

You die the life you live ? notions from a Death Cafe

By James Matthews

Talking about your death is one of the most intimate conversations you could have.

Such intimacy is often hard to establish with complete strangers, unless you're at a Death Cafe. Orangeville had its second such event when about 30 people gathered in late November at The French Press Coffee House for the Headwaters Death Cafe. The first was in September.

Reminiscent of once-popular artistic salons, Death Cafes have been popular in Europe for a few years. And they've started to gain popularity on this side of the pond. Three were held in Toronto in June, the largest with about 200 participants.

Jake McArthur is one of the Orangeville organizers. He works in hospices with palliative patients and their families. He believes smaller groups are conducive to an easy intimacy that leads to open honesty among strangers. And that is what makes it fulfilling to participants.

"This is the size I personally enjoy," said McArthur of the gaggle of people around tables upstairs in the coffee house. "It's not so big that it could be a process."

Death, at least the way it's spoken about during the cafe, isn't something that comes up at cocktail parties. This, despite that fact it's one of the very few things every person has in common. One who is born will die. Whether it's a foul or pleasant thought about death and dying, it's reflected upon during the cafes. Some participants have even learned a thing or two about themselves.

"Nobody escapes the experience (death)," McArthur said. "Even if you're a monk in a cave. We've all begun to realize the true immortality that was our birthright isn't there."

In 2000, McArthur's 23-year-old daughter died in a car accident. To say nothing of the grief, the experience changed him irrevocably in terms of the choices he now makes. It was stark evidence of life's fragility.

"Every day is a day I spend the way I want to spend it," he said. "While I have a choice, that's the choice I make."

He said many people don't live conscious of each day's possibilities. Perhaps it stems from a hesitancy to accept life's haphazardness and, likewise, death's. Confronted by the notion of a random life can be challenging for some participants.

"There's a lot of work to be done in our society," he said. "If people get comfortable with this subject, they'll be more prepared."

Preparedness means savouring life's every morsel as much as it means informing loved ones of your end-of-life care plan should you become incapacitated, unable to communicate such wishes. The pragmatic was spoken about just as much as religion, philosophy and abstract speculation during the Death Cafe.

Five people started as strangers to each other when they sat at a Headwaters Death Cafe table. To maintain a measure of anonymity, the four participants who dominated conversation are referred to as John, Paul, George and Ringo.

"If everybody tasted all life has to offer, we'd have a bigger smorgasbord," said Ringo, referring to how talk of death highlights the importance of truly living.

Paul told a story about a blind man placing a hand on an elephant. Wherever the blind man places his hand, that tactile perception is his only basis for knowledge of an elephant. And that holds for one's conditioned responses toward death, said John.

George agreed. So many parents shelter children from death, how the young are refused participation in loved ones' funerals and wakes. That leads to a fear of death and dying.

"As long as we don't talk about it, it won't happen to us," Paul observed.

You die the life you live, John commented, and not speaking about death is to deny a part of life.

Ringo drew them further. People who have control issues in daily life would be wary of death and circumstances of dying as aspects they're unable to influence.

John's father used to lament lost time, remarking about how youth is wasted on the young. Young people don't know just how little they actually know. It speaks to the invincibility of youth and how McArthur spoke about that birthright having been seen through. The world squeezes one's ability to suspend disbelief, quashes the possibility of magic, as one gets older.

"It (death) is a human thing, and we try to take the humanity out of it," said Ringo.