

## Contemplating a Good Death in the Time of Crisis

by Donna Stein-Harris

A family member in New York suffered a stroke about six weeks ago, right before COVID19 took over our lives. She is 77, and up until her stroke, she was healthy, active, and looking to the future. Her future is uncertain now, compounded with a possible exposure to the virus contracted in the rehab facility she's in. Family can't visit her, healthcare policies are a moving target, and information is contradictory. Arranging for her to come home has its own complications not the least of which is possibly exposing her children and home healthcare workers to the virus. Fear and anxiety are part of my New York family's daily life. These are not normal times, especially in New York.

In Northern Michigan, the situation is different. We're more spread out and most people, I've observed, are now practicing social distancing and wearing masks. All are good public health practices. But even if we're doing all the right things, we are experiencing a high level of community anxiety about this highly contagious and potentially life threatening virus. And, even if it's unspoken, we're all thinking about our own mortality.

Thinking about death, especially our own, is difficult even in normal times. In Death Cafe\* we talk a lot about our fear of dying. Interestingly, most people aren't afraid of being dead, but rather how we get there. Will I be in pain? Will I be alone? Who will remember me? What happens to my stuff? How do I talk to my family and friends about what I want? But when you look at all those concerns, there is a solution for each one of them. But those solutions require thoughtful planning and action. And all of the tools we have at our disposal require some form of communication.

Make sure your trust and will are current. Fill out a medical directive and appoint a health power of attorney (different than a regular power of attorney), that outlines your end of life wishes. This requires filling out forms and that can be tedious. Many of us start these legal processes but get waylaid. But now there is a new sense of urgency that we can't ignore.

There are many things we can do that don't require legal action. Talk to your family and loved ones. Tell them what you want at the end of your life - I want to be left alone, I want everyone with me, I want pain medication or not, I want all medical interventions possible, I want to let nature take its course, I want to be at home or in assisted living. Tell them what kind of funeral, memorial, burial, or cremation you want. Talk about all those things that are often thought of after the fact.

How do you get those conversations going? "There's something on my mind that I'd like to talk to you about." If the response is, "I don't want to talk about that," then say, "I know this is hard to talk about. All you have to do is listen."

If there is still resistance there is another solution. Write everything down and make sure everyone who needs to know gets a copy. Then there is no ambiguity. No chance for misinterpretation. This is a step everyone should take even if everything has been discussed. If you want help, there are

online tools that can help you organize your thoughts including "The Five Wishes" ([fivewishes.org](http://fivewishes.org)).

Keep in mind that anything you say or write down can be changed. The challenge is remembering to let people know if you've changed your mind.

The most important thing you can do is to let people know that you care about them, that you love them.

Mend fences now, not with recrimination, but with love. This is not an easy task and not always resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Sometimes it's easier to write things down than saying them out loud. And you will have at least tried.

But what happens, like what is happening to my relative in NY, where things are moving so fast that it feels, actually are, out of control. We're all feeling that loss of control right now. We're all feeling vulnerable. How do we take those feelings of internal chaos back to clarity, back to what we can control. There is one simple step. It's what should be the first and last thing we do. Tell people you love them. Let them know what they mean to you, how they have enriched your life. Even the little things. "Thank you for sharing that book with me. It's one of my favorites." "Remember when we were kids and Aunt Anna took us for ice cream every Friday after school. We had so much fun together." "I still use your shortbread recipe. Yum!"

Write these thoughts and feelings down to be delivered after your death to your whole family or to individuals. Start a journal, create an Emotional or Ethical Will. Let them know what was important to you and what your life was like and how they played a part in it. It can include life lessons, values, and expressions of gratitude ([next avenue.org](http://nextavenue.org), [celebrations of life.net](http://celebrationsoflife.net)).

In Death Cafe, our conversations often focus on what is a good death. It's different for everyone, as you would expect. But the key elements always include planning and communicating those plans. But sadly in times of chaos and uncertainty we can't always expect our good planning to be followed. But we can tell people we love them. Now!

Don't wait.

\*Death Cafe is an informal discussion group that explores end of life issues. It is not grief counseling or therapy, but rather an opportunity to increase awareness of death with the view of helping people to make the most of their lives.

Donna Stein-Harris is a Death Cafe facilitator in Traverse City, MI