

Chicog-Then and Now for September, 2026
JoAnn Malek

“A Death Cafe is a safe and welcoming social gathering where fellow humans can have open, honest, and respectful conversations about death and dying,” writes Maureen Skuban. Thousands of Death Cafes are convened around the world, including several in northern Wisconsin. Maureen is host and facilitator for monthly gatherings at the Shell Lake Library, held on third Thursday afternoons from 3-4:30pm.

She is also the baker! The theory of Death Cafe, which began in the UK in 2011, is that food and drink are an important aspect of building community. Each month Maureen prepares a homemade cake, offers teas and bottled water. Her fabulous cakes, a different recipe each time, are one good reason to attend.

There are usually a few new faces at the Shell Lake Death Cafe each month. Some folks return again and again, others don't. There is not a set agenda. Discussion topics vary according to the requests and interests of the group. Thus each gathering is unique. We are reminded to respect confidentiality, and to always be kind.

Twenty years ago, because of her own fear of the unknown, Maureen began a search into death. She found a program on hospice care at her local library that was helpful. On-line she discovered a wealth of resources.

The Date With Death Club created by Karen G. Johnston has an entire curriculum of 14 sessions covering many aspects of death and dying. Death With Dignity is an organization that advocates for freedom of choice at the end of life. Death Over Dinner walks you through discussions you might have over dinner. And these are just the D's.

In 2024 Maureen attended a Death Cafe in Chippewa Falls and then made arrangements to use a meeting room at the Shell Lake Library. The librarians collect and set out a shelf of books covering related topics. Maureen credits the death cafe experience with helping her to be comfortable talking about death. “It's an ongoing journey,” she says. “Talking about death makes me want to live better.”

It was at a Death Cafe that I met Genna Boatright, an INELDA-trained death doula. Birth doulas support the labor of emerging life; death doulas support the labor of exiting life. How interesting it is to compare our death with our birth. Each time we are moving from one form of existence into another.

The death doula is a non-medical support team member through the physical, emotional, and spiritual transitions of death. Doulas are there as advocate, ally, and resource provider along the roller coaster that is dying.

Genna teaches that death is not always pretty but it is beautiful. Each person's ride is unique to themselves. No two deaths are the same. It is courageous to sit with a family member/friend while they are dying, she says. Neither of you knows the right things to say or do in this situation. It is fine to admit that. It is OK to talk with the individual about their impending death. But always, the person dying is in charge.

There is no one correct way to say 'goodbye'. In my reading, I've learned of these five things one might say to dying loved ones, even after they're gone:

"I forgive you"

"Please forgive me"

"Thank you"

"I love you"

"Goodbye"

Genna uses the term 'fertile eternal'. She referred me to findings of UC Berkeley research: Every modern human carries up to 1% of their genome from ancient human lineage, which likely split off from our branch more than 500,000 years ago. She comments, "This gives me me curiosity and hope. We are all leaving a mark on the world."

Jim's death was bittersweet. The Parkinson's that had taken so much from his existence made his life difficult. Mine, too, as his caregiver. He wouldn't have wanted either of us to continue for much longer. Thirteen years ago, and I'd still have him back in a heartbeat. We had wonderful plans for our years as retired elders.



I've long said that I don't like this system that includes death. So far I haven't figured out a way to change it. Part of life is death. It's not an 'if' but a 'when.' Since Jim's death, I find that I'm not as frightened, more open to my own death. And I'm learning to say the words, ask questions, speak up with friends and family about their death and about mine. Thanks in part to Death Cafe.

Do you have stories to tell about Chicog-Then?
I'd like to listen. Call or text me at (612) 250-0301.

Thank you for reading Chicog-Then and Now

Town Website: www.townofchicog.com

IMPORTANT SEPTEMBER DATES

Wednesday 9/2, 6pm, monthly Chicog meeting

Wednesdays 9/9&23, Namekagon Transit Service

Thursday 9/10, 10:30-12, Bibliodragon bookmobile

(I understand that technical problems with the van have been diagnosed.

Hopefully the repair can happen soon.)