

**Testimony for the
Joint Public Health Committee
House Hon. Chair Kate Hogan
and Senate Chair Hon. Jason Lewis and Committee Members
on
The Compassionate Care for the Terminally Ill Act
October 27, 2015**

For me, this isn't a question about death. It's a question about life. How is it we want to spend the last minutes of living, who gets to choose and what our options might be. While science and medicine have made enormous strides in pain management, some people endure hideous endings. Certainly, for some, a wish to live as long as possible and to die "naturally" is a cognizant choice. I have watched people go to extraordinary lengths to live longer and dip into stores of unimaginable strength to bear pain. I have admiration for those people. It was their choice.

I have also watched people give up on life with what seemed to me, too little fight. People who said no to drugs, to treatment, to what some might say was life. It took more work for me to find admiration for those people, but I did, because it was their choice. And I have watched people all along the spectrum. Those who tried one more thing so they could live to see a grandchild's wedding. Those who survived rounds of chemotherapy to the benefit of their health but who told me privately, "I will never do that again. It wasn't worth it. If I had known, I would have opted out." I have admiration for each because it was their choice.

We live in a complex world, made more complex by science. We are faced with scientific capacities at times ahead of our ethical, moral and spiritual capacities. We have living wills, do-not-resuscitate orders and hospice care. But what we have always had is choice.

Whether it was legal or not, people have been choosing all along. In conversation with a relative, I just found out an uncle dying of lung cancer had a stash of pills under his mattress — almost 30 years ago. My father died 8 years ago. He had multiple sclerosis. He also had a stash of pills. "The worst thing, the very worst thing, is the pain." It could be hideous. He told me about his pills. He never used them. But it meant something to know if the pain became too great, he could leave.

Today, as a religious leader I urge you to hear that loving one another should not require suffering through our final days, weeks and months of living. As a daughter, I offer my father's voice through mine. Please hear him, and picture your own father, sibling, child, knowing they will be parting soon. Picture the grimace, hard as it may be. Note our natural feeling of wishing they would stay. Because it is so natural for us to fight loss. But then picture the powerful gift we as a society could offer, by making aid in dying a choice.

Thank you,
Rev. Wendy von Courter
Unitarian Universalist Church of Marblehead, MA