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Booth, S. (2018) 'Viewpoint 1: Facing the Inevitable,' in Learning for Well-being Magazine, Issue 5, published by the Learning for Well-being Foundation.

## Viewpoint 1: Facing the Inevitable

By Susan Booth

Like all living systems, the cycle of our lives has a beginning and it has an end. In Western society we celebrate the beginning and shy away from even talking about the end, let alone adequately preparing for it. *Let's Talk About Death and Dying* is the name of a discussion group I'm currently co-facilitating for the Society for Learning in Retirement London (Ontario, Canada).

Why do this? Because it's time for me personally to look at my life's ending. It *will* happen and each day I'm more aware that my body is giving me signals, my intuition is telling me that it is time to prepare, and the reality is that my friends are dying – some totally without warning and some with warning and finding themselves unprepared.

It's not that I am afraid of dying; I just didn't know how to have a conversation with others about it or about theirs. I found myself floundering on many occasions not knowing how to help or what to say to ease or participate in their passage. I felt so uncomfortable with the death and dying process of others that I began to realize I made excuses to avoid visiting them because I had no earthly idea of what to say that would not seem trite. As well, I really needed to do the 'get your own affairs in order' bit. So, I challenged myself out of my own need to learn, and I proposed the idea of a course on death and dying.

It's been an incredible process. First there was the resistance to the topic. One would think that a group of retirees who want to continue learning about all sorts of worldly topics would readily embrace the possibility of talking about the end of our human journey. But no. 'Who wants to talk about death and dying, it's so... so morbid, so depressing' was the constant refrain. Finally, someone said: 'I do! After all, it's the last great adventure,' and at that moment the committee bought in and the course was born.

We spent much time describing the course in 65 words or less and finally came up with: *Death is the one great certainty in life and a personal journey each of us approaches in our own way. Let's consider our own unique path with death, dying, and grieving by exploring this important though uncomfortable topic. Together we will be posing vitally important*

*questions, sharing experiences, and offering thoughtful observations that can profoundly change the way we live and die.*

In our community, there are beginning to be some informal meetings of people who want to talk about death and dying over tea or coffee. Known as death cafes, they have not yet caught on here, although the movement is growing worldwide. As well, one of our university colleges teaches an excellent course on Thanatology that many of my friends have taken. But it is usually offered in conjunction with a degree program and quite costly. Other than that, we weren't aware of anything of a like nature in our community.

The Society for Learning in Retirement (SLR) is a non-profit, member-run organization of retired or semi-retired individuals from all walks of life who share a love of on-going learning in a social environment. It is totally peer-learning, either through study, discussion or activity groups. Ours was a discussion group with a limit of 14 in order to create an environment of comfort where people could talk freely and feel heard. The course filled immediately. When asked why they wanted to talk about death and dying, the responses were varied, from one man who had recently and suddenly lost his wife and wanted to know how to move on and a woman who was terminally ill, to those who felt it was time to deal with the practicalities, to others who were just intellectually curious about the topic.

We needed to focus each of the 10 sessions and did this by listing the topics we would be discussing. A handout was created for each of the sessions to provide the 'meat' for a thoughtful discussion. We began each 2-hour session with a short focusing exercise. Then we divided the members into 3 small groups so they could talk more personally about what they had learned from the handout or other readings or from their own experience about the day's topic. The small group assignment allowed each person 2–3 uninterrupted minutes to share, followed by the group determining the topic they most wanted to explore in further depth with the class as a whole. The groups reported back, and we devoted 20–30 minutes to each of their chosen topics. There was never a moment's silence. The more the class spoke about each topic, the more in-depth and personal they got. There were a few times when we had to remind the group that judgements were not allowed and everyone's thoughts and beliefs in our shared-learning process would be honored. Each week one member volunteered to read a poem or short article or play a song as an inspirational closing.

Our first session was focused on 'living well until death do us part.' We wanted to ease people into the topic of death and dying so they wouldn't feel overwhelmed. We were also cognizant of needing to build trust among the members, so we could truly delve deeply into the unique journey each of us was on or would be entering. We asked them to journal about how they would live if they knew for sure they had five more years and not a moment more. We mentioned some things they might want to consider to get their ideas flowing. We made it a writing, not a thinking, exercise so we gave them only two minutes to trust their inner wisdom and to write whatever came without censoring. Then we continued, reducing the time frame to two years and then to three months. The last entry was: If this were my last three months to live, how would I live until I died? We went even further, asking them to choose the three goals that were most important to them from anywhere in

their responses, and then had them list specific activities they would need to do in order to accomplish those three goals. We drilled down further by asking them to commit to doing at least one of those activities in the next week. We finalized the exercise by having them make a contract with themselves that in the next three months they would have accomplished (or at least begun) to work on each of their goals. They signed the contract, self-addressed and sealed an envelope and gave it to us, with the promise that we would mail it back in three months, so they could take stock. Thus, ended the session on living well until we die.

The rest of the sessions followed in much the same manner. The topics ranged from Death, The Final Mystery; How to Have a Good Death; Caring for Ourselves/Others; End of Life Options; Assisted Death – Another Option; Funeral Preparations and Rituals; Grieving; an open session for them to discuss whatever they wanted; and the last session, Celebrating Our Lives. The evaluations throughout the sessions were consistent and along the lines of: 'I thought this course would be depressing or tough, but instead it brought a positive process to dying as well as information and practical ways to take charge of what needs to be accomplished to help family and friends who are left behind.' Many commented about how much laughter we shared.

Time has passed since our first offering, and we are now well into our second. During this time, I've had three friends die. Each of their dying processes was unique and I've gratefully learned from each of them. Two died in palliative care in hospital and one in a hospice. Over the years I've also had two dear friends die at home. Given this, my hope for myself is that, if circumstances allow, I will die in the hospice because the space created embodies the sacredness of the passage.

My friends had chosen very different ways in which to acknowledge their passing, with one enjoying a Celebration of Life days before dying, three having a celebration shortly after death, and the other requesting no funeral or service of any kind.

These experiences are teaching me much about what matters to me and to others when we die. All of us live such multi-faceted lives, influencing others for better or for worse, and leaving our mark – whether we know it or not. For me when a loved one dies I wish for some closure, some way of acknowledging how that person impacted my life, and a chance to discover much more about that person than I ever imagined. Stories that bring out the fullness of the life lived inspire me to carry on my friends' finest qualities. It is deeply moving to learn how many lives they have touched and how significantly, and to honor their legacy.

As my friends rest in peace, I carry on my own life cycle knowing I am changed because they were a part of my life. How grateful I am to bring this more fully into consciousness! And how much more I still have to learn that will help me when it's my turn. My journey continues.

## Author

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