I attended a death cafe

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An image from Death Cafe on the Central Coast, NSW. Photo: Kim Ryder

I've been compiling a list of songs to play at my funeral. No, I haven't had a near-death experience and I'm not terminally ill. In fact, I'm fine. I've just been coming to the realisation for awhile now that I am going to die. And so are you.

Strangely, few friends or family will indulge me in discussing the subject. In my family, death is pushed to the edge of life and only reluctantly tolerated at funerals – uptight, depressing affairs where crying visibly (let alone volubly) threatens to splinter the fragile social veneer overlaying our collective fears.

Fortunately, not everyone thinks like that. All over the globe, groups of like-minded, death-confronting people are meeting up at Death Cafes to eat cake, drink tea and talk about death. It's not an underground movement; everyone's welcome. According to the Death Cafe website the objective of this "social franchise" is to "increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives".

Death Cafe evaluation form is filled out at the end of the session. Photo: Kim Ryder

The first Death Cafe in the UK was held in 2011 by founder Jon Underwood, who was inspired by the Cafés Mortels set up by Swiss sociologist Bernard Crettaz. So far there've been at least 200 events, most in the US and Britain, as well as Canada, Italy and Australia. Some take place in actual cafes; others in spaces hired for the event. There are guidelines for facilitators to follow, one being that refreshments, ideally tea and cake, are made available at every event. Despite my aversion to mixing death and food (it seems I'm not the only one who sees it as taboo), I head to my first Death Cafe one Tuesday night, armed with an open mind and a box of tissues.

This one's a death-related film night with discussion to follow, and I join 13 people, aged from about 25-75, in a quiet drumming studio. Some of them already know each other, and as I head for a cushion on the floor, I hear one of them laugh to another: “Yeah, I was at the last one, too. I'm

becoming a real deathie."

Does that make me a newbie deathie, I wonder? Should I try and be blasé or will the film, *Cherry Blossoms*, turn me into a blubbering mess? (Directed by Doris Dörrie, the story takes place in Germany, then Tokyo during hanami, the fleeting cherry-blossom season. We meet a couple, a stifled and self-sacrificing wife and her dour, oblivious husband, as they grapple with getting older and the disrespect of their adult children. The unexpected death of one spouse leads the other to Japan and, ultimately, redemption.) Fortunately, it's more uplifting than depressing and there's no need for the tissues.

About halfway through, my cushion proves inadequate for my nearly middle-aged bones and a kind soul offers to share her beanbag. Bless. Brownies are handed out towards the end, but I can't bring myself to eat one until the main character has met his untimely but picturesque end beneath Mount Fuji.

An image from Death Cafe on the Central Coast, NSW. Photo: Kim Ryder

With cuppa in hand, we share our first names, but not our reasons for attending and start the discussion proper. The film's brought up plenty of issues that mirror our own fears. Will we die with our dreams unfulfilled? Can we fulfil the wishes of the dead? Which partner will die first? How will the other one cope? Will we rely on the kindness of strangers, rather than family, to comfort us at the end?

There are a few over-50s in the room and talk turns to caring for aged parents. One selfless soul visits her dying mother-in-law every day to give her, and now other residents in the dementia ward, love and attention. I hope there's someone like her around when I get old. Others talk of the lack of community these days, a disconnection between generations, and rifts with

children they worry will never heal.

The under-30s are more upbeat. One adores her family; they've all moved to the same street to be near each other. Another tells of her Gran who loves her aged-care facility and bails on family occasions to get back there as soon as she can. It's an intergenerational snapshot of the lead-up to death as well as the main event. Fascinating stuff.

The discussion goes up a notch when we talk about cross-cultural ways to mourn, including a confronting scene in the film that shows a skeleton post-cremation and an elaborate Japanese ritual where family members pick up the larger bones with chopsticks and carry them to an urn.

Could we hold that kind of ceremony in Australia, we collectively ask? “No,” pipes up my beanbag pal, who reveals she's a funeral director. I wonder why she's there but it seems rude to ask. The questions start flying and the bigger issues make way for the nitty gritty. “I thought all the bones turn to ash?” “No, they grind them,” she says. Wow. “Can you go and watch that?” asks one of the facilitators. “No. Sometimes you can watch the insertion of the coffin.” Why would you want to, I think? But some do.

One of the facilitators, who nursed her mother for eight months until she passed away, tells how she asked their funeral director if she could view the body being cremated. The answer was a resounding no. “What are the regulations around that kind of stuff?” someone asks. “The Australian funeral industry isn't regulated,” says the funeral director. (It's self-regulated. You can read more about that here, as well as a little about what goes on behind closed doors.)

Suddenly the discussion, which I find both horrifying and fascinating, is over. It's time to vacate the hired studio, but people linger to chat and help pack up; there's a real sense of connection among this small group of strangers.

The next event will be an open discussion and, according to Death Cafe facilitator Kim Ryder, the one who asked about watching the cremation, it's likely to be more intense than tonight's “gentle” one. Gulp. Apparently, one past event got rather heated when two groups aired their opposing views. “It was pretty intense,” says Kim. “We had to stop the discussion. Death Cafes are not a place to debate our spiritual or religious beliefs about what happens when we die.”

Still, there's no shortage of people wanting to talk about death. Past attendees have included everyone from psychics to palliative-care nurses, art therapists and psychotherapists, people who have had near-death experiences and, of course, those who have lost someone close. “It's different every time,” says Kim.

She seems amused but interested that I found the discussion challenging. There's little about death that fazes her. As well as facilitating Death Cafes, she also owns an end-of-life and after-death support and education service that runs death-focused workshops and community events. She'll even paint you a coffin to match your personality. “I live and breathe this stuff,” she says.

Hopefully after a few more events I'll have a little more of her courage, although I'm not keen on the upcoming behind-the scenes tour of my local crematorium with picnic to follow. In the meantime, I'll keep making the most of my finite life. I don't want regrets. I don't want "I should-haves". I want to live each day as if it were my last.

So I'll keep adding to my "Funeral songs of all time" playlist and sharing it with my friends. There'll be no *Wind Beneath My Wings* at my funeral, but I'm hoping my family will crack a smile at *Don't Worry, Be Happy* or at least have a good, loud cry. Or course, I'm in no hurry to test my theory (not that I'd be alive to see it) and hoping like hell that writing this has not tempted Fate.

Lifeline: 131114