

Madam Chairs and Members of the Committee:

I am Rev. Sidat Balgobin, a retired Minister of the United Church of Christ, sometimes known as the Congregational Church. I am also a former Hospice Chaplain and a Certified Spiritual Director. I live in Norwich, CT and am here in support of House Bill 6645, An Act Concerning Compassionate Aid in Dying for the Terminally Ill.

Earlier this month I wrote a two page commentary on this issue (attached). The title is, "From Certainty To Compassion." An abridged version was printed in The Norwich Bulletin on March 5th. The day after the op ed piece appeared, about a dozen people reached out to me thanking me for putting words of support to this issue, an issue which they each cared deeply about. Many of those were Catholics and some were elderly. All wanted to at least have this choice available to them when the time came when they could be facing a terminal illness themselves.

To me, the two central questions we each must ask ourselves are: what is the compassionate thing to do? The second is like it: what is the right thing to do? We are called to use both our heads and our hearts in this. It is ultimately a matter of conscience. People of faith will come out on different sides of this issue. There is no one correct answer in response to our faith and our beliefs. I am here to urge you to use all of your wisdom and experience to answer for yourselves what is compassionate and right. We are not here to discuss religious beliefs or views. That should not be the issue before a legislative committee hearing. And yet our faith and ethical beliefs - whatever they may be - must inform us. That is precisely the reason I fully support this bill. To me, it is right and compassionate. This law would give great comfort to those facing a terminal illness whether they choose to use this choice or not.

Having this bill enacted into law will give comfort to everyone simply knowing the choice is available. It will not only relieve physical pain and suffering, but mental anguish and anxiety. It will allow for emotional, mental and spiritual healing to take place at the end of life by allowing for a more peaceful space in which to reflect. Yet at some point, pain and suffering becomes unendurable. With the enactment of this law, a life can be celebrated with family and loved ones before passing on. It will allow for a graceful passage. I urge each of you to support this bill. Thank you.

From Certainty to Compassion

Over 40 years ago when I was a young man of 22, recently graduated from college and ready to take my first professional job, Nancy and I wanted to get married before we moved to New Jersey. Every Catholic priest we met told us there was no way we could do it. I was Protestant, and to complicate matters we wanted to get married in 3 weeks. The Catholic church had rules, and we didn't fit. The decision hit Nancy's father the hardest as he was a lifelong Catholic in good standing. He had arranged for a meeting of the Bishop hoping for some special dispensation. At the meeting, the Bishop explained the rules that prohibited him from agreeing to this marriage. Just as every priest we had met before, he told us this could not take place.

Yet I could see that he was a wise and kind man. I told him that it was really all right with me and Nancy to get married in a Protestant church, I even had a minister friend who could perform the ceremony. But I explained that Nancy's father would believe in his heart that we were not really married. Not any marriage outside the Church. He told us that the Church no longer taught that. I agreed this was a good change, but that nevertheless, Nancy's father still believed it - the church had taught it to him since he was a boy. I then asked him a simple question: What is the compassionate thing to do? He held this question for some time. Then he quietly said, Yes, I will allow the marriage. In that moment that faithful man moved from certainty to compassion, from rules to love.

The State of Connecticut legislature will soon consider a bill which would allow for choice at the end of life. I expect the bill will be similar to one in Oregon which has strict guidelines for its use. A Momentum Analysis and American Viewpoint poll taken in 2012 shows that approximately two thirds of Connecticut residents support patient choice to end needless pain and suffering near the end of life. Many people of faith and good moral character will oppose this bill; others will support it. I am among those who support it. Here's why. If it ever comes that I face pain and suffering with no medical alternative to dying, I would want the choice. This is not to say that from here I know what I would do, I do not know. But I know this much, I would want the choice to die with dignity, to say goodbye to my loved ones, to celebrate the life I've lived and then peacefully pass on to what lies next.

Good people of faith may call this a sin or have answers for what judgement may lie ahead for me if I were to choose this. Others may oppose it for entirely different reasons, citing a slippery slope of euthanasia or elderly abuse. But none of those things have happened in Oregon where this has been the law of the land for years. Not one instance in 14 years. Yet just having the choice can provide comfort for those with a terminal illness. People of faith can make an argument based on their selected readings of Scripture. My faith informs me to love God and others above all else, to not be judgmental, to not be certain. My journey has brought me to this wisdom: the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. I don't offer certainty and, truthfully, I don't trust the wisdom of those who do. Walking humbly with God is the path I choose. I don't offer to force my beliefs on anyone.

Years ago I was called to the bedside of a woman I had never met and who was dying. When I stood by the bed, the woman had shallow breathing and was asleep. With her friend on one side of the bed and me on the other I said a prayer. Then I

looked down at her as I began The Lord's Prayer, these familiar words. I held her hand and gently stroked her hair. I closed my eyes. By the end of the prayer the woman had died peacefully. I felt that her spirit was now somewhere else. I think of that scene and wish something peaceful for my own passing. And it will inevitably come one day. But I also know that the process of dying is not always peaceful. Indeed, it can often be just the opposite. For some it will hold fear, anxiety and excruciating pain.

I do believe that any illness holds within it the blessing of grace and the potential for healing. I have seen firsthand the healing that can take place at the end of one's life. This is not physical healing, but a serenity that was formerly out of reach. Illness and even the process of dying bring with it a possibility of peace beyond understanding. I believe in the redemptive power of illness and conscious dying.

This is the gift that hold the possibilities near the end of life. It cannot be forced on anyone. And I believe we all yearn for that which will heal and set us free, even near the end of life. The Irish poet and former Catholic priest John O'Donohue wrote a book of blessings. In his poem, "For a Friend on the Arrival of Illness", he encourages us to, "use this illness/As a lantern to illuminate/The new qualities which emerge in you." He ends his poem,

*May you keep faith with your body,
Learning to see it as a holy sanctuary
Which can bring this night-wound gradually
Toward the healing and freedom of dawn.*

To give any person a choice at the very end of life is to offer another doorway which can end imminent physical suffering and fear. It does not negate end of life healing, but can facilitate it. It can relieve anxiety, making room for sacred healing. It is a movement towards compassion, it is an act of kindness. Choice allows for both healing and a time to honor life. It is not an either/or choice between healing and death, but allows for both. We not only move from certainty to compassion, but towards loving kindness. It allows for an acceptance of death when pain becomes unendurable.

I do not defend this right to choose with theology, but with a learned wisdom of experience. I understand there are those who feel differently. Yet, I stand with those who simply want to cross this threshold on their own terms, with celebration and even joy. I stand with those who are or will be in pain, who are afraid of what lies ahead or are exhausted by their illness. Perhaps very few of us will opt for this path. Yet, in the end, it is a road which some may wish to take, and for them it will make all the difference.

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