

THE BALTIMORE SUN

Let's have dinner and talk about death

December 30, 2014

It isn't what she imagined for what Baby Boomers like to call "a post-career career." But Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Ellen Goodman finds herself talking to people about dying. Specifically, about dying the way they want to die.

She began The Conversation Project after her own mother's death at 92. They had never had this conversation and, with her mother suffering from dementia, they couldn't have it. She found herself making difficult decisions about her mother's care without any idea what her mother might have wanted.

"We had talked about everything but this one thing," said Ms. Goodman, "and that is how she wanted to live at the end of her life.

"I never want to leave the people I love that uneasy and bewildered about my own wishes," said the former Boston Globe writer.

From today through Jan. 7, The Conversation Project, in cooperation with Death Over Dinner, which also encourages these conversations, is urging people to pick an evening soon to "fill their tables with comfort food, family and friends and start talking about how they want to live the last days of their lives."

There is a work sheet to help everybody focus on the important decisions — plus a carefully worded invitation, videos to see in advance and dinner time talking points — online at theconversationproject.org. It will help you get started. Later this month, there will even be recipes from celebrity chefs, who will also share their stories about loved ones.

It is the second year for "Let's Have Dinner and Talk About Death." Last year, the organizations say, 1,500 dinners were held and more than 20,000 people visited the websites to download information.

I know. This sounds completely macabre. But, as Ms. Goodman points out, the Boomers have been cultural change agents throughout our lives. Civil rights, women's rights, birth control, natural childbirth, working mothers, gay rights. We are aging now, and death presents another opportunity.

"It is my belief that we are going to change the way we die."

Surveys show, she said, that 90 percent of Americans think this is an important conversation to have, but only 30 percent have had it.

"I think there has been a mutual conspiracy of silence," said Ms. Goodman. "The parents don't want to worry their children, and the children don't want to suggest that their parents might die."

The result is too many people are not dying the way they might have chosen to die, she said, and too many surviving children and spouses are left with the burden of uncertainty and regret in addition to grief.

"Conversations that we should have had, we are having in the intensive care unit," she said.

"It can't be about what [the survivors] want, it can't be about who loved Mom more. It has to be about having your wishes expressed and respected."

There is a significant practical element to this conversation — you are letting your loved ones know who will speak for you when you cannot speak for yourself.

I recently broached this topic with my husband, and he was stunned to learn that I had chosen my sister, the no-nonsense nurse. He had assume it would be he who made the decisions at my bedside.

"I know you," I said. "You will be lost in fear and grief, and you will be unable to move. Lizzie can put on her professional face and, with her background, make clear-headed choices."

Ms. Goodman makes the point that there is no checklist on Earth that can cover all of the eventualities we might face. But those who love us will know what mattered to us and will be that much more prepared.

"We are not saying you will have less care," said Ms. Goodman. "We are saying that those who love you will know what matters to you, how you wanted to live at the end of your life."

For more information about "Let's Have Dinner and Talk About Death," visit theconversationproject.org or deathoverdinner.org.

Susan Reimer's column appears on Mondays and Thursdays. She can be reached at sreimer@baltsun.com and @SusanReimer on Twitter.com