

From Grief to Gathering: Why I Lead Death Cafés

Swedish death cleaning, ghost hunters, regrets, sitting Shiva, and bucket lists. These are just a few of the topics people bring to my Death Cafés. Over the past three years, more than 400 people have taken part in these conversations—each bringing their own stories, questions, and reflections about death and dying.

These days, it can feel like the world is pulling apart at the seams. The noise, the tension, the constant push to take sides—it's exhausting. Beneath it all, loneliness is spreading. I lead Death Cafés because I believe that coming together to talk—especially about death and dying—can help us reconnect with ourselves, and with one another.

Death Cafés might sound morbid at first. But what often surprises attendees is how naturally these conversations turn toward reflections on what makes life joyful, and meaningful. The Cafés are structured as open, judgment-free dialogues—conversations grounded in listening with an open spirit. In this space, people are free to speak honestly about their fears, experiences, and hopes. It's a place to feel less alone. Together, we face the unknown with openness and curiosity.

My passion for this work deepened when my husband Jim died of leukemia during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pain of losing him was indescribable. I spent months moving through life in a fog. And yet, in the midst of that grief, something unexpected happened: the natural world revealed itself to me in a new way. The winter gardens of Highland Park shimmered with a richness I had never noticed before. The cycle of the seasons, the quiet resilience of the earth—it all seemed more vivid, more profound. In the face of death, I felt connected to the rhythms of life. Nature became my companion in grief, reminding me that I was part of something larger, ancient, and shared. Just like in community, there was solace in knowing I was not alone.

Early in my career as an advocate and lobbyist, I learned that identifying common ground was the first step to bringing people together. At this stage of my life, it's become clear that the most powerful common ground we have is death—our ultimate rite of passage. No matter what our differences are, we all face the same final mystery. Now, bringing people together to community build around our shared truth is my activism. In the face of aggressive polarization, I choose to build bridges—one conversation at a time. Because when we dare to face the unknown with others, we rediscover our shared humanity.

Talking about death and dying doesn't erase the complicated feelings we may have, but it helps us feel seen, heard, and less alone. Sharing stories, rituals, questions, and even fears with others builds community in a time when we desperately need it. Whether someone shows up to talk about regrets or ghost stories, bucket lists or burial rituals, they leave having touched something essential: the reminder that to grieve is to love, and to talk about death is, ultimately, to cherish life.

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To find an upcoming Death Café, or to schedule one for your group, visit www.jennifer-sanfilippo.com.