Death with Dignity

"I mean, what the f\*\*k?" my mom asks in a frustrated yet strangely calm way.

"Exactly. What in the f\*\*k!?", I shoot back adding emphasis as if an extra helping of indignation would somehow change things. The blast of anger instantly dissolves into the requisite silence of disbelieve.

"It should have been me. I'm not saying I want it to be but, logically, it should be. I mean, she did all the right things. Everything! All the things they say you should do. She exercised, she ate a healthy diet and it didn't matter. I don't do any of that yet I'm sitting here, healthy as a horse. I think it was the stress of her damn job. Pancreatic cancer. What a God-awful way to go". I cannot see my mother as she says this but the intermittent sound of running water through the phone tells me she is in the kitchen.

" I know, mom. It scares me to think that all of that was for naught. I do the 'right things' too with diet and exercise. God! I can't wrap my mind around it. I try but I just keep going back to Jenny. I can't bear to think of her watching her mother go through this". My posture droops as my frustration softens into sadness. My straight shoulders unwittingly hunch forward as I slowly adopt the wilted affect of defeat.

Jenny, my perennial friend. I've known her since I was 5. Our mothers are close friends so we grew up together. We drive each other crazy at times but our phone calls often sound like that of a spouse; ending with "I love you". It's hard for me to think about what lies ahead for her. And for her mother, Nancy, who is like a second mom to me. I hate the way the thought of your loved one's sadness and grief makes you feel so utterly helpless.

"I know. It breaks my heart", my mother says in that stammering, high-pitched way that means she is trying not to cry. But how could she do anything other than cry? She is losing her friend of nearly 40 years.

"F\*\*k", I quietly utter in response with a soft shake of my head. The effectual F-bomb fills the void of words we are unable to find for emotions we need desperately to express. It suddenly occurs to me how unusual this mother/daughter conversation is, yet I am profoundly grateful for it. I feel blessed for this family dynamic that allows us to speak so bluntly.

"I told Nancy we can take her to Oregon". My mother interrupts my thoughts with this comment. It seems out of context yet I know exactly what she means—the Oregon Death with Dignity Act.

"I figured. I got a tearful call from Jenny the other day asking me what to do when things get bad. She didn't know if Nancy would want to go to Oregon. When we were talking she brought up a valid point—why we can be merciful with animals by ending their needless suffering but we cannot do it with terminally ill people? It's a legitimate question. She's been to the doctor. Stage IV. Western medicine can offer nothing beyond palliative care at this point. It's unreasonable to me that the only option we are given in circumstances like this is the agony of a protracted death—whether to go through one ourselves or watch a loved one go through it. It pisses me off! It seems both cruel and incongruous, considering we live in a society that willfully puts people to death. Why is it so egregious to think of ending life mercifully rather than punitively?" I spit out from my invisible soap box, winded and exasperated. My impassioned speech entirely unnecessary. I already know my mother and I share the same opinion but I feel like an erupting volcano that cannot be contained.

"I know. It's a good question", she says. "When it's my turn, I'm moving back to Oregon. In the meantime, I told her I would call Aunty to see what we need to do just in case decides she wants to go", she says with renewed vigor. Clearly she's accepted this mission.

"Good idea, mom. I'll do some research too".

"Ok. I'll talk to you later. Love you".

"Love you, too", I say as we hang up.

Strangely enough, my mother and I have discussed this topic before. It was in 2004 when my grandmother was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. On the final day of her life, we gathered at her bedside to say our goodbyes and tell her it was okay for her to go. Her body racked with pain and her face contorted despite being heavily dosed with pain medication and not fully conscious. Our relief at seeing the grimace gone from her face surpassed the sadness we felt over her departure.

Not long afterwards my mother and I discussed our end of life wishes and how we would never want to suffer like that—neither the physical pain of the afflicted nor the emotional pain of the caregivers and loved ones. This is not a morbid fascination with death. I'm very much for living and my actions attest to that. I'm an organ donor and bone marrow donor. Four years ago I donated stem cells to a stranger with leukemia who was in need of a transplant. My cells enabled him to continue living.

But not everyone gets a second chance at life. There are illnesses for which there are no transplants, or even any viable treatments. "Get your affairs in order. We'll do our best to keep the pain under control" is what the doctors tell you when they have nothing else to offer.

What if we could offer another option? The option to die in a dignified and humane way. I am in no way suggesting that everyone diagnosed with a terminal illness be forced to take a lethal dose of pentobarbital. However, I feel strongly that, under those circumstances, we should all have the *choice*. Be it the choice to do it or the choice not to.