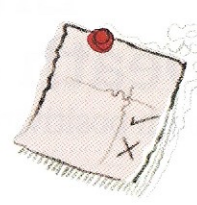
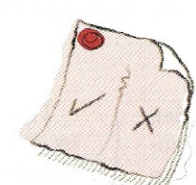
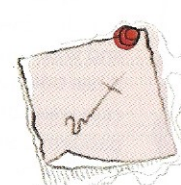
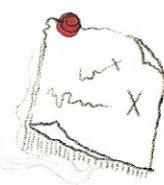


By S. Holland, Murphy et al.
Illustrations by Maryam Aziz

NEWSPAPER





End-of-Life Doulas, Death Cafes, and Free Cake

The death positivity movement has finally come for the Grim Reaper.

By S. Holland Murphy

When the round-robin of introductions reaches Maggie Conlee, she greets the small group with that winkingly blasé tone perfected by Gen Z. "My name is Maggiiiee," she begins, "and I'm here because I know a lot of dead peoplllle." The delivery earns a few snickers from the group sipping iced lattes and eating Dr Pepper-peanut butter cake in Union Coffee's second-floor lounge, but the 24-year-old's nonchalance is, in a way, the purpose of the gathering. The evening's event is a death cafe, a salon of sorts to chew on humanity's most unpalatable subject.

People show up each month for any number of reasons—grief, cancer, curiosity, free cake—and the mix of participants is as random as the line at the DMV. One silver-haired woman came to confess that she had run a red light and came within an inch of what could have been a fatal collision. A pixie-haired twentysomething says she is struggling with family strife after the loss of her grandpa. There is some friendly debate about cremation. ("If they cremate me, I will haunt them.") Terrell Johnson, a young baker wearing a crop top and pink jeans, makes a declaration against clouds on his own funeral program. "In the Black community, we are quick to put people on the t-shirt with the angel wings and the clouds," he says. The vibe is chill and plainspoken, but there's an implicit understanding that the conversation could explore seafloor depths. On another night, the room drops into a respectful silence when one man has a tearful epiphany—he is grieving the death of his former self after an injury limited his abilities.

The concept of a death cafe is a European import, popularized by an Englishman named Jon Underwood, who began inviting strangers into his London home for cake and honest, unstructured conversation about death and dying. Since Underwood's first gathering in 2011, almost 19,000 events have been held in 90 countries, everywhere from Bahrain to Brazil. (Underwood himself died unexpectedly of a brain hemorrhage in 2017; his mother and wife continue the organization's efforts in his stead.) Though it has taken a while for the concept to take root in Dallas—a death cafe was hosted at CocoAndré a few times before the COVID-19 pandemic shut it down—there are now four regularly scheduled death cafes that have popped up since 2023, all hosted by recently certified death doulas (think: birth doulas but for the other end of life). Several of these doulas have formed a support network for death workers called Death Collective North Texas. Dallas, it seems, is seeing a spark of life in the death positivity movement,

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which aims to sweep death out of the dark corners of impolite conversation and into the everyday dialogue.

"It's crucial to talk about it, because it is one of the only things that we will all do," says Britna Savarese, the death doula who hosts the Union Coffee death cafes. "No matter where we're from, no matter how we were raised, we're all going to die. And there's just no reason not to talk about it. People feel like if they discuss it, they're going to manifest it somehow. They're all of a sudden going to find out they're terminal because they had a conversation about death the day before. And it just doesn't work like that."

The argument for bringing death-related convos to the dinner table is multifaceted. The most obvious one being the practical side. "The more prepared you are for your end, the better your family and your loved ones can deal with their grief over your loss," Britna says. Thinking about death can also reframe how you live your life, which recalls Steve Jobs' Stanford commencement speech. "Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose," he told the 2005 graduates. And talking about the inevitable can also ease our death anxieties. Britna says she was initially shocked by the number of twentysomethings who came to the death cafe. When asked why they would be thinking about death, the youthful faction looked at her like she was "an out-of-touch little old grandma." They had been doing active shooter drills since kindergarten. Their mortality is as familiar as their own heartbeat.

Maggie is one of those young regulars, and though she has a knack for witty interjections, her introductory line wasn't a joke. It's not just that she knows a lot of dead people, it's that she's lost the most important people. She was 2 years old when her mother was killed in a car accident. After that, her maternal grandmother, Betty Austin, cared for her on schooldays; her dad had her on weekends and holidays. In those younger years, she spoke openly about death and asked questions about her mother. She would send notes attached to helium balloons meant to reach her mom and grandpa.

Then, when Maggie was 13, her dad had a heart attack. She went to school the day after he died. "I didn't know what to



*Britna Savarese, 50,
Death doula & host of Death Cafe Dallas*

do with it at all. I just kind of compressed it completely," she says. "My friends were super awkward about it, and I was super awkward about it. I didn't want to be the one sticking out." From that point on, she did her best to avoid any and all talk revolving around parents, not the easiest of feats for a teenager. "I would literally have to do conversational gymnastics to avoid telling people my parents were dead."

After graduating from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga last year, she followed her grandmother, who moved to Dallas to be closer to Maggie's aunt. Betty had been diagnosed with pulmonary disease, and the outlook wasn't good. Maggie found the death cafe while scrolling Instagram for things to do. When she first attended, she was "definitely freaked out by death." But she soon found a safe venue in which to vocalize her losses. "Being in that space is where I felt this sense of community and this sense of comfort and welcoming," she says. She also found help for her grandma.

Maggie cornered Britna after that first death cafe and peppered her with questions about her work as a death doula. Britna received the "death whisper," or the calling to work in death care, as a girl growing up in a small town, where she spent time in the mortuary after family members passed. She enrolled at the Dallas Institute of Funeral Service, one of the best mortuary schools in the country, but classes involved more emphasis on business aspects than she expected, and she soon dropped out. After decades working in customer service and marketing jobs, she came across Alua Arthur, a death doula who gave a popular TED Talk last year ("Why Thinking About Death Helps You Live a Better Life"), which was followed by the publication of her book, *Briefly Perfectly Human*, last April. Britna realized the death doula role was the compassionate side of death care work she had been drawn to, and she signed up for Arthur's 14-week death doula program, *Going With Grace*.

Death doulas—or end-of-life doulas, as some prefer to be called—is an ancient role turned modern profession that has seen a bump post-pandemic. Since no governing body exists, the role may look different from client to client or even doula to doula, but the overarching idea is to act as an advocate, helping the client achieve their best death possible, whatever that may



*Maggie Conlee, 24,
postsecondary pathways advisor*

*Will you have cake at your funeral? I'm a dessert person. Cake will definitely be part of it.
My favorite is strawberry, so I think that'll be the main flavor.*

mean to the individual. Doulas do not provide medical care like a hospice nurse or palliative doctor but may work in conjunction with medical staff to make the client more comfortable or help fulfill final wishes. For Maggie's family, Britna would sit vigil at Betty's bedside, giving her caretaker, Maggie's aunt, time to run errands or soak in the tub, while also acting as Betty's sounding board. "She was ready to die, and her body just would not allow it," Britna says. "She was having a lot of anger and frustration." Britna was a neutral party to whom Betty could vent. There's no easy way to tell your loved ones that you want to leave them.

Besides emotional and spiritual support for the terminally ill, a death doula may help perfectly healthy people create end-of-life plans, everything from medical forms to memorial preferences. This summer, Britna helped a middle-aged breast cancer survivor, who was in the midst of a divorce and out-of-state move, disentangle and restring end-of-life directives. Another client was a healthy 28-year-old, impelled to make end-of-life plans in the wake of her mother's unexpected death.

Starting that planning process doesn't have to be a morbid activity. The Art of Dying, a two-doula operation out of Fort Worth,

offers end-of-life planning parties (note that one-on-one services are only offered in Tarrant County). The idea: you plan the festivities with, say, espresso martinis around your coffee table or a spread in Beverly's private room, and the doulas bring planning binders for each participant and walk the group through the ins and outs of the end-of-life checklist items. "They've been so fun," says co-founder Lacy Buynak. "Odd, you might think, but there's a lot of storytelling that happens just naturally during that time and a realization that we're all worried about the same things, and we dig into that."

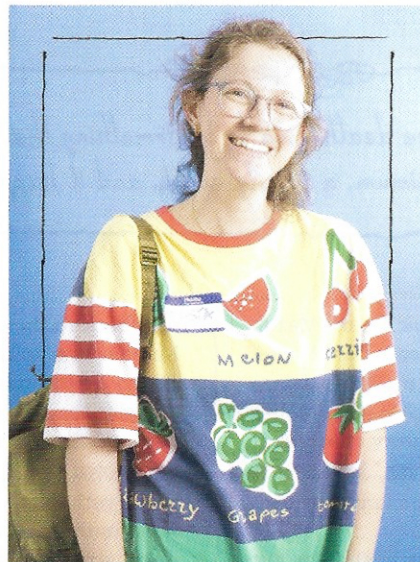
A death doula also serves the family as a whole, not just the dying. Tammy McNary, an Oak Cliff-based artist who initially sought out a death doula program as an exercise in examining her own mortality, wishes she had a doula to offer aftercare and help her process her own father's death. "I think we're still very much in a place as a society where we kind of leave people to themselves when they're grieving," she says. "We may offer, you know, to bring a casserole or text back and forth, but there aren't too many people who really get into just sitting with a person and letting them talk."

"I think we're still very much in a place as a society where we kind of leave people to themselves when they're grieving."



*Gabby Carr, 29,
therapist*

So what's your relationship to death?
I'm a therapist. I just actually graduated with my master's. I have just always personally been very fascinated with, slash, always thinking about death and how we relate to it. A lot of times our feelings and a lot of our shit ends up connected to fear.



*Krista Masci, 31,
product designer
for a funeral software company*

Have you been to a death cafe before?
*I actually drive in for this. I'm from Abilene, Texas, so about three hours from here. This is my third one. **How did you hear about it?** So my husband is a hospice chaplain, and then I work on the software side of death care. Yeah, so we're great at parties.*



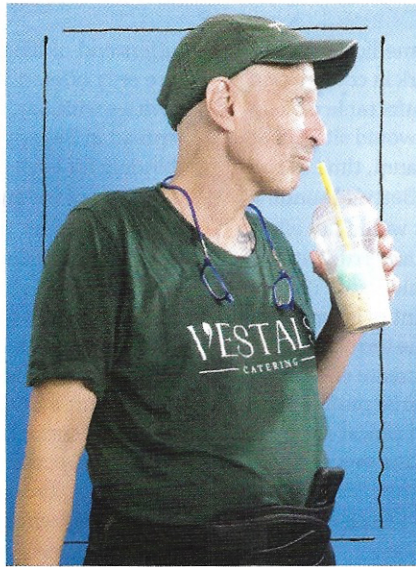
*Kara Walton, 29,
communication coordinator at the
Sammons Center for the Arts*

Do you think about death much? *No. I enjoy meeting to talk about spiritual things. I grew up pretty evangelical, and so this is kind of a taste of that that fits me and where I am with spirituality now. But death is always something that I think I'm cooler with than I am.*



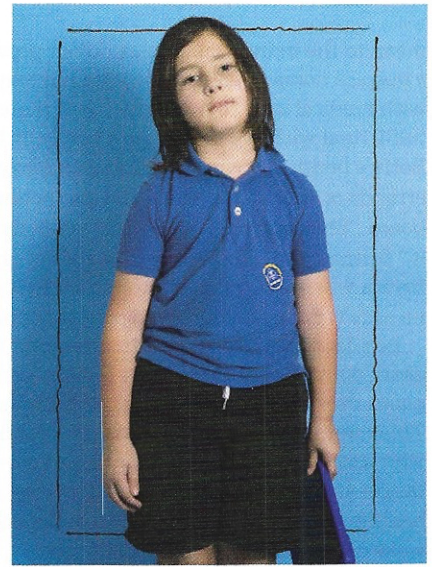
*Amy Navarro, 23,
program coordinator at Girls Inc.*

How long have you been coming to the death cafe? *I've been coming since the first one. I saw that it was the one-year anniversary, so I'm like I've got to make time for that.*



*Powder Rose, 55,
pastry chef*

You're a regular at this death cafe. What drew you? *They had me at free cake. Powder, that's your first name?* *No that's my nickname. Have you ever seen the movie, from 1995?* [He doffs his cap to reveal his bald head.] *I've gotten more sun since then, but I used to be more colorless.*



*Oliver, 8,
student*

What are you playing? *Minecraft.*
Did you hear what the grown-ups were talking about? *A little bit.*
What did you think? [Shrugs and continues playing]

"People don't realize death used to be something that was a community event or, at minimum, a family event, and it happened at home."

As for why death is such an uncomfortable topic, Briana Mazur, a palliative doctor who occasionally attends Death Cafe Dallas, points to the modern phenomenon of dying in medical settings and ushering the dead into funeral homes. "People don't realize death used to be something that was a community event or, at minimum, a family event, and it happened at home," Mazur says, "which means, for better or for worse, the whole family was involved and saw that process."

"I'm taking care of people in the hospital day in and day out whose family members may be in their 70s or 80s and have never been at the bedside of someone who's dying, and they have no idea what to expect. You can get that long in your life [without witnessing death] because we've walled it off, right? We've separated it out. Not only do we not talk about it, but we don't do it around anybody."

Mazur mentions the Civil War, an era that comes up frequently when talking to people who work in death care, as it's widely seen as the turning point in how Americans handle their dead. That's because it's when embalming started trending, with Abraham Lincoln as the ultimate influencer.

Lincoln's buddy, a colonel, was one of the war's first casualties. A surgeon offered to preserve the cadaver, so it could be

sent back to the family, by pumping the veins with chemicals. Lincoln was so impressed, he eventually commissioned the doc to give thousands of fallen soldiers a lifelike glow-up before shipping the bodies back home. After Lincoln's assassination, his own embalmed corpse went on a 2-week tour back to his Illinois hometown, giving throngs of Americans their first glimpse of the preservative art.

Up until then, handling the dead had largely been a domestic duty carried out by the women of the family. But as embalming took off, the cabinetmakers who fashioned coffins for their communities started wielding syringes as well as hammers. By the end of World War I, the household's front parlor, where families had once laid grandma out for viewing, had been rebranded as the "living room."

The funeral business is now a \$20 billion industry with some 19,000 operations across the country. Which is why a dead body is a thing few of us spend much time with until we become one.

It was among the Confederate gravestones of Mississippi that Audah Danielle was raised before she took off for SMU. A hospice chaplain who previously incorporated Reiki therapy and meditation into her end-of-life doula practice, Danielle believes our disconnection from death "is creating a sickness in our hearts."

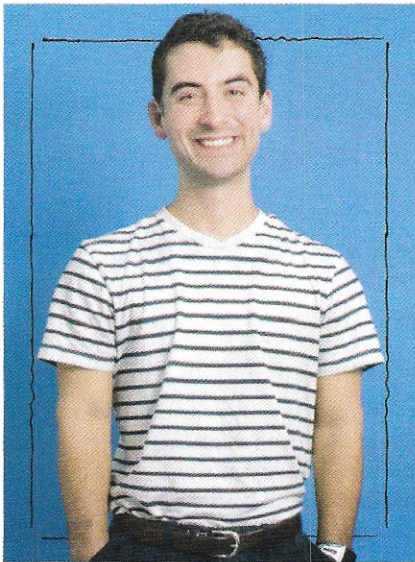
"And because I allow myself to feel the pain and to be sad, I also feel more satisfaction and joy and love. It's our grief that connects us to our humanity."

"We don't have spaces in our culture to grieve. It's like you're expected to be fine after two weeks," Danielle says. "I don't believe there's any end date. The heart's always bleeding. And we have to just come to accept that that is a reality. And because I allow myself to feel the pain and to be sad, I also feel more satisfaction and joy and love. It's our grief that connects us to our humanity."

As for Maggie, the grieving experience has been remarkably different with the passing of her grandma, who finally found relief last January. Maggie's more mature now, and the death cafes have given her practice speaking plainly about her losses. "I'm trying to embrace it more and just be up front about it and, like, live my truth," she says. She also began studying toward her own death doula certification. "I wanted to turn my grief into this thing

that I can pour out into the world," she says. Maggie's uncertain whether she'll make a career of the training but plans to serve her community. In June, she held a Father's Day event in Denton for others without dads.

She says the training is "very rich and very heavy." Part of the program is making one's own end-of-life plans, and she sounds almost buoyant while describing her ideal funeral, which she'd like to be held in the Pink Palace Museum and Planetarium in Memphis. "I want all my stuff set up like a museum, and people can take what they want," she says. "I want to be cremated and my ashes put in necklaces that can be passed out. And I want it to be a discussion, and people can get to know each other through me." And, of course, there will be cake.



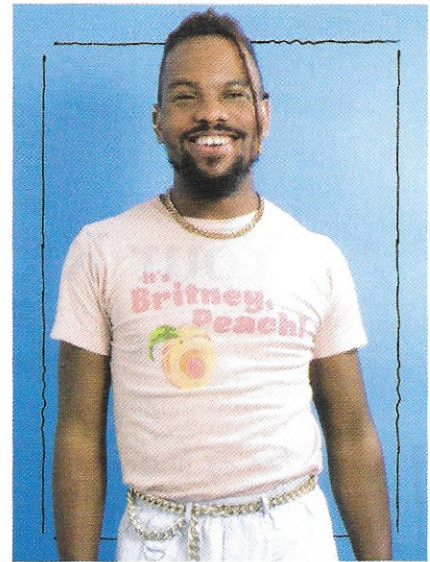
*Daniel Dossey, 23,
legal assistant for the Freedom
From Religion Foundation*

What brings you here tonight? *I was just going to do some work. Oh, did you just see the sign downstairs? Yeah. I mean, in college I took a lot of classes surrounding death, and it really just shaped the way that I lived my life. And I feel like nobody really talks about death anymore, especially not in an open context where there isn't a lot of shame and there is a lot of acceptance. So when I saw the words "death cafe," I was like, Oh my God, don't mind if I do.*



*Katie Newsome, 34,
pastor and director of Union Coffee*

Had you ever been to a death cafe before this started? *No. Before I [opened Union Coffee] I worked as a chaplain at Methodist Dallas Medical Center, and I was primarily in the emergency room and the ICU, so I just dealt all the time with sudden traumatic loss and families that were not ready to have those conversations about death. I really love the idea of promoting a space to ask questions, be weird for a minute, talk about death. It's fine!*



*Terrell Johnson, 32,
owner of Sweet Nothings & Pastries*

Oh, you're the baker who brings the cake! *I'm just a speck of dust on the beach. At the last death cafe, you talked about how the Black community doesn't really discuss death. My mom and I and my aunt and some of the older generation, we can talk about it now because my generation is not putting up with it anymore. Too many things are happening. We've lived through COVID, the whole pandemic.*