

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

Richard Friedberg

His daughter, Elinor, used medical aid in dying in Oregon

New York, New York



Reason #52

So that despite the pain of losing a daughter, a father's lasting memory can be of her peaceful death.

My daughter Elinor — talented, gregarious, beautiful, courageous and beloved — died early in July 2011, five years after being diagnosed at age 36 with breast cancer.

There was surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, which gave her lymphedema (and all the byproducts of lymphedema: compression bandages on her left arm [she was left-handed], an excruciatingly restrictive diet, tedious daily massage to draw the lymph elsewhere, and she could sadly not tend her plants.) Through it all, she never missed a dance class.

She was an official belly dance instructor at two institutions and continued to perform at nightclubs during her five years of remission. She loved the centrality of belly dance, the way all movements proceed from the trunk rather than from the limbs; she developed a precision and independence of movement in the lower back and waist that was not matched by anyone in the professional classes I watched her participate in.

Of course, dancers must also smile. And she smiled brilliantly, with her many-colored skirt swirling around her. In the classes she taught, she dispensed joy that gave no hint of what she was suffering. She had taken up belly dance at Reed College, and after graduating in 1992 she continued to live in Portland, Oregon. She was dark of complexion, and audiences often assumed that she had a Middle Eastern heritage. When she explained that she was actually a Jew from New York, they nodded with understanding — to them that was equally exotic. Dance gave her a self.

In September 2010, she learned that the cancer had spread — to the other breast and elsewhere. The doctors gave her less than a year to live, without medication, which might extend to two or three with continued chemotherapy. She would have no more of it. Better one year of life as she wished it than several more of misery. She refused all further treatment, ate as she wished, allowed the sun to kiss her skin as it would, and married her long-time boyfriend (loving and steadfast through it all) in an unforgettable ceremony. Everything that could go wrong went right.

She was, of course, eligible for Oregon's Death with Dignity law, but her doctors, always committed to the prolongation of life, were not ready to certify the required six-months-to-live. She and her husband embarked on a round-the-world tour, starting with Hawai'i. They got as far as New Zealand. Without warning a terrible abdominal pain struck her, unceasing. The cancer, now

spreading through the abdomen, had settled on the mesentery, that waving structure that carries the small intestine like the edge of a fan. Bumping against something, it had twisted itself into a configuration in which the intestine was obstructed. She could not hold down any medication. After long hours of agony, while the doctors considered the pros and cons of surgery, the bowel untwisted itself and she was out of immediate danger.

The honeymoon over, they returned to Portland and Elinor began to campaign earnestly and urgently for the permission to die legally. By this time the cancer was also eating its way through her liver, and I prayed that this organ would be consumed and its toxins sent to her brain, giving her a quiet and merciful death before the terrible enemy grasped her again by the gut. She did have one more such attack, again self-resolving. Like the first, it struck without warning. It was clear that the thing could happen at any moment of any day.

Finally, at the beginning of July, permission was granted. She announced to a small group of close friends that the medicine would arrive in a few days and that there would be a roof party above her dance studio. She had previously said her last goodbye to her mother and siblings, and to others not present. During the remaining days, the first rose of summer appeared near the porch, solitary and large. She was glad to have lived long enough to see it, she said.

On the last night, there was live music played by friends, refreshments and conversation, performances of various kinds by the guests, and all that makes a good party. Two representatives from Compassion & Choices were there, and their advice and support at certain junctures was invaluable. At midnight two friends appeared with solemn faces and an eight-ounce glass holding the medication. They warned her it wouldn't taste good.

This was the point of no return. She drank it all without hesitation, announced loudly, "That tasted terrible!", lay back, and died in her husband's arms.

I doubt that I could ever be as brave as Elinor. But I'm now in my 80s, and cancer is common in my family. The chance of my living for more than ten years is slim. I'm in no hurry to die; but when my turn does come, I would like to be allowed to die in the manner that I choose.

**To join our mission, email Amanda Cavanaugh
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