

60 REASONS TO SUPPORT NEW YORK'S MEDICAL AID IN DYING ACT

Betty Rollin

New York, New York



Reason #47

So that no one has to consider breaking the law to grant their loved one's last wish: to die in peace without needless suffering.

My mother was the world's most cheerful person. Her glass, as they say, was half full. If it rained, she'd say it was good for the flowers. When her only child—me—got cancer, she thought how lucky we were that I didn't die.

And when, at the age of 74, she got ovarian cancer, she fought the good fight, endured the most punishing chemotherapy, and during the year chemotherapy bought her, lived to the hilt. She even had a gentleman friend!

When the cancer recurred, she was sad, but she took it in stride. It soon became clear that the disease had gained a foothold and that she would die soon. At this point, she was only truly comfortable when she slept. One late afternoon I'll never forget, she told me what she wanted to do. She lay in bed, a pink nylon cap covering the few strands of hair she had left:

"I've had a wonderful life," she said in a half whisper, "but now it's over, or it should be. I'm not afraid to die, but I am afraid of this cancer, what it's doing to me...There's never any real relief from it now. Nothing but nausea and pain and hopelessness. There's no treatment anymore. So what happens to me now? I'll die slowly. I don't want that. Who does it benefit if I die slowly? There's no point in a slow death, none. I've never liked doing things with no point. I've got to end this."

Many sick people talk this way. Some of them mean it. I knew my mother meant it because she brought it up continuously over the next few weeks—even on days that she didn't feel so horribly sick.

Of course I didn't hand my mother a gun. I knew what the law was—assisting a suicide was at that time—1983—was illegal in every state—and my husband and I both were afraid to break it. My mother's pain could be controlled somewhat, but not entirely, and nothing could control her misery and terror and, worst of all, her feeling of helplessness, of being in the grip of something terrible that would surely become worse and that she could not control.

We had to do something. But we were not only afraid of breaking the law; we were afraid of trying to help her die and failing. We were amateurs at dying. My husband was a math professor, I a journalist. What did we know about helping someone to die, let alone to die painlessly? But we couldn't bear to stand by and do nothing. We began to do research.

We found out what it would take for her to die "safely," that is without suffering. But we were terrified that, even if we found pills for her to take, she might throw them up. That is the fate of many people. I know because, since writing a book about all of this, I hear from people who

To join our mission, email Amanda Cavanaugh at acavanaugh@compassionandchoices.org.

 compassion
& choices

have tried to die and failed. We knew we had to have a doctor's help, or at least advice. We finally found a doctor who told us what drugs to get, how to get them, and said he would advise us, anonymously, over the phone. Still, we were terrified.

The doctor came through and my mother eased out of life as we hoped she would, and more important, as she hoped she would—painlessly, gracefully, gratefully. I loved my mother—I still miss her and I'm moved by the memory of her death—but it isn't a painful memory. And that's because watching her die was like watching someone you love go over a prison wall. She was so grateful to escape—and we were so grateful she made it. And we were grateful that, at the end of her life, she had some peace.

I wrote a book about this experience, *Last Wish*, published in 1985 and republished in 1998. Surprisingly, the book was a *NYTimes* bestseller. It was also published in 19 countries and made into a TV movie in 1992 starring Patty Duke as me and Maureen Stapleton as my mother. As a result, I heard from a lot of people. Many of them were in a similar situation—with very different endings. Some of them watched helplessly as their loved one died a long, agonized death. Others tried to kill their mother or sister or husband and failed, which led to more misery for everyone. Almost no one, without a doctor's help, was able, as one woman put it, "to rescue my husband from life."

And now, 38 years later, people who live in 10 states and Washington, D.C. are able to have the same kind of peace that we had. An important fact is that many of those terminally ill people who request medical aid in dying don't use the help. But it means everything to them to know it's there. I've come to think that is what these laws are really about: giving terminally ill people peace of mind to know they can escape from a life of suffering they no longer want. And if they don't choose to end their lives, they know the

option is there. The option kills the fear. Because of that, many who have the option to die when they feel ready don't take it! It's enough for them just to know they're not trapped. From what I've seen over the years, that's what these medical aid-in-dying laws are mostly about.

Two and a half years ago, we learned that a colonoscopy my husband had, as the surgeon put it, "missed" his Stage 4 colon cancer. My husband was given two years to live and that's what he got. He died last November. Our lives had been full of happiness and good fortune and, even as he was dying, we were grateful. And he was so brave. He tried to hide his suffering from me, but of course I saw it and felt it. We had hospice, so he had good pain control and we were able to afford private duty nurses, so that he could die at home. But it wasn't a quick death. As brave as he was, his last wish was a scream: "Let me die!" But we live in New York State, where medical aid in dying is not authorized yet, so, in effect, no one heard him.

I am 85 now and I am asking—begging—lawmakers to pass New York's Medical Aid in Dying Act—in memory of my husband, for me, and for everyone else who will die someday who would be comforted just to know the law is there.

To join our mission, email **Amanda Cavanaugh** at acavanaugh@compassionandchoices.org.

