

Celebrating life by getting in touch with death

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Ten people paid \$40 each to play dead inside an office at a South Austin strip mall earlier this month. They handed in their class registrations to a man dressed like an undertaker and walked into a windowless room containing a makeshift altar, flowers and burning candles.

Amparo Garcia-Crow, 48, was standing behind a lectern as they filed in.

"This is a great day to die," she said.

Four hours of death, Austin-style, followed. It was a groovy, touchy-feely experience, complete with skipping, hugging, laughing, fake murders and teary farewells interrupted by the buzzing of cell phones that participants had forgotten to turn off.

The class is Garcia-Crow's attempt to share what death has taught her about life. The actress, writer and director said it is supposed to be educational rather than therapeutic.

She grew up in San Diego, a small South Texas town where attending funerals was a social event, she said. Her father was stabbed to death in a diner on his 40th birthday by a man who held a grudge against him because he would not give him a ride, said Garcia-Crow, who did not witness her father's death. Two months later, she said, a flood destroyed her family's home.

She had her own brush with death two years ago when doctors found and removed a grapefruit-sized cyst from an ovary, Garcia-Crow said.

When describing how tragedy has affected her life, Garcia-Crow said, she often remembers what her father said to her mother in the minutes after he was stabbed.

"He kept saying, 'They're coming for me,' and 'I've never felt better in my life,' " she said. "It gave me permission and an awareness that a death is a birth."

Her class, called Dead for a Day, is about experiencing a transitional state between living and dying based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, written in the 8th century, she said. That state involved a lot of laughs in the class when she asked participants to stage their own "terrifying, blood-curdling" death.

Some people screamed "No!" and collapsed. Jack Lee, 50, fell to the carpeted floor and made choking sounds.

Lee, a professional actor, said he signed up for the class because he wanted to "just kind of connect with this death thing and be reminded of the fact that we're all temporarily here."

Garcia-Crow asked class members to imagine that a doctor had given them six months to live and then write down reasons they wanted to live - as well as reasons it might be a "relief" to die.

Ammathyst Rose, a 39-year-old healer, said the exercise made her realize that she wanted to live to create a "wonderful, beautiful large theatrical piece."

In another exercise, Garcia-Crow asked participants to pretend they were different ages ranging from 3 to 80. They were supposed to move the way they felt at each age. Clarita Riccobono, a 54-year-old who sells health products from her home, said it helped her review her life.

"There really was a lot of pain that showed up, but I could see it grew me into the being I am today," she said.

The kind of exercises that Garcia-Crow put the class through can be "extremely powerful," said **Worth Kilcrease**, who has a master's degree in counseling and a practice in Austin specializing in death and dying therapy.

"It can bring up for people some things that are residing way back or down deep," he said.

Kilcrease, who did not attend the class, said that because such an experience can be powerful, an instructor needs to be careful

that participants are not traumatized by it.

Garcia-Crow, who said she has been trained in crisis counseling, said that if someone gets upset, she tries to show compassion.

"Death is one of the processes that nobody can get a master's degree in," she said.

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