

# Tea and pastries with the Grim Reaper

By Su Clauson-Wicker Special to The Roanoke Times Nov 6, 2016



Isabel Berney hosted the first Death Cafe in the the NRV. Death Cafes are offshoots of the “cafe mortel” movement that emerged in Switzerland about 10 years ago.

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**BLACKSBURG** — From the peals of laughter issuing from Belkoom restaurant’s party rom, one would never guess the topic of conversation is death.

That is the only requirement of this informal gathering — that participants talk about some aspect of death.

The group, which came together one night late last month in response to an ad, is called a Death Cafe, one of more than 3,700 such gatherings that have been held around the world. Offshoots of the “cafe mortel” movement that emerged in Switzerland about 10

years ago, these are not grief support groups or end-of-life planning sessions, but casual forums for people who want practical advice or to bat around philosophical thoughts.

What happens in death, they might ask. How does death affect how I live my life? How do I prepare for it?

“Most people avoid talking about death,” said Phil Olson, assistant professor in Virginia Tech’s Department of Science and Technology in Society and host of the recent cafe. “A dead body can be a dirty, scary thing. It’s been a taboo topic, like sex used to be. But in the past several years, more people began wanting to know about death, to examine it and talk about it in a comfortable setting. Death Cafes provide that setting.”

The mostly senior group sipping tea and nibbling baklava around the table doesn’t seem haunted by the fear of death. In fact, they appear extremely comfortable discussing burial options. Preferences range from “green burial,” being interred in a simple box or shroud without any embalming, to cremation to a traditional funeral and cemetery burial.

“Shop around,” advises Isabel Berney, who brought the Death Café concept to the New River Valley almost three years ago. A charter member of the nonprofit Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Virginia Blue Ridge, Berney has the organization’s 2016 survey of regional funeral service costs in hand. The 10-page document shows that the most economical full-service funeral, including casket, varies from about \$12,000 to

\$3,500, while direct cremations range from almost \$1,200 to \$3,650, depending upon the funeral home.

“I’ve been thinking about death for 40 years,” says Berney, 74, “ever since I read ‘The American Way of Death’ by Jessica Mitford and became concerned about the high cost of burial expenses.”

Olson, on the other hand, has a philosophical interest in hearing people’s attitudes about the dead human body.

The son, grandson, and great grandson of funeral directors, he grew up seeing corpses and hearing “cool, exciting and weird” stories about bodies on a daily basis.

Olson is working on a research project examining the issues and conceptions surrounding alkaline hydrolysis (also known as “flameless cremation”) technologies entering the funeral industry. This technology, considered “green” by many groups, has not yet come to Virginia.

One couple, who traveled 90 minutes to attend the Death Cafe at the Belkroom, volunteers that they have an old cemetery on their farm.

“A friend with a backhoe is all you need,” exclaims Sandy Schlaudecker of Blacksburg.

Most at the table seem envious. Unfortunately, the couple lives in a jurisdiction where they must obtain approval from all of their nearby neighbors before attempting a

burial. In Blacksburg, Berney notes, anyone can bury one person on their lot, although this reduces the property's resale value.

But the talk isn't all about burials. Kay Kay Goette of Blacksburg brings up the case of an elderly local woman suffering painful ailments who announced that she was ready to die and would no longer be eating or drinking.

The staff at her nursing home wouldn't allow this, so the woman moved in with her daughter. The next morning, the sheriff's department showed up to investigate a "possible case of elder abuse."

The wise older woman presented them with a signed, notarized declaration of her intent and mental fitness, and was able to die on her own terms, Goette says. The moral of the story, the group decides, is not to tell professionals whose job it is to prolong life, if you want to die a "natural" death.

This was the fourth Death Cafe offered in the New River Valley by members of the Funeral Consumers Alliance. At some earlier gatherings, the conversation focused more on the process of dying, Berney says, especially when hospice workers attended. In nearly all of the Death Cafes, someone expressed a sense of yearning for the days when death was treated as a part of life, when deaths and funerals took place at home and the deceased washed and dressed by family members.

It is the goal of Death Cafes: to bring death out of the closet. The Internet is spreading the word. The website [Deathcafe.com](http://Deathcafe.com) was created by Jon Underwood, who held the first official Death Cafe in 2011, in England. Anyone can host a death café, whether in a private home or a restaurant. Some have been held in cemeteries.

Anyone interested in attending a future Death Café in the New River Valley should contact the Funeral Consumers Alliance of the Virginia Blue Ridge at [fcavbr@gmail.com](mailto:fcavbr@gmail.com) or 540-953-5589.



Phil Olson is a Virginia Tech professor and Funeral Consumers Alliance of Virginia Blue Ridge board member. His father and grandfather ran a funeral home.

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