

The Quandary of Choice: End-of-Life Spiritual Care
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Periodically, some brave, terminally ill individual decides to choose when to end their own life. And in doing so, they become national news, refueling a debate that continues to wage over whether or not we have the right in these circumstances to decide when our lives should end.

Medical science has now given us the ability to sustain life well past what nature might otherwise dictate and where there is life, some would maintain that there is always hope. But at what cost? And when did it become wrong, or even sinful, to allow nature to take its course.

My position about end-of-life care, especially end-of-life spiritual care, is strong. I believe in choice. I believe because as a gerontology nurse I witnessed the suffering of my patients, day in and day out, for years. Many of them were left to die excruciating deaths because no wanted to or could address the needs of the terminally ill patient. Fortunately, times are changing.

I believe that for a decision like this to be made it requires a steadfast faith in God-Universe, family and, definitely, oneself. I am quite sure that this decision is not a fleeting thought, but rather a very deep introspective evaluation of self, the quality of life, and the power to choose what is right for oneself.

We live our whole life making choices that emanate from our spiritual values. We decide what road we should take (or not take) based upon inner reflection and knowing. We have the opportunity to step into our destiny by making choices that honor our life's path. In this one instance when we are striving for dignity, we are made to walk through a myriad of obstacles to harness the inner peace of choice.

I believe in miracles. Could the miracle here be that we are now talking about end-of-life care, diligently trying to understand the plight and needs of the terminal patient? Could the miracle be that we are looking at each other with a kind and reverent heart, especially the terminal patient, because of the courage of those who have changed the system? The idea of "dying with dignity" becoming a mainstream topic of discussion amongst professionals, spiritual leaders and others is an opportunity to expand humanity's kindness.

I believe in God. In moments like this, "God is in the choosing." God is in the thought. God is in the discovery. God is in the obstacle. God is in the discussion. God is in the answer. Could the presence of something holy be in a decision about the cessation of life? I believe that God is part of us, all of us, including the terminally ill patient. I do believe that there is no separation between God and love, kindness, thoughtfulness, generosity, hope, and us. In times of turmoil, if you are a spiritual person, you enter a sacred place within for contemplation, quietness and ultimately, to seek out answers. And, if you are a steward of listening, the answers come.

I think back, just three short years, to my mother's passing. After much consultation, both medically and spiritually, while upholding my mother's wishes, I made the decision to stop giving my mother her life-sustaining insulin and Lasix four days before she died. It was clear to me that the lack of this medicine could ultimately halt my mother's breath. **It was one of the hardest things I would ever have to do.** But, it wasn't about me, it was about what she wished and hoped for at the end of her life. It was about dignity, not my selfish need to have my mother here beyond her 71st year.

Because I am an advocate of making decisions for end-of-life care, both spiritually and medically, I had prompted my mother to talk about what she felt years before her passing. I had a clear understanding of what she wanted. We did not come to the decision lightly. We prayed about it. We talked about it. We even cried about it. But, what my mother knew most was that she wanted to have control of her end-of-life care and wanted to leave this world, and enter the next place with absolute dignity and grace. And, that she did accomplish.

So, yes, I do have a position about end-of-life care. It is one shrouded with love, thoughtfulness, reverence, and spirituality. And ultimately, it is one gifted with choice.