

## The Death Salon UK 2014 Experience

by Sarah Buchmann

When I told friends I'd be going to the Death Salon, some thought it would be some kind of three-day-Goth-Party in London (probably worshipping Count Dracula as the sexiest man... well, ever). Others showed a genuine curiosity. The Mission Statement gives a nice answer to what the Death Salon is 'We are historians, writers, artists, musicians, death professionals, and armchair researchers shining a light on the culture of death denial by engaging with mortality via various media.' Writing my first novel about an alternative undertaker, I went to the Death Salon for fact checking and meeting inspirational people sharing my persistent interest in death. From the start, everyone was very supportive and we all enjoyed not being the macabre weirdo for once. Death is normal.

There've been so many wonderful lectures and people (about 100 people attended every day) that I won't be able to mention them all. Once allowed under the stunning glass ceiling of Bart's Pathology Museum and surrounded by its ornamental balustrades and various medical specimens, we were served wine and started getting to know each other. I immediately became friends with lovely Sally Penn, who used to work in pathology and is now a humanist funeral celebrant.



Some ladies were burlesque beauties and it turned out they don't make their living in tattoo studios (as one might've imagined) but work in pathology and forensics. One of them was Carla Valentine, technical curator at the museum and our wonderful host. She did a great job tending the flock, regularly calling us back to our seats as we all got so engaged during breaks. After her, admirable Megan Rosenbloom, director and co-founder of Death Salon (as well as librarian at University of Southern California) gave us a second very warm welcome.

The first lecture held the promising title 'Contemplating Death Can Improve Mental Health: Evidence from Experimental Psychology'. In it, Dr Nathan Hefflick (School of Psychology, University of Kent) told us that writing about negative events over time has a positive effect on both physical and mental health. In experiments, writing about mortality 10 minutes a day had a positive effect on people suffering from depression.

Rosie Inman-Cook from The Natural Death Centre gave some vivid examples for why the current situation needs improvement. The following excerpts are from phone calls the centre has received 'The funeral director repeatedly referred to my mother as "it".' What?! And it gets worse 'The funeral director insisted that embalming was crucial and I would to be blamed if the body started to stink.' I first mistyped funeral dictator here.

Simon Ferrar of Clandon Wood Natural Burial Site described his resting place so beautifully and illustrated his words with pictures of lush meadows and coffins on horse-drawn carts; I felt like dying on the spot only to have myself taken to this paradise for the dead and the living. Simon says 'At Clandon Wood there's always tea, coffee, biscuits, a hug, and time for a talk.' Also, at Clandon Wood children are part of the funeral. Because: Death is normal.



The concept of the Death Café, as introduced to us by Josefine Speyer (co-founder of The Natural Death Centre, facilitator of The Death Café, and UKCP reg. psychotherapist and bereavement specialist), is very intriguing. It's an informal gathering of people sharing tea/coffee and cake, encouraging the talk about death and mortality. As Josefine put it 'It's about finding out what you want for yourself and letting your next of kin know.'

Who's invited it? The Swiss. I've come all the way to London to learn that Swiss-French sociologist and ethnologist Bernard Crettaz founded the 'Café mortel'. Though there's currently none running in German-speaking Switzerland (- I'm going to change that. Who's with me?), Death Cafés are thriving in the US, UK, and many other countries. My new friend Sally has already started one in her neighborhood together with a local funeral director (got it right first time round). With the help of the Death Café website you can find the one closest to you or start your own ([www.deathcafe.com](http://www.deathcafe.com)).

Sarah (we're many Sarahs here) Troop talked about Dia de los Muertos (Mexican day of the dead). Being a Mexican-American herself, she gave me some insight into Antonia Da Silva's (my main character) soul and heritage. Sarah explained the Mexican relationship with death and how it's very much part of life. Dia de los Muertos is a colorful celebration for and with the dead. It's a time for family reunion including the ancestors, so they also get offered food, drink, and special things they liked. Disney tried to copyright Dia de los Muertos. According to Sarah, Mexicans are happy to share the festival but it is not for sale. The company's been turned down.

There're lectures about keepsakes and shrines for remembrance, hospital mortuaries (subtitled 'the blind spot of end of life care'), a historian speaks about how looking dead wasn't the same as being dead and how the kiss of life and cardiac massage evolved. There's a panel discussion about funerals in the UK with questions and answers mentioning the Home Funeral movement, and a speech about the human fear of premature burial.

Everyone at Death Salon agrees that death is universal. I dare say it is the most repeated sentence during the whole congress. All participants have a story of the death(s) that brought them here. 'My mom died and everything changed. I wanted to create meaning from the loss,' says Annie Broadbent, author of 'We Need to Talk about Grief'. She gives us five dos and don'ts in the presence of a bereaved:

DO 1) Make a joke about the awkwardness of the situation. 2) Share memories of the deceased and keep bringing it up. 3) Be honest. 'I don't know what to say,' is a perfectly fine thing to say. 4) Do something specific (don't ask 'what can I do?'), take action, e.g. Are there children, pets or a household to take care of? 5) Ask questions. If you feel unsure about it, ask if you can ask questions.

DON'T 1) Help as a default action. Some hugs are more for the supposed supporter than for the bereaved. 2) Tell them not to cry. ('Keep breathing' might be a good thing to say). 3) Pretend you don't know. 4) Things are not okay after the funeral. (Wait about a month, go and say 'I want to be here for you'). 5) Assume that toughness is a sign of strength.

We heard lectures about organ donation (whatever your feelings towards it, let your loved ones know!), Victorian Anatomy Museums (wax models for education), and The Necropolis Railway and Brookwood Cemetery (the train that would bring you to your final destination). And thanks to Nicholas Wheatley, we had his model death-train running around a cemetery, with hearses, ghosts, a grim reaper, and even a hippo to look out for. Where's Waldo at the Death Salon; very entertaining indeed! Wondered if we had a good time? Say it again: Death is normal.

Another speech was about the use of radiology (CT, MRI) in post mortems. Then, Kristoffer Hughes talked about how the 'Servants of the Reaper' came about. He doesn't believe that prostitution is the oldest profession in the world as our ancestors must have taken care of their dead before that. He took us through centuries to contemporary life, where we're officially sick (and will get medicated) if our grief exceeds expected norms for intensity, duration or dysfunction (DSM-IV).

Dr Cathy Molyneux (director of anatomical studies at Queen Mary, University of London) took us on a journey through the history of the dissection room including the grim tale of the famous body snatchers Burke and Hare. She also explained what happens if you donate your body to a medical school. Dr Sarah (yet another Sarah) Yardley from Keele University spoke about how the reality of dissection turns medical students into professional doctors. It is nothing like on television and they

have to make sense of the experience. Doctors will be exposed to death during their career, yet it is not on their curriculum. Sarah wants to see that changed. Dr Lindsey Fitzharris focused on dissection as a rite of passage separating the insiders from the outsiders.



We heard about 150 years of funeral practice in the UK, the future of death technology (the estimated year when there'll be more dead facebook users than living ones is 2065), funeral food practices (the American South should be example to the rest of the world), and how archeologists struggle with the ambiguity of digging up human remains. Right after, we got introduced to the relationship between the nude figure and death in art by Nikki Shaill and got to try and draw a beautiful real life model holding a golden skull.

Another archeologist told us about unusual burial practices and necrophobia (fear of the dead). An artist and photographer showed us and talked about Victorian post-mortem photography. After her, we got to hear about the criminalization of indecent burial and its excess in the UK to this day. Dr Paul Koudounaris, bon vivant from LA, looked like he'd just jumped out of a Pirates of the Caribbean movie. He took us very vividly through a slideshow (is it still called that?) showing Bolivian skulls who enjoy a very well cared for 'second life' among the living. They're kept in homes as friends with names and believed to do wonders. To be learned from this is that a society will hold a completely different mindset towards death if 'the dead' are seen as individuals.

Adorable Caitlin Doughty (mortician with her own you tube series 'Ask a Mortician', founder of The Order of the Good Death, and co-founder of Death Salon) titled her speech 'Memento (no)mori' and started by saying that we have to stop apologizing for our profound interest in (inevitable) death. She encourages everyone to take death back into their own hands even though that might sometimes get unpleasant 'The corpse is like a vegetable; you might not like all kinds but they're good for you.' Bodies are not dangerous (cadaveric poison is a myth). Get involved in funerals and do whatever you can contribute (wash and dress the deceased, witness cremation at the site, dig the grave...). Now everybody loud and clear: Death is normal.