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‘Death café’ opens door, minds to discussing taboo topic

By Nancy Shohet West | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 08, 2014

When Kip Roberson, director of the Reuben Hoar Library in Littleton, came across a flier for a “death café,” he assumed it was some kind of theatrical murder mystery and pictured costumed villains and damsels in distress.

But after learning that they are actually part of a fast-growing movement that began a decade ago in Europe and is recently finding a foothold in the United States, he became intrigued. His curiosity led to the decision for the Reuben Hoar Library to host its own death café in late March, making it one of the first Massachusetts venues to jump on board.



ELLEN HARASIMOWICZ FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Judith Eaton (right) lends a sympathetic ear as Suni Smith makes a point during a discussion about death and related issues at the Reuben Hoar Library in Littleton.

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In short, the gatherings are an opportunity for people to get together and share their ideas about death.

“It’s not a bereavement group,” emphasizes Peg Lorenz, who facilitated the Littleton gathering as well as an earlier one at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge. “Using the café model so typical of European public life — complete with cake, and tea or coffee being served — it’s a way to simply have a conversation about something that many people don’t know how to talk about.”

Indeed, a typical session brings together people from all walks of life who just want to

overcome what some see as a taboo, she said.

“People feel relieved to be in a group of like-minded people,” said Lorenz, a hospice volunteer who heard about death cafés while attending a meeting of home funeral advocates in Arizona.

“It’s typical in many families that there are members who don’t want to talk about death — their own or other people’s,” Lorenz said. “A death café is a place for people to come with their questions, their curiosity, their wish to find out how other people are thinking about death.”

Like Roberson, Bree Harvey, the vice president of cemetery and visitor services at Mount Auburn Cemetery, had no idea what to expect when she put out the word that her facility would be hosting a death discussion. But she knows that people who visit the cemetery, whether for bird-watching or to attend a burial service, tend to have a lot of questions.

“We’ve been thinking about ways we can reach out to the public in a more proactive way, and it occurred to me that we have the perfect setting,” Harvey said. “People here are already thinking about the topics that come up in a death café.”

Harvey thought the inaugural event might draw five or 10 participants; instead she had to start a waiting list after 35 people signed up.

“Everybody’s reasons for attending were different, but everyone brought something to the table,” she said. “It was surprising to hear how much laughter was happening in the room as people shared ideas and asked each other questions.”

The death café movement does not advocate for any particular kind of end-of-life decisions, Lorenz said. “And I tell people to take off their fix-it hats and put aside any professional expertise. They are about listening and sharing ideas.”

Intended to bring small groups of people together for democratic discussion, they typically run the gamut of topics, from conversations about burial versus cremation to reminiscences — both positive and negative — of the deaths of loved ones, and to

concern about how to discuss wishes for a memorial service with one's children.

At 31, Kat Kimball of West Boylston may not seem like someone who would spend a lot of time dwelling on mortality. Yet as soon as she heard about the death café at Mount Auburn, she signed up — and she found the experience so appealing that she attended her second one just a few days later. Now she is hoping to organize a home-based event among her peers.

“The first death café I attended was kind of like the experience of Star Trek fans getting together and dorking out,” Kimball said. “The second one, in Littleton, was more just people discussing different options when it comes to death. Both were really interesting. It's so much more important than talking about work or what your pets did today, and the death cafés bring together like-minded people so that it's not awkward to talk about. It makes the topic of death seem somehow nonchalant.”

Mary Adams, a great-grandmother who drove up from the South Shore with a
WhatsApp icon tend the Littleton event, found herself thinking about her late mother as
she participated in the round-table discussion.

“No one ever talked to my mother about death and dying,” Adams said. “I have so many mixed emotions about it. Mostly I don't want to miss out on anything that happens with my grandchildren or great-grandchildren, and I don't want to be forgotten. But I don't have a fear of death. I came here because I wanted to know what other people were thinking about.”

Lorenz believes that more openness about death, as seen through this movement but also with her work in home funerals and the growing interest in home hospice care, is another way in which the baby boom generation is making its mark.

“We baby boomers are watching what our elderly parents are going through and saying we might not want to do it that way,” Lorenz said. “My goal is to normalize death. We're all going to die; let's be OK with the idea by talking about it.”

A death café takes away the stigma of discussing mortality, agreed Lessia Shajenko, who also attended the Littleton event. “Our mothers teach us to knit, to count money,

to change diapers,” Shajenko said. “Why doesn’t anyone teach us to talk about death?”

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