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**ICCFA Magazine  
author spotlight**

►Rubin, The Doyenne of Death, has hosted four Death Café events and held the first

American event west of the Mississippi.

►She is the host of the A Good Goodbye TV series and Internet radio show on the RockStar Radio Network. She is a Certified Funeral Celebrant and a public speaker who uses funny films to help start preneed funeral planning conversations.

<http://agoodgoodbye.com/a-good-goodbye-tv-series/>



►In addition to writing articles for ICCFA Magazine, she is the author of the book, "A Good Goodbye: Funeral Planning for Those Who Don't Plan to Die" and The Family Plot Blog.

[www.AGoodGoodbye.com](http://www.AGoodGoodbye.com)

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►Rubin is a member of the Association for Death Education and Counseling and the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association. She also serves on the cemetery committee for Congregation Albert in Albuquerque, New Mexico and she volunteers with the Chevra Kaddisha, which ritually prepares bodies for Jewish burial.

**MORE ABOUT THIS TOPIC**

►Jon Underwood and Lizzy Miles spoke at length about the Death Café movement on Gail Rubin's Internet radio show, A Good Goodbye, recorded on June 26, 2013. To download a free podcast of this interview, visit:

<http://RockStarRadioNetwork.com/podcasts/agoodgoodbye>

**END-OF-LIFE ISSUES**

Funeral directors and cemeterians are used to the fact that most people avoid talking about death. But the people attending Death Café events don't go for the cake and coffee, they go for the conversations that center around death and dying and how facing the end can help you live with more purpose.



One of the participants in a Death Café event held in Cleveland talks as others give her their full attention.

# Death Cafés

## Sharing some coffee, some cake and lots of talk about death and dying

The Death Café movement is growing around the world, bringing conversations about mortality out of the closet. Recent stories in The New York Times and USA Today, on NPR and MSN.com, and in many other national, international and local news outlets confirm this phenomenon.

### What is a Death Café?

Death Cafés bring strangers together in a public setting to enjoy comfort foods such as tea and cake and to talk about death. The stated objective for the Death Café movement: "To increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives."

Founder Jon Underwood modeled the



The facilitators at the first Cleveland, Ohio, Death Café event, held at Gypsy Beans & Baking Co., cut the carrot cake.

Death Café concept based on the work of sociologist Bernard Crettaz, who started running Café Mortel get-togethers in 2004

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Attendees tend to be mostly in the 50- to 75-year-old range.

More women attend than men—the gatherings are generally two-thirds female.

in Switzerland and France. Underwood read an article about those get-togethers in 2010 and decided to start holding similar events as part of a range of projects he was doing about death.

“People talking about death reflect on life as well,” Underwood explained. “Thinking about death in many cases makes people ask questions: How’s the best way to use my life? What’s going to be meaningful for me at the time when I come to die? What am I going to look back on and feel really proud of?”

Anyone can download a guide on how to hold a Death Café from the organization’s website, [www.DeathCafe.com](http://www.DeathCafe.com). The Death Café is a social franchise; people who use the Death Café name abide by certain principles.

A Death Café can be offered by anyone following these stipulations:

- Run it on a not-for-profit basis, though to be sustainable, you can cover expenses through donations and fundraising.
- Schedule it in an accessible, respectful and confidential space, free of discrimination, where people can express their views safely.
- Facilitate it with no intention of leading participants toward any particular conclusion, product or course of action.
- Serve refreshing drinks and nourishing



At Death Café event held during June in New York City.

food—and cake!

The Death Café is not designed for bereavement support or grief counseling. People who have experienced a very recent and/or traumatic loss or death are encouraged to seek professional support.

“Some people think instinctively that the Death Café is a depressing time, a morbid occasion. But really, it’s anything but,” said Underwood. “Our facing up to our fear of death tends to be an enlivening, refreshing and empowering experience. There’s always a lot more laughter than tears.”

### How Death Café got started

Underwood comes from a family that’s totally comfortable talking about death and dying. His mother, psychotherapist

Sue Barsky Reid, was the facilitator of the initial Death Café events. She developed the model for running Death Cafés: Create a safe, convivial setting where the group leads the discussions. Facilitators merely pose questions to keep the conversation flowing.

Serving tea and cake is important. Crettaz linked talking about death with eating and drinking. Consciously nurturing our bodies

counteracts the fear people have about discussing death and allows them to relax and talk. Caterers notice that people tend to eat more at funerals than they do at weddings.

The very first Death Café was held in the basement of Underwoods’ home in London in September 2011. Hospice worker Lizzy Miles held the first Death Café in the United States in Columbus, Ohio, in July 2012. I held the second one in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in September 2012.

Since then, the movement has mushroomed. As of July 2013, at least 180 Death Café events have

been held in the United States and around the world. Other participating countries include Wales, Scotland, Canada, Italy, New Zealand, Taiwan and Australia.

### Who attends and where are they held?

The setting for Death Café events varies widely. While many are held in cafés or tearooms, they’ve also been held in churches, funeral homes, cemeteries, private homes, community rooms in various buildings and other settings.

Those who attend Death Cafés range from 20-somethings to seniors in their 90s. Attendees tend to be mostly in the 50- to 75-year-old range. More women attend than men—the gatherings are generally two-thirds female.

“Over 90 percent of the people who facilitate Death Cafés are women,” Underwood said. “While it was founded by men, Death Café is primarily a movement led by women.”

People who facilitate a Death Café need to be comfortable talking about the different aspects of death and dying. They need to be comfortable dealing with grief and able to handle any difficult situations that might arise.

“We don’t necessarily require people



At a Death Café event in Albuquerque.

## END-OF-LIFE ISSUES



**Co-facilitators Mindi Horwitch, LISW, and Gail Rubin, Certified Celebrant, at an Albuquerque Death Café event.**

to have a professional background in death and dying, because we think that might be restrictive, but we do check that anyone who facilitates, as much as we can check, is appropriately qualified," explained Underwood.

### **What gets discussed?**

The conversation runs the gamut—medical concerns, advanced directives, “pulling the plug,” suicide, physician-assisted suicide,

financial concerns, wills, funerals, what happens after we die and many other aspects of living and dying.

“People are really hungry to talk about their experiences, to air it in public, to gain reflections on that and to listen to other people talk about death and dying. I think that’s one of the reasons the Death Café has spread so quickly, because there’s general awareness that by putting death to the sidelines, we really haven’t done ourselves any favors,” Underwood said.

One veteran facilitator has found that the events are not all the same. “Even though I have hosted 12 events,” said Lizzy Miles, “there are still new topics of conversation that come up that I’ve never heard before. Each time it’s a new experience.”

Participants are invariably enthusiastic about the experience. In describing it, they use words such as “thought-provoking,” “intriguing,” “stimulating,” “worthwhile,”



**At another Death Café event in Cleveland.**

“comfortable,” “informative,” “practical,” “interesting,” “safe,” “educational” and “fun.”

“The thing about Death Café, the thing that keeps me going and makes it special from my perspective, is the way people actually speak at these events,” Underwood said. “People say the most profound and beautiful things. And they’ll say it with their own very personal voice. It’s always surprising and refreshing.”