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Tea, Two Sugars, and Death: Cafe Groups Ponder the End

By PAULA SPAN

Socrates did not fear death; he calmly drank the hemlock. Kierkegaard was obsessed with death, which made him a bit gloomy. As for Lorraine Tosiello, a 58-year-old internist in Bradley Beach, N.J., it is the process of dying that seems endlessly puzzling.

“I’m more interested, philosophically, in what is death? What is that transition?” Dr. Tosiello said at a recent meeting in a Manhattan coffee shop, where eight people had shown up on a Wednesday night to discuss questions that philosophers have grappled with for ages.

The group, which meets monthly, is called a Death Cafe, one of many such gatherings that have sprung up in nearly 40 cities around the country in the last year. Offshoots of the “café mortel” movement that emerged in Switzerland and France about 10 years ago, these are not grief support groups or end-of-life planning sessions, but rather casual forums for people who want to bat around philosophical thoughts. What is death like? Why do we fear it? How do our views of death inform the way we live?

“Death and grief are topics avoided at all costs in our society,” said Audrey Pellicano, 60, who hosts the New York Death Cafe, which will hold its fifth meeting on Wednesday. “If we talk about them, maybe we won’t fear them as much.”

Part dorm room chat session, part

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Nancy Gershman, left, and Audrey Pellicano, who hosts the New York Death Cafe. The fifth meeting will be held on Wednesday.

group therapy, Death Cafes are styled as intellectual salons, but in practice they tend to wind up being something slightly different — call it cafe society in the age of the meetup. Each is led by a volunteer facilitator, often someone who has a professional tie to the topic (Ms. Pellicano, for instance, is a grief counselor). The participants include people of all ages, working and retired, who are drawn by Facebook announcements, storefront fliers, local calendar listings or word of mouth. Women usually outnumber men.

“In Europe, there’s a tradition of meeting in informal ways to discuss ideas — the café philosophique, the café scientifique,” said Jon Underwood, 40, a Web

Julie Glassberg for The New York Times designer in London who said he held the first Death Cafe in his basement in 2011 and has propagated the concept through a Web site he maintains.

Mr. Underwood adapted the idea from a Swiss sociologist, Bernard Crettaz, who had organized “café mortels” to try to foster more open discussions of death. “There’s a growing recognition that the way we’ve outsourced death to the medical profession and to funeral directors hasn’t done us any favors,” Mr. Underwood said. He envisioned Death Cafe as “a space where people can discuss death and find meaning and reflect on what’s important and ask profound questions.”

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In practice, people's motives for attending vary, as does the depth of the conversation. Dr. Tosiello, who said she had never lost a close family member, was there for intellectual enjoyment. Others went to ponder the questions and feelings that the death of a loved one had raised.

For instance, at a Death Cafe meeting this month in St. Joseph, Mo., the host, Megan Mooney, a 29-year-old social worker, asked each of the 19 participants to supply a single word that he or she associated with death. "Freedom," someone said. "Grief." "Transition." "Relief." "Finality." And then, "Graduation."

The last came from Kelly Vanderpool, a 25-year-old mother, who was a high school freshman when a friend with a new driver's license died in an auto accident. "Ever since, I've wanted to know where he was," she said in an interview. "Is it true that life continues? Is Joe around still?"

Jeneva Stoffels, who is 69 and drove 70 miles from Auburn, Neb., to attend the meeting, told Ms. Vanderpool that she did not have an answer. But she did know that her late mother once spoke to her in a dream. "A younger version, glowing and happy, an 'I'm in a good place so you can let go' kind of thing," Ms. Stoffels said in an interview. "Regardless of where it came from, it was reassuring."

Ms. Mooney, the host, asked a series of conversation-starting questions: What is your biggest fear about death? What do you want your legacy to be? She had brought markers and blank boards on which people could finish the sentence "Before I Die I Want to" The responses included "See Egypt," "Win the lottery," "Write a book of poems" and "See my daughter grow up."

Over all, Ms. Mooney said, "There are some somber moments, but people laugh. They have fun."

The meetings tend to be more mundane than macabre, and more likely to produce small epiphanies than profound realizations. "It's not like psychotherapy," Ms. Stoffels said. "There's not going to be a big breakthrough. It just widens the door a crack."

"At one cafe, I had someone who believed in reincarnation sitting across from three atheists, telling them about her past lives," said Lizzy Miles, a hospice social worker who organized that first meeting in Columbus and has led the group there ever since. Discussion topics have included euthanasia, grief, the best-selling book "Proof of Heaven" and do-not-resuscitate orders.

QUOTATION OF THE DAY

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—AUDREY PELLICANO, who hosts the New York Death Café, at which participants discuss the philosophical thoughts on death.

Doctors and scholars who study attitudes toward death say that for most people, such conversations are healthy; talking about death can ease people's fears and the notion that death is taboo. "A major part of American society is very averse to thinking about dying," said David Barnard, a professor of ethics at the Oregon Health and Science University who has written extensively about the end of life.

In the United States, Death Cafes have spread quickly. The first one met last summer in a Panera Bread outside Columbus, Ohio, where guests were served tombstone-shaped cookies. Since then, more than 100 meetings have been held in cities and towns across the country, including Atlanta, Baltimore, Cleveland, Los Angeles and Seattle.

Ms. Miles logged 112 participants in her first nine events and determined that a quarter were under 35 and 22 percent were over 65, with most ages 45 to 64 and women predominating. About half of the people who filled out a survey after a meeting agreed with the statement that "I feel more comfortable talking about death and dying now."

The Death Cafe movement has a few ground rules. Meetings are confidential and not for profit. People must respect one another's disparate beliefs and avoid proselytizing. And tea and cake play an important role.

"There's a superstition that if you talk about death, you invite it closer," said Mr. Underwood, the organizer in London. "But the consumption of food is a life-sustaining process. Cake normalizes things."

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