

Dying to Talk About It?

Death is a topic that Dena Bliss is passionate about. “The whole concept of talking about and understanding death and dying has been something that I've been interested in since I was a child,” she shares.

When Dena was seven years old, she remembers exploring a cemetery next to the community garden plot her caregivers tended to while her parents worked. “I remember looking down at the grave site of a child. What a galvanizing moment. An interesting thing that happens to everybody, and it could happen to me!” she shares.

During the pandemic, Dena enrolled in a SASC program, Speaking of Death, run by Tess Lorraine. Enjoying the class immensely for over a year, she stepped forward to replace Tess when she asked for a volunteer. “I don't pretend to have done this by myself. I created a curriculum based on somebody else's curriculum. I started doing a group called “Dying to Talk About It,” Dena shares.” I adore the work. I adore the people. I adore the experience of being with a group of above average adults having a really meaningful conversation”.



Every third Friday, from 2:30 – 4 pm, twenty to twenty-four elders gather to discuss death. Attending Dying to Talk About Its class might feel daunting for a newcomer. However, Dena greets everyone with her warm, inviting nature, and the energy is upbeat and very engaging upon arrival. Friends reconnect and welcome newcomers. Once everyone is seated in the large circle, Dena begins by asking each participant to state their first name. Next, she offers a question for the group to ponder. “I expect everyone to answer the first question. Then I offer a prepared prompt to share about.” There are several ground rules that she outlines: there is no fixing, there is no advice. And she is proud that it is not a lecture. “It's a more Socratic chiming in approach”, she explains. “Everybody gets a chance to talk, and everybody gets a chance to disagree, but there is no cross-talking. I call on each person after they raise their hand.”

Dena prepares topics and emails participants three weeks before the class, offering them the chance to ruminate and decide if they wish to join. “Two months ago, the class topic was ‘What should be in a comprehensive end-of-life file?’ “It sounds very dry. And I knew that it sounded dry,” she shares. “There wasn't much danger or scariness in talking about that,” she remembers. “But when I followed up with, ‘Why haven't you made a file like this? What's in the way? What's the resistance about?’” That is when the conversation becomes much richer.”



Dena facilitates each class with ease and levity. “We laugh at every session. People are shocked at how much laughing gets done in a group that's talking about death and dying.” Dena is skilled at navigating group dynamics. She graciously allows each person time to share and gently steers them back on topic when needed. “It's subject-driven. But if we're in a passionate or interesting area, I'm happy to let that just run. And just manage, manage who gets to talk next.”

Dena's brilliant facilitating skills began in the 70's at the National Organization for Women. “I was in my 20s. I was studying co-counseling and learned a tremendous amount about listening skills,” she remembers.

After attending Sonoma State's postgraduate program in mediation, she worked as a nonviolent facilitator, coordinator, and consensus process facilitator on nuclear weapons and injustice in Central America. Continuing to support her community, Dena worked as a disability resource specialist for 12 years and later retired in 2000.

Dena grew up in Lawrence Park, a small town outside of Erie, Pennsylvania. Spending most of her time outdoors, she loved swimming, as well as dancing and theater. An only child, with adoring parents, she remembers “They were very much interested in talking about and being engaged in adult things. I was always invited to listen to and participate in adult conversation”.

Keenly aware of how fear can change the course of life, she remembers the pivotal family move to California when she was 10 years old. “It was during the McCarthy era. My father was a union organizer, and my mother was a secretary in the union. I think my mom couldn't bear it. It was so frightening. Their jobs, our livelihood, it was a risk.” Years later, Dena began to piece together her memories and ask questions. “I remember, one day after school, the FBI came to my house in California, to speak to my father who was out working”.

Dena reflects, “Those people that raised me were very clear about imparting a sense of obligation, to reach out and care for people who have less than you do”. Last year, Dena instigated the first Christmas Day gathering at the Senior Center, to offer a fun, welcoming space to come enjoy music, treats, and companionship, when many people are home alone on this day. Dena plans to volunteer to host the Christmas Day gathering again this year!

It is evident in Dena's lifetime of reaching out that she is a valuable and loved member of the Sebastopol community. Attendees at her class jump at the chance to share the support and camaraderie they feel from attending her classes. Dena creates a safe environment filled with truth, risk, and connection to dying, always with ease and love.

Thank you, Dena, for your courage and for bringing the tough topics to our discussions!

To register for the Dying to Talk About It class or additional classes at the SASC visit us at:
www.sebastopolseniorcenter.org

