

Life's Decisions

I believe that California should pursue a law that protects end-of-life aid for terminally-ill individuals who are suffering. Speaking from first-hand experience, it was intensely frustrating to witness someone struggling with end-of-life health issues and suffering, but if the law is instituted, it would allow individuals to freely choose to die in peace. According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, over 50% of dying patients in hospitals experience significant pain in the last stages of terminal illnesses. The ability to terminate one's life, should conditions dictate, would grant individuals the dignity to know that their life was lived to the end. Mark Twain once said, "From the cradle to his grave a man never does a single thing which has any first and foremost object but one – to secure peace of mind, spiritual comfort, for himself." Life and death are completely different stages of the human experience, yet they are interdependent of each other. However, when someone is presented with the decision of when to die, it allows them personal independence, with an underlying sense of tranquility, in the knowledge that they can experience a peaceful death. Even in death, there is a value to life.

I had the distinct privilege of being a volunteer at a local hospice. This program allowed me the opportunities to engage in a number of outreach activities, such as making Memory Bears; this program involved volunteers, like myself, gathering fabric from a deceased patient's clothing to make a teddy bear to give to the surviving family members in their moments of grief. Each action I engaged in created a ripple effect, a positive outcome for others to assist them in their grief. The feeling of personal satisfaction in helping far exceeded anything tangible or materialistic; through the hospice patient who I encountered, I was able to experience love and, in return, be loved unconditionally.

Gloria would often say, "Living in the golden years is a bunch of rubbish!" Diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, this eighty-three year old small, fragile woman loved to socialize and tell others about her life. She was born in Shanghai, China, raised as a privileged child, yet upon moving to America in 1942, was rounded up to a Japanese internment camp as the result of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The next three years proved difficult for Gloria and her family as they struggled to adapt to the hardships of camp life. Several times, she had to eat horse meat rather than go hungry. Though Gloria struggled during this time in her early life, she became a stronger woman and lived her last moments fully, surrounded by her family and friends.

As a hospice volunteer, I visited Gloria, administered Holy Communion, and read her biblical passages, since she became homebound as a result of a recent stroke and the ever degenerative struggle with Parkinson's. My time with her was a gift; she received that slice of the "outside world" through my contact and enjoyed every one of our visits. I witnessed, through Gloria, that dying is the culmination of life and that everyone, one day, will experience it.

Volunteering at hospice was not an easy thing to do; I was working in an environment with people who were terminally ill and constantly dying. As a young high

school student, this was initially difficult to experience. The hospice provided palliative care, which by definition means that they relieve, as well as prevent, patients from suffering as they near their death. There were several times when I would make introductory contact with a patient only to discover that the next week, they had passed away. Initially, this was disheartening, yet as time went by, I realized that these patients actually thrived on the simple act of companionship with others; this realization gave me purpose and strength to continue. While death is challenging to endure as a caregiver, I know that I will need to become accustomed to this part of life as I pursue a career as a doctor. I know that such a career will be extremely time consuming and strenuous, but my heart is set, my goal is clear. Being a caregiver to the homebound elderly has given me a whole new perspective into the geriatric phase of life and the challenges one encounters maintaining dignity until one's end.

Three months after meeting Gloria, she died in the privacy of her own home. Her daughter was present when she passed, and it was a relief to know that Gloria's suffering came to a peaceful end. Her advance directive stated that upon her inability to eat, she did not want a feeding tube administered to artificially keep her alive. This concept parallels with the rules of aid in dying so that patients can fully express their wishes of treatment when they are incapable of doing so in the final stage of their life. Being a patient of hospice allowed Gloria to live the end of her life naturally, and to feel both satisfied and at ease when it was her time to pass.

Creating a law in California to assist in the aid in dying would allow many individuals the opportunity to experience a gentle, yet predictable end of life. Terminally-ill people would not have to endure prolonged suffering as they would demonstrate the authority over their own life and death. Having that ability would provide the vulnerably ill the gift to "secure peace of mind, spiritual comfort," for themselves in their final moments of life.