The coffee shop: so much more than just coffee

If life has taught me anything, it is that community is everything. I learned this throughout my life - in family, in work and in the friendships that deepened quietly over the years.

My wife and I live close to a small coffee shop. I have to admit it's a ridiculous expense for us as we could actually make coffee at home for a few cents. Instead, we spend what any sensible accountant would call a small fortune each month on cups of coffee … and the odd bacon and egg roll.

We love the coffee there, but it's probably conversation, belonging, routine and laughter that makes it so special. It's the reason we leave our home each day. A place where people notice if we don't turn up and at our age that's important.

The coffee shop is a modest affair, just a few tables, a coffee machine humming away and the smell of ground beans in the air. In our community though, it has become something else entirely. The coffee shops our meeting place.

Most of us who gather there are late 70s, early 80s, a great vintage. With that comes a curious mix of professions and life experience. We carry more stories than we used to and definitely more fragility and more specialist appointments. We have more aches, more walking sticks and take careful steps. You look at a group of us shuffling in, one step at a time, and it's hard not to smile. Smiling is important.

The coffee shop gives structure to my day now that I'm retired. We get up, head down, and take our place. It doesn't matter whether we stay ten minutes or two hours, the point is that we arrived and we are known. In my suburb, people still look after each other. We notice if someone hasn't been seen for a while. Someone will ask, someone will follow up. We genuinely care. We organise meals for neighbours who are unwell, lifts to doctors, grocery runs, even pet minding.

We discuss things all manor of things while we drink our coffee. Some mornings it feels like a small parliament has assembled. Local issues are debated with surprising intensity - the footpaths that need fixing or council decisions that make no sense to anyone. Other mornings, we turn to more practical matters. It's not uncommon for someone to arrive with a new My Aged Care plan and lay it on the table for interpretation. Between us, we carry a formidable amount of knowledge about systems, support, and services.

For many, the coffee shop is a doorway. Some people live alone or have lost partners. Some are simply at that stage of life where the world has become smaller. It's ordinary life, shared. Our neighbours come from all over the world. You hear it in the air - Danish, French, Russian, the occasional American voice, and my own Dutch accent still hanging around after all these years. People drift in and out, often with dogs in tow, hopeful for a treat. There is something about coffee that levels people, the titles disappear and backgrounds don't matter.

And then, one day, there is an empty chair.

For ten years Ole' and I walked each morning and like many great friendships, it settled into a simple rhythm - a daily walk up the hill, and then back again to recover at the coffee shop and solve the world's problems. It was a casual arrangement without a schedule, just a rhythm we both under-

stood. Some days we talked and some days we didn't. Our friendship didn't require constant noise, it was built on turning up, not performance. The best friendships are like that, they are gentle and not demanding.

In January 2026 Ole' passed away at the age of 95 after a short and devastating illness. People tell me 95 was a good innings but that doesn't make the loss any easier.

We feel his absence at the coffee shop in a way that is difficult to describe. Ole' was a quiet man with a wise steadiness about him and a contagiously calm way of listening. His chair is still there, of course. Someone else may sit in it from time to time. But we all know that there is a difference between a chair being empty and a precious friend missing.

Since Ole' passed, I've continued walking and going to the coffee shop. But the rhythm has changed as I walk alone now. The route has changed slightly also, mainly because of my poor eyesight. Ole' managed our busier road crossings, he chose the right moment, guiding us through traffic without fuss. Without him, I've had to adjust, slowing down and choosing safer paths. Life continues, but it continues differently.

We didn't grieve at the coffee shop with a ceremony, there were no speeches. Instead our grief simply sits among us, like another regular. From time to time, someone will mention Ole' in passing, a small story, a quiet laugh. And in those moments Ole' joins us again. That is what coffee shops like this do. They help us live with our grief and remember. We drink our coffee with our friends and other familiar faces. It's simply a "good morning." It doesn't sound like much but it is.

So whilst the the coffee we buy is expensive and on paper, it makes no sense at all, I look around at the conversations, the laughter and the gentle support and I realise we are not just paying for coffee. We are investing in our friendships and even now with Ole's chair empty at the coffee shop we are held together.

Ole' may be gone, but he has not disappeared. Not while his seat is remembered. Not while his stories are told. Not while we keep showing up.

And so tomorrow morning, like every morning, we will walk through the door, order our coffee, take our seats ….

and keep on living.

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