to encourage them to take a specific course of action. There is no proselytizing, no judgement, no debate. Death Café is open to all belief systems or none. While a particular thread in a conversation at one Death Café meeting may come up again at the next meeting, there is no attempt to have an ongoing discussion about a particular topic. Instead, the only continuity from one Death Café to the next is, well, the general topic of death. Each Death Café draws new attendees, and so each Death Café is a self-contained event.

I’ve attended two Twin Cities Death Cafés. The first, on a miserably humid Sunday afternoon in July, was held at Lakewood Cemetery’s gorgeous new mausoleum and drew about 20 people. The “tea and cake” part came later for those who wanted to migrate to Gigi’s Café nearby. It was the second meeting of Death Café Twin Cities; a reporter and photographer from the StarTribune were present to cover the event. (See www.startribune.com/lifestyle/216473041.html.) The organizers, still getting the hang of things, gave each participant a small card with a death-related quote printed on it, and then divided us into three groups. I was in a group that included a couple who were dealing with the raw edges of a recent family death, and so, contrary to the Death Café vision, we became something of a grief support group, or at least a sounding board for the couple’s grief.

Since then, in the interest of limiting each Death Café to no more than 15 people, the Twin Cities organizers have sponsored one or two Death Cafés, on an almost monthly basis, in both St. Paul and Minneapolis.

The second Death Café I attended was held January 19th in what has become a regular venue for Death Café, the private meeting room at Common Roots Café. Nine people were in attendance, including the facilitator, and we all sat around a large table, with or without “tea and cake.”

The Conversation

What did we talk about? Honoring the last wishes of a dying loved one; having an advance directive; preferred methods of final disposition: cremation, green burial, a home funeral; unconditional love; the death of my pet; the suicide of a friend; making sure my affairs are in order; cleaning out my closets so some one doesn’t have to alter my death; how to take time in a busy life to remember loved ones who have died; how to focus on what’s precious to me in life.

At both Death Cafés I attended, several participants remarked on how difficult it is to bring up the subject of death with spouses, relatives, or friends. It can be awkward, unintentionally threatening, and for some, a downer. Some may find the free-floating, agenda-less format of Death Café with an ever-changing group of participants not their cup of tea—or piece of cake. Personally, I love the idea, but I’m not sure I’ll become a regular.

I thought of the Death Café vision after reading an inspiring, profoundly moving opinion piece in The New York Times recently called “How Long Have I Got Left?” by Paul Kalanithi, a 36-year-old chief resident in neurological surgery, diagnosed with an aggressive...
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Cancer. He writes: “I began to realize that coming face-to-face with my own mortality, in a sense, had changed both nothing and everything. Before my cancer was diagnosed, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn’t know when. After the diagnosis, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn’t know when. But now I knew it acutely. The problem wasn’t really a scientific one. The fact of death is unsettling. Yet there is no other way to live.”

“There is no other way to live.” That’s the essence of Death Café: to increase our awareness of death so as to make the most of our lives.

To learn more or find a Twin Cities location, go to www.deathcafe.com.

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