



SCOTT MANCHESTER/ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

Marilyn Schlitz with the poster for her movie "Death makes life possible" in her Petaluma home on Tuesday.

Seeking meaning in life, death

By YOVANNA BIEBERICH
ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

Teenagers aren't usually worried about their own mortality, but a near-death experience at the age of 16 prompted Marilyn Schlitz to start thinking about what lies beyond our final breath and how to accept the inevitable fact of life — death.

"I was in a serious motorcycle accident," said Schlitz, a social anthropologist, author and former CEO of the Institute of Noetic Sciences in Petaluma. "My body flew from the motorcycle into the air and I remember watching it as it was tumbling. I felt an awareness that was different from being in my body."

Schlitz survived the accident, but the 66 stitches to her knee marked the beginning of a lifelong search for answers to the questions about life,

death and how we deal with the reality of mortality.

Her thirst for answers led her to earn a Ph.D. in anthropology, and what followed was years of researching how different cultures view consciousness and how those views effect or change the way people live their lives. The author and co-author of a number of books on that topic, Schlitz added filmmaking to her credits this year with the debut of "Death Makes Life Possible," a documentary she made in partnership with alternative medicine advocate Deepak Chopra.

"I had been involved in doing research on different cultural traditions of healing and how different healers approach the process of restoration and wholeness," said Schlitz. "I collected about

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60 interviews from people of different world traditions and then I did a project on conscious transformation and how we change the views of who we are. The book 'Living Deeply' came out of that. It was through that project that I started asking questions about the big transformation—death—and what people think about it."

Her work led to an invitation in 2011 to give a talk on consciousness and mortality with Chopra. He was so impressed by her work that he expressed an interest in making a film with her.

"I was excited, but declined it the next day," said Schlitz. "I was CEO of IONS at the time and just felt like I couldn't take on the fundraising to do it. He encouraged me to do it, though, and said not to worry about it, the money would come. Deepak felt this was an important topic and for that reason he wanted to collaborate on it. So, we went into a major fundraising effort to make the film."

Schlitz left IONS in 2012 to dive deep into the project, which grew to include a companion book of the same title. Through several interviews with scientists, reli-

gious leaders, scholars, doctors and healers, "Death Makes Life Possible" explores how different cultures view death and what many people think happens after we die. It also examines how we can redefine attitudes and fears toward mortality and how a shift in thinking and acceptance of death as a normal part of life can lead to happier, more purpose-driven people.

"Our culture values youth," said Schlitz. "If you get old and die, you somehow are a loser or failed. That's not true. Aging and dying is part of something everyone will face, but at a core level culturally we try to be forever young. I think that puts a lot of pressure on us as we grow older."

As uncomfortable as the topic of mortality is in American culture, it's a conversation that needs to happen, according to Schlitz. The Baby Boomer generation is edging closer to their 70s, and worldwide, there's a graying of the overall population she said will necessitate a redefining of aging and a transformation of fear of dying into awareness and acceptance.

"Boomers have always wanted to do things differently, and I think as they do grow older, dying will be done differently, too," said Schlitz. "Financially, there's

a huge expense at the end of life. I think that as people become more death aware, they take better care of themselves. People exercise more and eat better and have more social engagement. They also do things that offer meaning in life."

There are also negative consequences to death denial, fear being a primary one that Schlitz said leads to pathological practices and dysfunctional behaviors that affect not just the individual, but their families and communities.

"Research says that if people don't come to an awareness of appreciating mortality as a part of life, what gets triggered when they lose someone in their family or get sick is aggressive behaviors," she said. "People get more protective of the in-group and reactive and aggressive toward those with different values. You can look at this globally and see how people are intolerant of each other. How do we begin to broaden the understanding of who we are as a 'we' rather than 'us' against some other group? Death awareness is a tool for promoting this."

"Death Makes Life Possible" also touches on the topic of grief and what tools can be used to deal with it and overcome it. Everything from gratitude journals, walking, community gardens, artistic ex-

pression and community events such as Memorial Day or Day of the Dead provide ways for people to express grief, as well as share it with others who have also gone through loss. Schlitz said these different tools not only help with healing, but also inspire people to rethink their priorities, serve others and seek to do and care about things that have lasting value.

"How do we transform grief into something that inspires us to pay more attention to our kids and giving back to our communities and engaging in creative work that empowers?" she said. "That's the challenge with our culture. It's so materialistic that there's no room in the dominant paradigm for those aspects of ourselves that's immaterial."

The reaction to the film and book has been extremely positive, according to Schlitz, and it's led to additional projects based on them, including podcasts that are available on her website, deathmakeslifepossible.com. Another project is the 10-part educational program she debuted at a retirement community. It met with such success, that a larger chain retirement community is working with Schlitz to provide the program to their approximately 100,000 residents.

"We just completed a guidebook for nurses and doctors," she added. "It's not published yet. I anticipate by October there will be a set of offerings on the website for people to do self-paced learning. The project we did for the retirement communities can also be applied to hospice and chaplaincy. It's got an infinite number of possible expressions. I'm excited about using these as tools and building educational programs for people to engage in the material."

Schlitz also confirmed that "Death Makes Life Possible" will premiere on OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network in October.

"I think the surprise for me has been how many people have been really touched by 'Death Makes Life Possible,'" said Schlitz. "I don't think the book and film are an end all. It's part of something. I think the main thing is how does death invite us to question our assumptions and look at our world view? What gives you meaning and purpose? How can we engage all aspects of life and not just the simple and easy? I think examining these questions can make for happier, healthier and better citizens."

(Contact Yovanna Bieberich at yovanna.bieberich@arguscourier.com. On Twitter at [Yovanna_Argus](https://twitter.com/Yovanna_Argus).)