

Let's talk about death

A new social movement seeks to transform death from taboo to a normal part of life

BY ANNE BOKMA

When Catherine Tremblay's 78-year-old mother told her she was considering assisted suicide after a car accident left her in constant pain, the north Vancouver lawyer relied on her expertise as a volunteer Death Cafe facilitator and asked her mother's permission to bathe and dress her after she died.

"I told her I wanted to take care of her body," says Tremblay, whose mother agreed to the request. "I don't want to give her body to a funeral home. It's important that we take care of the dead ourselves."

People like Tremblay are part of a growing social movement that's giving death a new lease on life, or at least transforming it, through open conversations, from a taboo topic into a suitable — even necessary — one. Across Canada, there have been hundreds of Death Cafes, run by volunteers in public spaces such as libraries and community centres, as well as Death over Dinner events where hosts invite friends to engage in the kind of conversation most people would

do anything to avoid. (The deathoverdinner.org website provides conversation prompts, suggested readings and videos, a mock invitation and tips on moderating.) Before I Die festivals in the United States and Europe include cemetery walks, workshops on assisted dying and art installations that invite people to write down their goals before they die.

This trend to lift the lid on what some consider to be a morbid topic is being driven in part by the "spiritual but not religious,"

who want to break the monopoly funeral homes and churches have had on matters related to death and dying, and by baby boomers, who, facing their own mortality even as they care for elderly relatives, are keen to transform the way they will mark their final transition.

"People want to engage with the topic of death in meaningful ways, and they don't see church as the place where that conversation is going to happen because they think the church is going to impose its views on them," says Rev. Nancy Talbot, a minister

at Mount Seymour United in North Vancouver. To help remedy this, she asked Tremblay to facilitate a Death Cafe in the lobby of her church earlier this year. Twenty-five people showed up, and now Death Cafes are a regular outreach effort. They are "absolutely spiritual" because they allow participants to "foster authentic connections with each other," says Talbot.

For her part, Tremblay says she's thankful the church has opened its doors to "offer a safe space for people to talk about something that makes them vulnerable."

These intimate gatherings help participants determine what constitutes a good death, says Rochelle Martin, a registered nurse and death midwife in Hamilton. She says green burials and home funerals are popular topics at Death Cafes, noting that while surveys show 75 percent of people wish to die at home, most will die in a hospital.

Martin's efforts to help people devise a plan for their passing have prompted her to do the same. The 43-year-old has already purchased the dry ice packs she'll need to keep her dead body chilled during her home funeral, and there's a \$125 cardboard cremation casket ready in her basement that will fit nicely into her Audi minivan (she's checked). She wants her three kids to help dig the hole at her plot in the Cobourg, Ont., Union Cemetery, a green burial site. "The digging has to feel like hard work because then it will be meaningful for them," she says.

If all of this seems too grim, Martin urges people to consider that openly talking about the end can make death — and life — more meaningful. "People experience a real sense of spirituality in having these conversations because this is a topic that touches us deeply, and it's one we haven't been able to explore together." Until now, that is.

Anne Bokma is a journalist in Hamilton.

