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The Right to Die Should Be a Personal Decision

Michael Burcham - Opinion

Stories of individuals who are facing a terminal illness (especially the recent story of Brittany Maynard, who moved from California to Oregon for the right to end her life peacefully) are heartbreaking and polarizing all at the same time.

Some applaud — some cry foul — but few of the critics are facing an immediate end to their mortality. That is why such a decision is so deeply personal.

Honestly, I am not a fan of the term “physician-assisted suicide.” If you’ve ever sat with someone who is actively dying from a terrible, progressive disease, there’s nothing that feels “suicidal.” The person is already dying, and they’re quite aware of their situation. Their pain and discomfort — in many cases — is increasing. They are not saying, “I want to end my life.” They are saying, “If this is going to happen to me, can I have a say in how it happens?”

When I reflect on the conversation going on in California, we should all remember that access to life-ending drugs is only one tiny aspect of the hundreds of hard choices an individual makes when facing a terminal disease.

Here are a few:

- How do I manage my pain and nausea?
- What happens when I can no longer dress myself? When I can no longer take care of my "bathroom needs," what do I want then?
- If I can no longer swallow, do I want the health care community to insert a tube in my throat that feeds me?
- Do I want to keep my heart beating when all my other organs are failing?
- When I can no longer communicate discomfort or pain — but I still feel it — who will monitor me and keep me comfortable and pain-free?
- If my disease totally destroys my life, sends me into continuous seizures, a coma, do I want to continue when I can no longer participate in life?

There are many physicians and other professionals within the medical community who have long had empathy for such situations and feel compelled to do *something* — even when the *something* has no meaningful value.

Can we restore what was historically accurate; that the end of life is one of the most sacred, intimate and highly personal moments? None of us should sit in judgment of another's terminal situation unless you want to sign up for the same journey.

A friend of mine, Mr. John Jay Hooker, is facing terminal cancer. He told me recently, "If I am going to die, the last civil right I have should be to decide on my terms where, how and when that happens. I would do that for the pet I dearly love. Why can't I do that for me? If I can peacefully exit this life without pain, seizure or other trauma, don't I have the right to make that call?" John Jay Hooker still fighting, for life and death

He is right.

There are so many ways we can help one another in those last few months, weeks and moments of life. It is the most intimate time we can share. If you've ever held the hand of someone you deeply love who is dying, you are forever changed in how you view such a passing from this life.

For myself, when it comes to my last moments — if granted any say in the process — I do not want to be in a hospital bed, hooked to tubes in a cold, impersonal environment with strangers coming in and out to see if I've breathed my last breath. I do not want to die to the sound of cardiac monitors, nurse call buttons beeping and the smell of disinfectant in the air.

In those final moments, I want to be home, surrounded by James Taylor, the smell of my mom's peach cobbler and holding the hands of those I love and cherish.

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