



Project Story: Way to Go! Poetry, Music and Conversation on the End of Life **Pauline Le Bel**

What would it be like to allow the topic of death to enter the room and be acknowledged? Could we chat with open hearts and minds about our fears and hopes? Could we act as people who are all going to die and have one chance to do it? We give much attention to birth, such a blessed event. Death — also a sacred time — deserves as much attention.

On a Sunday afternoon in November, over forty brave folks showed up to give death some serious attention — not only elders, but middle-aged and young people too. As they entered the library, they were welcomed by the soulful cello playing of Matthew van der Giessen. They were greeted in song by Pauline Le Bel, who also read her poems on the end of life — poignant, and at times, lighthearted.





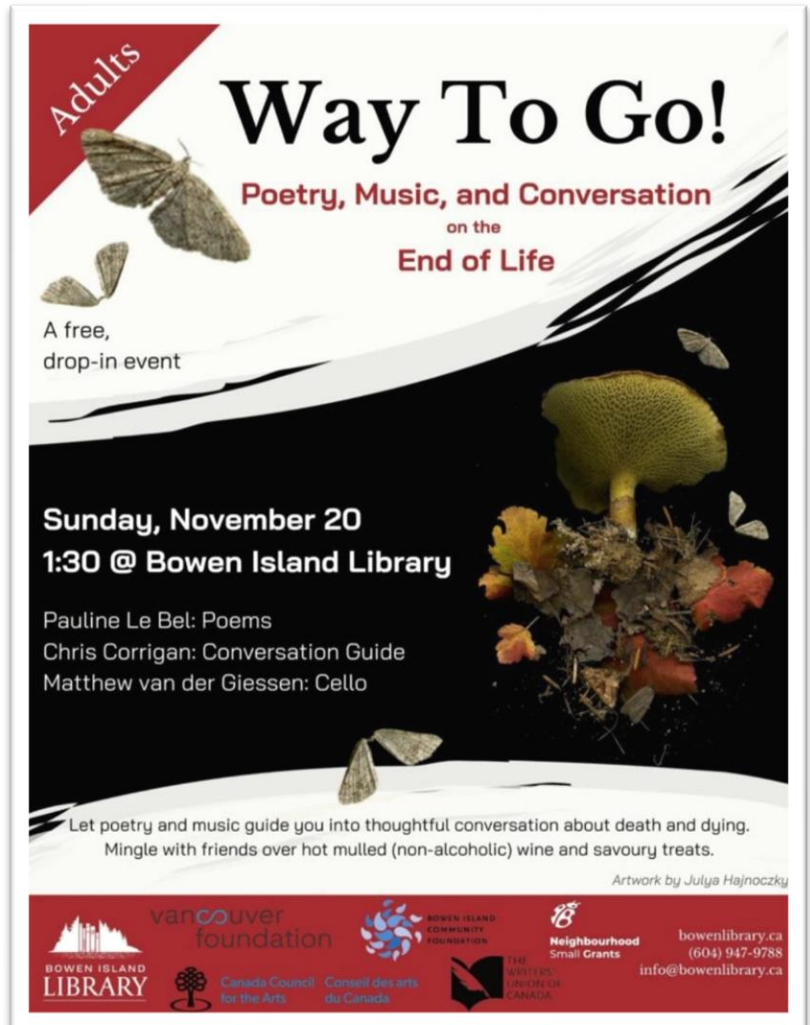
Chris Corrigan then guided the deep conversation, asking questions that arose from the themes of Pauline’s poems: “how would you talk about your own death?” and “what kind of ancestor would you like to be?” Participants went into small groups to facilitate intimate conversation. There was an audible, enthusiastic buzz in the room, created by people who had clearly wanted to talk about death but were silenced by our culture’s taboo. Strangers willingly shared their thoughts about their own death and those of their loved ones.

Then we celebrated with hot mulled non-alcoholic wine (brewed by Pauline and Rabia) and savoury goodies made by Bowen Bites: small triangles of spanakopita, cheese straws and rosemary shortbread — all delicious. And as we nourished our bodies, the conversation continued. Some would have stayed longer, but the library was closing.

The motivation for this event began many years ago when I was caring for my older sister who was diagnosed with a terminal illness. It was a precious, soulful time, which deepened our bond of love and helped me to transform my beliefs about the end of life. After she died, I wrote poems and songs, some of which played a part in Way to Go!

The response to Way to Go! was beyond my wildest dreams. Next day, my email box was full of praise for the event, and requests to do it again. Two Letters to the Editor appeared in the Undercurrent from people grateful for their experience. I’ve attached them, as they speak so clearly of that day.

Many thanks to Bowen Island Community Foundation and Vancouver Foundation for funding Way to Go!





Letters to the Undercurrent November 24, 2022:

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A safe and compassionate space

Dear Neighbours,

I'd like to thank Pauline Le Bel and Chris Corrigan for leading 'Way To Go', a wonderful afternoon gathering at the Library on Sunday, November 20.

Entering the space while Matthew van der Giessen played cello was comfortable and easy. Pauline's poignant and humor-

ous poetry set the tone and Chris' prompts set the intentions for small group sharing.

I enjoyed rich conversations with so many fellow Boweners (most of whom I've never met before as a relative newbie). I so appreciated the safe space, compassionate encouragement and willingness of everyone in attendance to share their experi-

ence, wonder and hopes around death and dying.

Having a space to talk about something we are all going to do one day, but rarely discuss openly, felt liberating.

I hope we will gather again.

- Krista Hensbury

Hard to explain...

I would like to express how delighted I was to attend a remarkable event at the Bowen Island Public Library on Sunday, November 20. Pauline Le Bel produced, "Way To Go — Poetry, Music, and Conversation on the End of Life."

In the lead-up to 1:30 pm Matthew van der Giessen played his cello as about 40 Islanders arrived. I expected it to be a somber session. Somehow, it was seldom about grief, it was more about contemplating our own future and something that is as natural as birth.

It was thoughtful, respectful, and sometimes serious because we all had the opportunity to think about our own end-of-life. But with Pauline's songs and powerful voice, and her often-funny poetry, the mood remained positive and intrigued by the variety of perspectives.

Chris Corrigan hosted the event, and skillfully guided the assembled into small group sessions where we explored questions such as how we wanted to talk about our own death, and who is the ancestor we think we will become?

Pauline had raised some support for this, and at the conclusion we were served savory food, including spanakopita and non-alcoholic mulled wine. I left feeling hopeful about the time I have left, and with a greater appreciation for the members of our Bowen Island community.

I am going to find it difficult to explain to people who were not there what they missed. Thanks to the Library, Pauline, Chris, Matthew, and the volunteers who facilitated this event.

- Robert J. Ballantyne

