

Charlene Elderkin is one of the founders of the Threshold Care Circle, out of the tiny town of Viroqua, Wisconsin. Charlene had been hearing death stories for years and wanted to give others some of this experience. She has collected a series of stories about what happens to us after someone we love dies. Charlene gathered the stories into her recently published book, *Where the Tree Falls, the Forest Rises*. Each story is told in the first person, directly from the experience as the writer lived it and retold the story.

We had a chance to talk with Charlene the book and her experiences of listening to death stories.

Why did you compile these stories?

The stories started out as this little idea. That idea was born out of the same kind of impulse that the Threshold Care Circle was. Behind it was the experience of a number of deaths and hearing other people tell stories that seemed to be so moving.

Initially, I didn't really have a clear focus other than wanting to gather death stories. That's why my Gmail says deathstories. I started to mention that to people and was encouraged along the way.

What I notice is that when we are impacted by a death and in the time surrounding that death, if you are available as a listener, you hear some pretty incredible things. I realized that I had an opportunity. It kind of came to focus around my mother's death. What is it like when your mother dies? I had experienced death before, but not the death of my mother.

Part of the thought was that I wanted death to not be so taboo. To gather stories and that would open up conversations. Behind this is the wish to get death out of the closet. Not only so that we can do our advance planning and such, but so that we can be open to this very deeply spiritual experience.

You've talked about this "opening" that happens when someone dies. What is that?

When there is a death and there's that raw quality, the filters that normally tell you how to act and how to feel, you aren't able to access them. They don't have as much power in this raw space. Your filters are down. We're all looking for meaning.

Somebody said 'A person can take any "what" if they have a "why."

Death is often an opportunity for us to look for meaning. We look for meaning in the dead one's life, in our lives. This opens us up to exploring these things that we normally keep ourselves too busy to consider.

The person who has died has gone through the threshold and she is going through that gateway. It's like if you're up in an airplane and there's a break in the fuselage, and the person has gone through this threshold and there's this wind and you're holding on to your physical self, but there's a part of you that's being pulled through with them as they make their journey. You're standing at the gateway and you feel the breeze. It makes you more open and vulnerable. So if we can take the opportunity when those things are resonating it's an

opportunity for spiritual growth. Almost every spiritual practice or faith talks about being present. What an act of presence it is if you can stand at the doorway of death and life and be present for that.

What kinds of stories are in the book?

There's a real wide variety. As I started gathering these and putting the word out, I was struggling with how to ask for them. I felt like if I could just come up with a title it would be clearer. I started looking to poetry and in a collection by Wendell Berry there was a poem called *The Rising*, there was a part that talked about where there's death there's re-growth and there's the physical and the spiritual aspect. The title is a line from that poem.

In the 30 pieces in the book, some are written like a story and some are written like a personal essay. I am not a professional editor, and although I had them professionally edited, they are all very different. I tried to get as much diversity as I could in reaching out to different groups. In this collection there are people who have just suffered a loss; there are people who are finding where loss will take them after 15 years. There's the death of a child, unexpected deaths, the death of a parent expected after a long time.

Why is it so difficult for people to face this thing that we know will happen and that happens every day?

I've gotten so accustomed to talking about it, I forget that people don't like to talk about it. I was in a public place and talking to a woman and when she asked me about a home funeral, she started to whisper. And I thought, "Oh, right. Now we're talking about death so we have to talk really quietly."

I hear it said that we're a death-denying culture and that there's a death taboo. I think we just don't know how to talk about it and we need a context and to be given permission and a way for people to listen. Maybe there are not enough listeners.

It's not like death hasn't happened to us in our world. The death of a parent hasn't happened to everybody, but most everybody has had somebody die. When the culture gives you three days bereavement leave, what does that say? Like you're going to be ready to go back to work in three days? It's a big joke. So there is a cultural component here. We need to make places for more listening.

We need to allow some grieving room. I hope the book can help anyone who doesn't know this experience. For example, I don't know what it's like to lose a sibling. But as I walk through these stories with these people, I know a little bit more now. I might be better at listening. It's a way to learn and help yourself to be a better listener.

How can people get the book?

People can order the book at www.createpace.com/3770324.

People can receive five dollars off with the discount code NV45KRWT. They can also order the books through amazon.com or through their local bookstore.
If people like the book, they could write a review on Amazon.com