**Linda Hochstetler: Meet the Mennonite-turned-Buddhist psychotherapist who specializes in the topic of death**

Written by Ben Barak.

You’ll notice a few things upon first impression of Linda Hochstetler. You’ll catch sight of the pearly white hair falling across her forehead. Just below it, you surely won’t miss her thick red glasses; which her cheeks push up slightly when she smiles. You’ll probably also notice the way she looks at you intently as she speaks to you, as though looking passed the window of your eyes.

But most of all, upon first impression of Linda Hochstetler, what you’ll surely pick up on is her contagious energy. This enthusiasm in her voice, an awareness in her eyes.

“I just don’t waste energy on things that don’t matter,” she tells me with a smile.

An important skill. Especially for a 55-year-old Buddhist psychotherapist whose life revolves around conversation, and especially when that conversation is very often about the subject death and dying.

Hochstetler is a social worker based in Toronto and a meditation teacher with Awaken in Toronto, an organization that she co-founded five years ago. Among other ventures, she also teaches a masters in Pastoral studies course at the University of Toronto’s Buddhism program, and is a clinical supervisor for up-and-coming Buddhist chaplains.

As a social worker, Hochstetler has specialized in the topic of death and dying for the past five years, and believes in the benefit of speaking about it openly.

“I’m trying to touch as many lives as I can, and help people go to places that they can’t go on their own, particularly around death,” she said. “I find the more we go into that place, the more it affects the way we live our life. And that’s the part I love, I want to change the way we live our lives.”

That’s true for the various couples, individuals and families that she sees through her private psychotherapy practice, which she runs out of an office in the Village Healing Centre located in Toronto’s Roncesvalles neighbourhood, as well as numerous other initiatives she’s part of that delve deep into the topic.

Hochstetler runs “Death Cafés” every couple of months, where strangers — often 25-35 out of an online community of hundreds— gather at a local coffee shop to discuss various topics related to death. She also hosts a monthly “Death, Dying and Community” group, where participants discuss practical things like wish writing at end of life, but also existential topics like the fate of the body and consciousness after death.

So does delving so often into the topic ever affect her state of mind? Not like you’d think.

“It makes me happier,” she says. “So it’s such an opposite from what people imagine... There’s a richness to conversations that really matter.”

As is there a richness to simply contemplating the topic regularly, she says—a facet of her Buddhist faith. She once had a phone app called “WeCroak,” which sends the user multiple reminders a day that they are one day going to die.

“I had that one for a while, it’s kind of fun,” she says with a chuckle.

But the strength to face the topic openly developed through years of exposure from early childhood. Born in Montana to a Mennonite family, Hochstetler’s upbringing was very much part of the Mennonite spiritual community. Her parents spoke openly about death when she was a child, she says, getting advance care plans and writing their wills early, and she would regularly attend funerals where it was customary to touch the body of the deceased.

At 18, she moved to Canada, where she would find her place in Buddhism. Soon, after an undergraduate degree in psychology in Waterloo and a master in social work degree at the University of Toronto, Hochstetler found herself working for an employee assistance program under a sector called “critical incident response.” She was sent on-site to provide counselling to employees following a death in the workplace, and once counselled employees at a branch of the Toronto Public Library where someone had ended their life by suicide by jumping off the library bannister.

After 13 years working that job, her division closed and she was laid off in 2014. And so began a new adventure. Unemployed at 50, Hochstetler realized, “almost overnight,” she says, that she wanted to study death and dying.

She rode an overnight bus down to New York City once a month to study contemplative end of life care, and later became certified in palliative care at Mohawk College in Hamilton. From there, she volunteered at Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto, counselling palliative care patients and relatives as they sat for hours in the waiting room.

“I can tell you it makes me fearless,” Hochstetler says, on how her experiences have molded her emotional state. “When you sit there and watch death approach hundreds of times…You just really learn to understand that this is the way it is; this is the way it works.”

It likely also helps that Hochstetler is deeply spiritual and an avid meditator, a token of her Buddhist faith. She’s completed silent meditation retreats ranging from two weeks to two months, which she says “rejuvenate her,” but most of all, she says she learns from teaching meditation to her dozens of students.

Bat Fung, Hochstetler’s friend who often looks to her for guidance in his meditative path, says that her skill is in her ability to relate to students.

“She’s very good at relaying the message in a way that people can listen to, which makes her a very powerful teacher,” he says.

Sarah Rix, also a student of Hochstetler’s, says that her ability to relate is paired equally with knowing to push students passed their comfort zone, and how far to push.

But perhaps the key in defining Hochstetler’s contribution to the field of meditation—and equally, to social work—is her seamless blending together of all that she is part of.

Sarah Knox is a close friend of Hochstetler’s, and the two together started a childcare co-op called The Kinder Garden. Knox says that Hochstetler entrepreneurially expands her Buddhism and social work background into both the subject of death and dying, and her meditation classes.

Hochstetler spreads “an ethic, a set of values that is about living a full life deeply connected to others and deeply spiritual at the same time,” Knox says.

For Linda Hochstetler, all that and more is simply part of her greater purpose. As I ask her about the source of her motivation, she responds with a smile and answers confidently.

“I feel like I want to continue to change the world in some way… I want to leave an impression on the world,” she says. “I don’t believe it’s sufficient to simply have my own happiness and my family happiness. I really go beyond the nuclear family; I go beyond into my community with my vision.”