

## ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - AMANDA BLAINEY (Katie Elliott & Amanda Blainey)

My guest on today's show is Amanda Blainey, the founder of *Doing Death*, an organisation that opens up authentic conversations about death and dying. When not working on her upcoming book, *Do Death*, Amanda runs a Death Café - a regular pop-up event for people to discuss their mortality.

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Good morning, Amanda Blainey.

Hello!

Hey, thank you for joining me today. How are you?

Oh, you're very welcome. I'm very well actually. The sun's shining so I can't really complain.

You and I met at the DO Lectures where we were both speaking last year and you gave a wonderful talk on the subject of death. So I was hoping that today we might be able to have a bit of a chat about the work that you do around death.

So I wanted to start a sort of gentle conversation, get people to start thinking about death and not to feel daunted or scared by that process, because I think we are in a situation where we don't really talk about it and we don't even think about it and it's always put to the back of our minds. And actually what I've learned through exploring the subject of death is that, actually, through death you can really think about what's important in your life and it really starts to get you thinking about what you want to do with that time that you have. So that's really my message. By getting people to think about death, they're thinking about their life and what they want to do with it. When I was younger, I was very interested in doing life coaching and I feel like I'm doing that in a weird sort of way, so it's kind of like I'm doing death coaching, but actually it's life coaching.

So when you talk to people about death and dying, are there common misconceptions or points of resistance that you encounter? What sort of things do people say to you when you talk about death?

If I'm in a shop and someone will say, "Do you want to go on the mailing list?" and I say, "Yeah", they say, "What's your email address?" and I say, "It's

Amanda@doingdeath" - it's really interesting, people's reactions. They either burst into laughter or they're really embarrassed, and I didn't really expect that. I didn't expect that to be such a big deal. But it is. I think I was very deliberate in using the word 'death' in the organization and I guess *Doing Death* people say, "Well what is that?" And I say, "Well, it's an organisation which encourages people to talk about and think about the subject of death". And they go, "Oh, that's a bit weird". And they're always a bit shocked and they always say, "Ooh, is that not a bit morbid?" And I always say to them, "Well I think it's really important because it's something that we don't really think about". And it always starts a conversation and then people are really happy to talk and often, you know, if someone's got time and they meet me in the street and we're just chatting and they'll say, "What you doing?" and they just start telling me all their stories and, you know, the first deaths they've encountered and it really starts opening up conversations. So whenever I mention it, it always creates an interesting reaction and I always love that. It's kind of what I want to do, is I want to be in for a bit disruptive and just the name in itself does that.

That's great. So very often you find that people want to talk about death, but they don't necessarily have a way of getting into that conversation within the framework of our normal sort of social interactions?

Exactly. Yeah, and I think that's why the Death Café movement was set up in 2011 by a guy called Jon Underwood and he, like me, thought it was really important to provide a space for people to start talking about death because he said that - and I say it in the past tense because he actually died last year, prematurely at the age of, I think he was 44. But before he died he set up this amazing franchise of cafés around the world. I think there's over 7,000 now, globally, where people turn up, they go to a café and they meet strangers - sometimes they might come with a friend - and they spend a couple of hours talking about whatever they want to talk about in a space where they're allowed to talk about, which, you know, I have to have it on a timer because otherwise we'd be there all night. Once you open those doors, then people feel they can, they feel like they've been given permission to talk. You know, it's wonderful. But it's also very reflective of how we are as a society, that we don't allow that space to talk about something that's really, really important and something that will really affect all of us.

So just to help me understand, as someone who hasn't ever been to a Death Café, and for other people who might be listening who are wondering what that looks like - is it a place where you go and you drink tea together? What happens exactly?

Yeah. Well, the original set up was to have tea and cake, because when you have tea and cake, it's very relaxed isn't it?

Yeah.

It sort of encourages you to talk. So that's why when he set it up, that was his model rather than being in a sterile environment where you might be in a conference room or you know... I think he took the idea from some sort of Bohemian-style cafe in Paris and it was just really to provide a relaxed environment for people to sit and talk. And once you do that, great things can happen.

Mmm. So do you, as the person who's, who's running the Death Café, do you start off the conversation with people or do you introduce people? Or how do you create that sense of a safe space to talk about things that often aren't spoken about?

Well, in my Death Café, I'm always very excited to see everybody. So I think initially that breaks the ice because I'm just so happy that people have arrived and that they're willing to talk about death. So I'm usually quite jolly when everyone turns up and everyone's then quite relaxed and you know, people go and order a cup of tea and I run mine in a local cheese shop so you can get a cheeseboard and a coffee and sometimes people might order a glass of wine. And so for lots of people it's a night out, cos it's like they're going somewhere nice and so they feel happy anyway. They're a little bit hesitant, I always think, particularly if they've not been to one before, they don't know what to expect, they're a little bit daunted. And then we sit round, I split it into small tables. Each table has a facilitator on it and you just literally say whoever wants to go first can introduce themselves and tell us a bit about why they're here. That's it. Two hours later you've talked about all sorts of things. And you don't lead it, the people lead it. So it's whatever they want to talk about. The only thing I would normally do is if someone is dominant in the conversation, I would then say, "Oh, does anyone else want to add something to that?" or "Does anyone who's not spoken want to speak?" So that's really my role, is just facilitating that conversation and making sure that people can talk and feel comfortable. And it varies. Some people come because they're terrified of death, and they feel like they can't talk to their family about it. And these are all different age groups. When I was just saying that then I was thinking about someone who's in their 30s who's petrified about death and it really affects her actually. She has panic attacks throughout the day. She's petrified for her family. And when she came, she left feeling so much better that she'd had somewhere that she could go and just talk about it, about feeling like this.

Yeah.

Another lady who came, her husband absolutely didn't ever want to talk about death and she said, "But I think about it and I want somewhere to go that I can talk about what I want to talk about". So she felt that it was really important to come. When I meet people like that I think, "That's why we need to have things like Death

Café". At the end of the evening people say, "Oh, I can't say why I've enjoyed it so much, but it's just such a relief". It's fascinating. It never ceases to amaze me how powerful talking is, sharing, you know there's that sense of community, that sense of belonging and there's that sense that we're all in it together. That kind of makes you feel like there's sort of safety in it, in a way, knowing, "Okay, we're all gonna die. So that's something we all have in common".

And it's great just to be putting that out there because, despite the fact that we don't talk about it and we pretend that it isn't there, it is the one thing that we do all have in common isn't it? Above and beyond everything else we can all be pretty certain that we will be dying at some point. And I think, you know, with an elephant in the room like that, there is always a lot of - the death elephant - there's a lot of relief isn't there, that comes from actually naming the thing that we're thinking about but not talking about and having that sense of shared ownership of it. That it's not some weird aberration that affects only us, it's part of the human experience.

Yeah. And I mean I'm writing a book at the moment as well, it's going to be called *Do Death* and that's out later on in the year, and I was thinking about why it's so powerful, talking about death. I think it's like anything isn't it? When you talk about something, it's sort of dissipates that fear.

Yeah.

It's not going to take away the fear of death. I don't think you could ever really do that. But you know, preparing and thinking about what would be important to us when we die, that's one thing. But you also think about what's important, like how you want to live in the meantime. It's not concentrating on death, it's concentrating on life. I mean, I volunteer in a local hospice and what strikes me every time I go in there, it's the love. It's the love between the family and the friends and the relatives and the nurses. And it's so powerful and it's in a way, when you're dealing with death that love is heightened.

Yeah.

And I often think, why does that not come through more in life? Why can't we be like this? And I think when you have proximity to death like that, when you work in a place like a hospice, when you come out, everything looks a bit different. Everything feels a bit different. The tiny little things that we take for granted every day, I don't take for granted when I come out of there. Even if I'm driving back and I park my car and I see one of my neighbours, I feel like this really intense love for them, it's really funny. You know, even doctors - doctors often say, "I get home and I hold my

family that little bit closer". They have an understanding that life is precious and I think a lot of people don't value their life as much as they could. They're stuck doing things that don't make them happy and they don't think, "Actually I could change that, I could do something different and make a difference to myself".

Yeah, there's a beautiful sense of perspective that comes, I think, when you realise that you are inevitably going to die one day and that means, you know, there's a limit to the number of days and that you have various choices about what you do with that time. Maybe you don't feel that you can choose everything, but you can certainly make some choices about what you're going to be doing in the time available to you. And I know from getting to a point where I was thinking that I wouldn't be able to continue living, when I came through the other side of that, I've had a very strong sense ever since that I'm kind of on my bonus life and it's incredible how valuable that time now feels. I don't feel I can take it for granted anymore. And I was at an event just this last week and some people were talking about having had experiences in life where they nearly died for whatever reason, and then afterwards this sense of it being a real gift to find themselves still here.

Yeah, like an awakening.

Yeah. It's profound. So in opening up that conversation and facilitating that conversation with people, there's a real gift that you're giving there, isn't there? In helping people to get that perspective and realise the preciousness.

Yeah, that's the key element of why I'm doing this. And I think also if, if someone said to you, "Would you like to live forever?" I don't think I would want to live forever because what would you aim for? What would you do? Death gives our life meaning. It's a bit like, I do a podcast and I interviewed David Hieatt and I love this notion... He told me that his idea about death is it's a bit like a computer running out of battery. That when you're working on your laptop and you know you've got limited amount of power left, you work a lot faster and better and use that time really wisely. And he said that's a bit like that, you know, because you know it's coming - you use that time a bit more wisely. I know people are, scientists are trying to say that they might come up with a solution one day, but would you want to take that really? I don't think people would.

It's a really, interesting question.

It is, isn't it? Who wants to live forever?

I thought you were going to sing it then!

Given all of what we've talked about this morning, if you could create a Little Challenge for people around the subject of death and dying, what would your Little Challenge be?

Well, I think my Little Challenge would be, if people could imagine if they had one year left to live, what would you do? What would you change in your life? What would you say to the people that you love? What would be important to you? And it might make you think, "Okay, what have I always wanted to do?" Even if it's something tiny like learning to play the piano. "I've always wanted to learn the piano. I'm going to do that in the last year of my life". There's nothing stopping you from doing that. They don't have to be big things.

And we don't have to do them perfectly. So, maybe we can't travel the whole world, but maybe we could go to the seaside tomorrow.

Exactly. Yeah. It might not be doing something. It might be saying something to someone: "Oh, I'd better ring my sister and tell her I really love her and I really appreciate her and she's doing a great job with her children and I'm really proud of her." And people save that stuff and that seems really sad to me. There's this idea that, you know, if you're terminally ill or you've been given a diagnosis that things aren't looking good and you haven't long, people start doing those things? And I always think, why does it take that? Why can't we say that now? What's stopping us from saying those really nice things to people and you know what? It makes you feel good too things that don't require a lot of effort, but I tell you what, once you start giving a bit more to other people as well, it makes you feel good. So there's so much we can do. It's powerful.

That's really lovely. And I'm just thinking, listening to you talk about it, I'm thinking that when you say we save these things up for the end of our lives, you know, saying the nice thing to someone... Slightly off on a tangent, but I was just remembering a little while ago when we moved house and we never really looked after our house until we were going to put it on the market. And then we did all this stuff to the house to make it really nice so that somebody else would buy it. And I remember thinking to myself, "Oh, if we'd done some of that a little bit sooner, we might have enjoyed living in the house a bit more". This ridiculous thing of saving up all that good stuff, cos actually by saying the kind thing or you know, learning to play chopsticks on the piano this week, or whatever it might be, the little thing, you can actually really enhance your quality of life right now. So whatever it is, go out and do it.

I know.

Is that our message for today? Go out and do something!

Or say something. Just do something nice for someone, open the door or smile at someone in the supermarket. Honestly, it's those tiny little things that connect us and give us a sense of community and it's really important.

That's so lovely. Thank you, Amanda, for sharing that and for our conversation today.

Oh thank you so much for asking me, I've really enjoyed it.

Wonderful. So if people want to find out more about Doing Death, about the book that you're writing, about Death Café, where's the easiest place for them to find you online?

Well, they can go to [DoingDeath.com](http://DoingDeath.com). There are links to my podcast and there's an events page on which you can find out when I'm doing my death cafe or talks, and I'm on Twitter at [DoingDeath](https://twitter.com/DoingDeath) and Instagram at [DoingDeath](https://www.instagram.com/DoingDeath) and Facebook - funnily enough - at [DoingDeath](https://www.facebook.com/DoingDeath), so it's quite easy to find me.

You're the Doing Death lady.

I am the Doing Death lady.

Thanks Amanda.