

Death makes life precious

Brattleboro Area Hospice to host Vermont's first Death Cafe

*To request hospice care support or grief counseling, to volunteer, to learn more about services offered by Brattleboro Area Hospice, or to RSVP for the Café, call 802-257-0775 or visit www.brattleborohospice.org. For more information on the Death Café movement, visit www.deathcafe.com. Originally published in *The Commons* issue #206 (Wednesday, June 5, 2013).*

By Olga Peters / *The Commons*

BRATTLEBORO—"Life is short. Eat dessert first," the saying goes.

Representatives of Brattleboro Area Hospice are taking those words to heart as they take the normally taboo subject of death out of the closet and set it on the table.

Right next to a piece of cake.

Hospice will host Vermont's first "death café" at Amy's Bakery Arts Café on Main Street on Thursday, June 13, from 6 to 8 p.m.

Death cafés are part of a movement started in Europe to facilitate a greater dialogue around death as a natural part of life, and to help people make the most of their lives while they can.

Hospice Executive Director Susan Parris describes the gathering as a free-flowing conversation about death, with treats.

Cheryl Richards, Hospice care coordinator and bereavement care counselor, said that people gather at these events without an agenda, and that all topics are welcome.

"That said, we're not taking the concept lightly," she added. Richards said she hopes participants do hold the conversation lightly and remain open to musings.

"Besides that, they get to eat cake," she said, laughing.

A death café event starts with the facilitator offering a conversational "icebreaker." For example, is it better to die unexpectedly in your sleep, or surrounded by loved ones?

People tend to believe they're immortal, said Richards. But when a loved one dies, or a serious illness is diagnosed, people often reflect on their own mortality.

Life is temporary, said Richards. People should ask themselves what they want their lives to look like, and live that life deeply with the people they love.

The idea for hosting a death café in Brattleboro came after someone forwarded Richards an article about one in Europe. Richards and Parris said the café sprang to mind as a winning way to encourage people to take up what most people have come to regard as an uncomfortable subject.

They say they hope the café's familiar and sweet atmosphere will draw participants, put them at ease, and encourage a lively exchange.

Hospice offers a variety of trainings on death and dying, but these offerings come with set curriculum or educational agendas. The café, however, offers free-form conversations without agendas.

“We just want to encourage people to have these conversations,” Parris said.

The reason?

We’re all going to die eventually, Richards said.

According to a Hospice press release, Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettaz is credited with pioneering the death café concept. He hosted the first such events — called “cafés mortels” — in 2004 in conjunction with his research.

He later incorporated the results of his studies and these events into a book, “Cafés Mortels: Sortir la mort du silence,” or “Bringing Death out of Silence” (2010).

The idea of hosting the cafés spread immediately after. Londoner Jon Underwood reportedly read about the idea and hosted a death café in his home in 2011.

Lizzy Miles, an American thanatologist — one who studies death scientifically — and licensed social worker, organized and conducted the first known death café in the United States, in Columbus, Ohio, in 2012.

Topics at such cafés have included: What happens after death? How do I help my parents as they approach the end of life? How should I prepare for my own death? How might thinking about death improve my life? They might also discuss differences in grieving rituals, near-death experiences, and green burial.

Richards said attendees generally are middle aged or older, though college students and parents with small children commonly host and attend. Such gatherings gently introduce children to the concept of death — that it’s a natural part of life and safe to discuss.

Generally in the West, most children’s first exposure to death comes as a shock, with the loss of a pet or close relative, and is not well processed, leading to anxiety.

Richards stressed that the café is not a grief support group, and it is perhaps not ideal for anyone actively grieving a recent loss. She suggested active mourners contact Hospice directly.

Parris said she hoped one of the benefits of the death café is that by having the conversation with strangers, people will walk further down the path of exploring death. It will make conversations with loved ones easier.

“It’s [practical] to start having the conversation,” Parris said.

Until relatively recently, from the Victorian era into the early 1900s, death was typically observed in the front parlor of many homes. Many people died at home. Wakes were held at home.

In the Victorian era, some households placed dead loved ones in large glass jars filled with some form of embalming fluid, and displayed them in the parlor, said Richards.

“Can you imagine if people did that now? Guests would run screaming,” she said.

Richards said she’s not sure when death and dying became hush-hush. She thinks that with the industrial revolution, events such as births, illnesses, and death moved out of homes and into hospitals, clinics, and funeral homes, respectively — and parlors were re-branded “living rooms.”

Parris added that the average lifespan, once into the 40s, has stretched into the 70s. With this longer lifespan, people think they have unlimited time and push their lives into “someday.”

As the newest member of Hospice, Development Director Andrea Livermore said that dying can’t be controlled; it’s the unknown. To cope, people avoid the idea altogether.

“[They say], Let’s look the other way and keep going,” Livermore said.

Richards says she grew up in a “death-phobic family.” She experienced the death of a loved one at 3. No one ever spoke to her about the loss.

Now, after nearly 30 years in the field, she has witnessed healing, growth, and the opening of her heart through interacting with the dying and grieving people in front of her. In her early years, Richards worked primarily with dying children.

Now, Richards said, she has learned how people die, how to allow the experience, how to honor it with grief, and how hold it with compassion.

Death and grief do hurt, she says. But the process contains “awesome potential” if people are willing to stay open to the experience.

New experiences and understanding can rise from the ashes of the pain, Richards said. “You can become more than you were.”

Of working at Hospice, Parris said the fear of death and the unknown is always present.

Mortality makes life precious, said Parris. She recommends people value the experience, as no one lives forever.

There’s always something you can do when someone is dying within the hospice model, said Parris. Even if it’s simply holding a hand. Just because someone can’t be cured does not mean comfort and love can’t fill the space.

Enormous beauty is as much a part of the process as loss and pain, Richards said.

The more she experiences life, loss of loved ones, and her own mortality, Parris said, the painful emotions never leave; she becomes more comfortable experiencing them.

There’s often laughter too, Richards said.

“It’s OK to come [to the café] and laugh” about fears, about tears, or about the unknown, said Richards.

“We’re human,” she said. “We get to have it all.”

“Including cake,” said Livermore.