

All people die with dignity

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November 6, 2014

Before her recent death with the assistance of a prescription of barbiturates, Brittany Maynard, who was terminally ill, made public her hopes that this would be a watershed moment for the movement to make choices such as hers legal in all of the U.S.

I can understand some of the reasoning of that campaign, even if I don't agree with it. And I feel nothing but compassion for Maynard and her family that she suffered as much as she did from an incurable disease before her life was cut short. I don't plan to stand in the way of advocates who want doctors who choose to do so to be able to write such prescriptions. I need all of the time and energy I have for end-of-life issues in my work as a hospital chaplain. Further, [there has been no evidence of a slippery slope](#) from a relatively small number of individuals [[PDF](#)] making this choice into more vulnerable populations feeling pressure to do so.

What troubles me greatly about Oregon's law—and the movement for more like it—is [its name](#). In the past weeks as the media have covered Maynard's story, the phrase "death with dignity" has become more common as an alternative to describing it as suicide. I can understand advocates wanting to avoid the word *suicide*, but it doesn't follow that we [should describe](#) illnesses such as [glioblastoma](#), the form of brain cancer that Maynard had, as resulting in a "death without dignity."

I'm even more worried when advocates speak about choice and control over one's body as essential to having dignity in one's dying. To be fair, the organization that Maynard worked with, Compassion & Choices, is [more careful to use neutral language](#), though they do define *death with dignity* as the "freedom to die peacefully and in control."

I've been a companion to dozens of people in their final days, and every one of them died with [dignity](#)—because every one of them was in every moment worthy of respect and honor as a human being. The infant who stopped breathing, the youth cut down by gun violence, the middle-aged man with longtime drug addiction or the mother with cancer who each had intense seizures, the elder who could no longer say any family members' names—all of them were dignified. Each of them died with dignity, and none of them died by choice or in control.

Upholding each other's dignity is not only a basic part of our Christian commitments to each other—as one pastor [points out](#), it's part of his tradition's baptismal vows—it's also the cornerstone for building the kind of society in which we all can flourish while we live, and honor each other's humanity when we die.

If the debate around legal physician-assisted death swells, as Maynard hoped it would, let's make that our common ground.