



Choice and Dignity, Inc.

End-of-Life Advocacy

PO Box 86886 • Tucson, AZ 85754

Newsletter - Fourth Edition, June 2021

520-235-5646

www.ChoiceAndDignity.org

**As a member, you are receiving two copies of this newsletter.
Please give one to a friend or neighbor to help spread the word.**

My Experience With Death Education

At the age of 30, having discovered nowhere in the country to study for a degree in Thanatology, I decided that the best way to learn about the subject was to teach it, which I proceeded to do, teaching Death Education to undergraduates for three years at Auburn University. Though an elective class, it was always “sold out.”

My major fields of study at Colgate University were Sociology, Anthropology, and English. I knew that the handful of death education already offered sporadically around the country were described under various disciplines: health care, psychology, etc. My approach was to offer the course through the Sociology Department of Auburn.

Danny Sullivan (Jeez, I can't believe that I am remembering his name!), head of the department, was pretty skeptical but heard me out. With

considerable effort, I developed a rationale, a thorough curriculum, and a plan to implement it. At the time, there were very few such courses extant. I believe that Robert Katsenbaum was teaching one at Arizona State University, Dan Leviton included parts of death education in his health classes at the University of Maryland, and there was a Canadian fellow who had edited and published a great little book on the subject (“We Are But A Moment's Sunlight”), and a fledgling movement was emerging through ADEC: the Association for Death Education and Counseling.

By doing my own creative thinking, drawing upon my own limited experience, and picking the brains of some of those few already involved in the field, I set out to offer the course: Death Education.

Persuading the administration of the merits of such an endeavor was more difficult than developing the curriculum!

This study of death and dying encompassed death as viewed in the arts, literature, music, law, theology, economics, psychology, philosophy, and cultural anthropology. We would also consider the meaning of death, viewing individual behavior and social conduct regarding this one inescapable reality.

My students and I had fun, exploring death-related humor and frolicking in the cemetery. The class was not a morbid or depressing experience. It was, for many, an eyeopener.

Most of my students, ages 18-20, considered themselves immortal. Field trips to the morgue, funeral home, and cemetery, combined with academic study, helped to disabuse them of this notion. What

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amazes me to this day is that many of us still lead our lives with what seems a similar notion: not putting our affairs in order, not considering how we might want to die, not executing advance directives,

not planning for this inevitable reality until tragedy such as a serious illness might strike.

It is the role of education to teach about life, all of life, and dying is part of life. I remain convinced that such courses as mine would benefit others and equally convinced that many of the insights to be gained from such courses would benefit students and their families throughout their lives. In my book, "How To Get The Death You Want" - A Practical And Moral Guide," I cite the rationale, some goals, and some postulations for the course I taught in the 1970s. Occasionally, I now still teach Death Education to adults through OLLI: the University of Arizona's adult education program.

EXPERIENCE *continued on next page*

Experience

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We with Choice and Dignity, Inc. seek to change this avoidance of contemplating one's death, enabling all adults to calmly and rationally engage in such considerations by attending our many classes and programs aimed at doing so, details of which can be found on our website at www.ChoiceAndDignity.org. I hope you, and those you love, will take advantage of what we offer.

- **John Abraham**

Death, Dying, and Mime

My last semester as an undergraduate at Oakland University, I had room for two electives. I decided to find two courses that would fit not into my normal academic studies but rather with my desire to better understand and appreciate life. Mime was my first choice. For my second, I went with Death and Dying.

It seemed like I couldn't find two more diametrically opposed classes. After signing up I thought, "What am I doing? In one class I'll be moving my body, dancing, probably having fun, and in the other I'll be focusing on death and probably getting depressed. Why am I throwing myself into this abyss? At least this will be a strange last semester."

Actually, the two courses melded together. The zest of life is so close to the energy of death; I found that semester to be a metaphor for embracing it all—for simultaneously dancing with life and waltzing with death. It was an academic dance on a tightrope giving meaning to Leon Russell's lyrics, "I'm up on a tight wire, one side's ice and one is fire."

That semester I learned to juggle, to mime, to show myself trapped in a box. I moved my body and gave meaning to life's basic, archetypal motions. Intense, incredible, alive.

Dr. William Fish, who taught several classes in philosophy and Death and Dying, required us to keep a journal and to reflect on various exercises, for example writing our own obituaries and designing our own tombstones. In a strange way, we enjoyed

field trips to funeral homes, cemeteries, crematoria, and embalming rooms. We came face to face with that which is avoided in our society, the reality of death.

The semester was an exercise in zen; life and death inextricably linked. To hold in our hands our mortality, without plunging into nihilism and the black hole of no meaning, can help us seize the proverbial day and suck the juice out of life precisely because we know it will end. It's a walk on a philosophical razor's edge, but that walk helps us appreciate the juicy moments, sending flowers to our living loves and befriending and loving the animal that we assume we will outlive. It's walking with hearts open and heads high, because living well is the morning of dying well in the evening.

Choice and Dignity, Inc. exists to help people to die well after having lived well. Knowing that our exit can be sweet, or perhaps bittersweet, can make our lives richer, more sensuous, less fearful, and even more wonderful. It helps us to face the unknown unafraid and more able to "go gentle into that good night." To take part in classes, discussions, bereavement groups, and death cafés helps us prepare for the void that lies ahead. But, at the same time, those same experiences make us all the more eager to savour the warming fire that is life.

In the end, let us not fear an abyss but rather let us celebrate the continuum that is existence. Like the good mime, let us moonwalk off the stage with a smile that says our journey has been well taken.

- **Mary Beth Ginter, Ph.D.,**
Choice and Dignity member

Anne's Story

For all the years I've supported the right to die peacefully, I am surprised, and feel blessed, that now, I am actually, deliberately completing my own life.

I broke my left wrist twenty years ago. Since then, severe osteoporosis made my bones weak and fragile. Recently, I fractured bones in my back leaving me with excruciating pain.

When pain meds and injections only relieved the pain minimally, my future looked terrible. There was little quality of life, little joy and constant pain.

I am so thankful that I was able to attend Choice and Dignity's programs and learn about the

ANNE'S STORY *continued on next page*

Anne's Story

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importance of having a strong advocate (found through Choice and Dignity) to help me navigate through the medical care I needed. I was able to talk to like-minded people, who understood, without judgment, my wishes, to complete life on my terms.

My life has been both challenging and adventuresome, with career success and loving friends. However, I was not prepared for the decay of my body, even though I was in my 80's. My hearing became more and more difficult in spite of having excellent hearing aides. Enjoying group conversations and visits with friends became real struggles. About a year ago I developed Age Related Macular Degeneration in both eyes and had to have eye injections frequently. I loved reading, but it became harder to read with all the constant pain. My life became more and more isolating.

When my back-bones fractured and the pain became excruciating and unyielding, and I feared becoming totally incapacitated from future breaks, I knew it was time to say good bye: enough. But how to do it was challenging. Why does it have to be so difficult in our society to have a deliberate and peaceful death?

Then I called Choice and Dignity, and found that their support and guidance gave me relief and a great sense of peace. With all the information I have received from the C & D group my anxiety decreased, which helped me deal with my pain better.

My life has been full and now it feels complete, and I am ready. The medical field is slowly coming around and some hospitals support a natural death, keeping patients comfortable without lifesaving measures. Hopefully, it will become easier for anyone, being of sound mind, to have a peaceful death.

It is comforting now, to know I will complete my life with personal choice and dignity.

- Anne,
*Choice and Dignity member
(now deceased)*

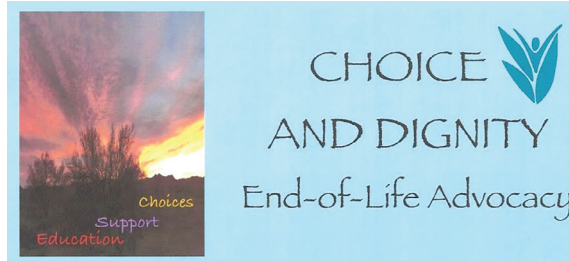
Tracy's Story

In 2018, I was diagnosed with Polycythemia Vera. Polycythemia Vera is a rare blood cancer for which there is no cure. At the time of my diagnosed, I knew nothing about Polycythemia Vera. I was given my diagnoses with some explanation (quite possibly I was in too much shock to absorb much) and given some pamphlets to read. Getting the big C diagnosis with the additional news that there is no cure for this type of cancer was a huge wake up call for me to start thinking about death and dying in a practical way rather than in a theoretical way. Fortunately for me I found Choice and Dignity, Inc. through the internet. It is comforting to me to know I had a sympathetic supportive group of like-minded individuals in my search for solutions to a prolonged possibly painful and undignified death of needless suffering. Choice and Dignity is a great source of

comfort to me. It is such a relief to know what my options are for my death and that I have support and resources for planning and implementing the way I choose to die when the time comes. I am grateful for Choice and Dignity so much so

that I have volunteered to help in many ways and do all I can to keep this organization available to all. And I have included them in my will.

- Tracy,
Choice and Dignity member



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The significance of obituaries

By Derek Humphry,
Advisory Board of Choice and Dignity, Inc.

I'm a daily scanner of the obituaries in the four newspapers that I read in the U.S.A. and U.K. (all now online, unfortunately). Why this obsession?

True, at 90, I'm on the cusp of life and death myself, yet the instinct to study the lives of others recently deceased goes longer and deeper than that.

After perusing the lists of the recently dear departed, I only read the obits of people who interest me: How did they achieve what they did? How long did it take them? What was their particular significance?

Particularly fascinating to me are the stories of WWII veterans who were in dangerous combat situations, through skill and luck survived, then went on to live to be 90 or even 100.

Bear in mind that early in life, it was my job to write obituaries. As a newspaper reporter from age 16, I was often sent to the homes of just-bereaved families to seek out the backgrounds.

I was never turned away. People seemed honored that their loved one deserved being in the local paper.

Later in life, I've felt obliged to compose the obits of colleagues in mutual campaigning movements, giving these articles a deeper description through familiarity.

There's some strange feeling in the words of the unknown person who opined: "You are not really dead until everybody who knew you is dead, too."



**Are you a member of
Choice and Dignity, Inc.?**



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www.ChoiceAndDignity.org

**Learn more about our mascot, "Comfort,"
at www.website ChoiceandDignity.org
Comfort Bears are free to those who need
their love and consolation.**

Comfy and I had thought about his correspondence with his old friend Teddy, who is ready to self-exit. Sadly, the SNAV (Special Needs Animal Veterinary) decided that Teddy's questions about vet-assisted-suicide meant Teddy was mentally ill. Now that he has been released, Teddy is looking for guidance about inert gas method. Oh, and yes, he is planning to mention C&D in his will.

Comfort asks: "Is Choice and Dignity, Inc. in your will, so more people may be comforted?"



More than one-third of Death with Dignity groups' income comes from bequests – generous members who want to help others after they are gone.

Please add us to your legacy.

We certainly would appreciate your putting us in your will:

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Choice and Dignity, Inc.

PO Box 86886, Tucson, Arizona 85754

Donations can easily be made on our website.