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# PERSPECTIVES

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## Waiting to Die

*Working in a hospice helped demonstrate the need for assisted suicide*

**T**here is rarely death with dignity. What the body does on its way to death defies dignity. A handful manage courage, sometimes humor and graciousness. Sherwin B. Nuland's best seller, "How We Die," describes a small fraction of how it really is. His is a rather clinical approach — what happens to the various bodily systems as we begin to shut down. What is the circulatory system up to while the digestive system expels or holds onto what little contents are left?

**OPINION**



**Hannah Dillon**

Dr. Nuland didn't mention the smells of dying. The sounds of dying. The feel of dying. The places of dying. Its taste and look. Its textures. Death's waste, grief and ... relief.

I have had the privilege to attend to nearly five hundred people who had decided to die at home or who came to Coming Home Hospice in San Francisco to do it. (In 1994, we looked north to Oregon and applauded our neighbors' humanity and courage by passing Measure 16).

Three years later those who tried to "persuade" us yet again that we had no right to preempt our suffering in dying cited hospice as one answer to "the problem." Hospice is a good way to go, yet my co-workers and I were implored by patients countless times to "please, help me die." And so, at times, we did help to hasten their death. Pain cannot always be managed. It was one of the most compassionate gestures we could make for another human being.

Steven came to our hospice out of a room of cats and the debris of no longer being alive. He was encrusted with feces beneath ripped jeans, fingernails brown with it, reeking of stale, sweet piss, rotting seaweed

breath and something else.

A friend shows us newspaper clippings of Steven's days as an AIDS activist. Now, scraggy blond hair and goatee. Toothless at thirty. Flannel shirt misbuttoned and once-white socks soaked in blood-brown fluid. The stench of him.

I feel overwhelmed, not knowing where to begin and press the bell for reinforcements.

We wait for the morphine to take effect before we can peel off his socks. We double glove. He writhes. But the socks have to come off.

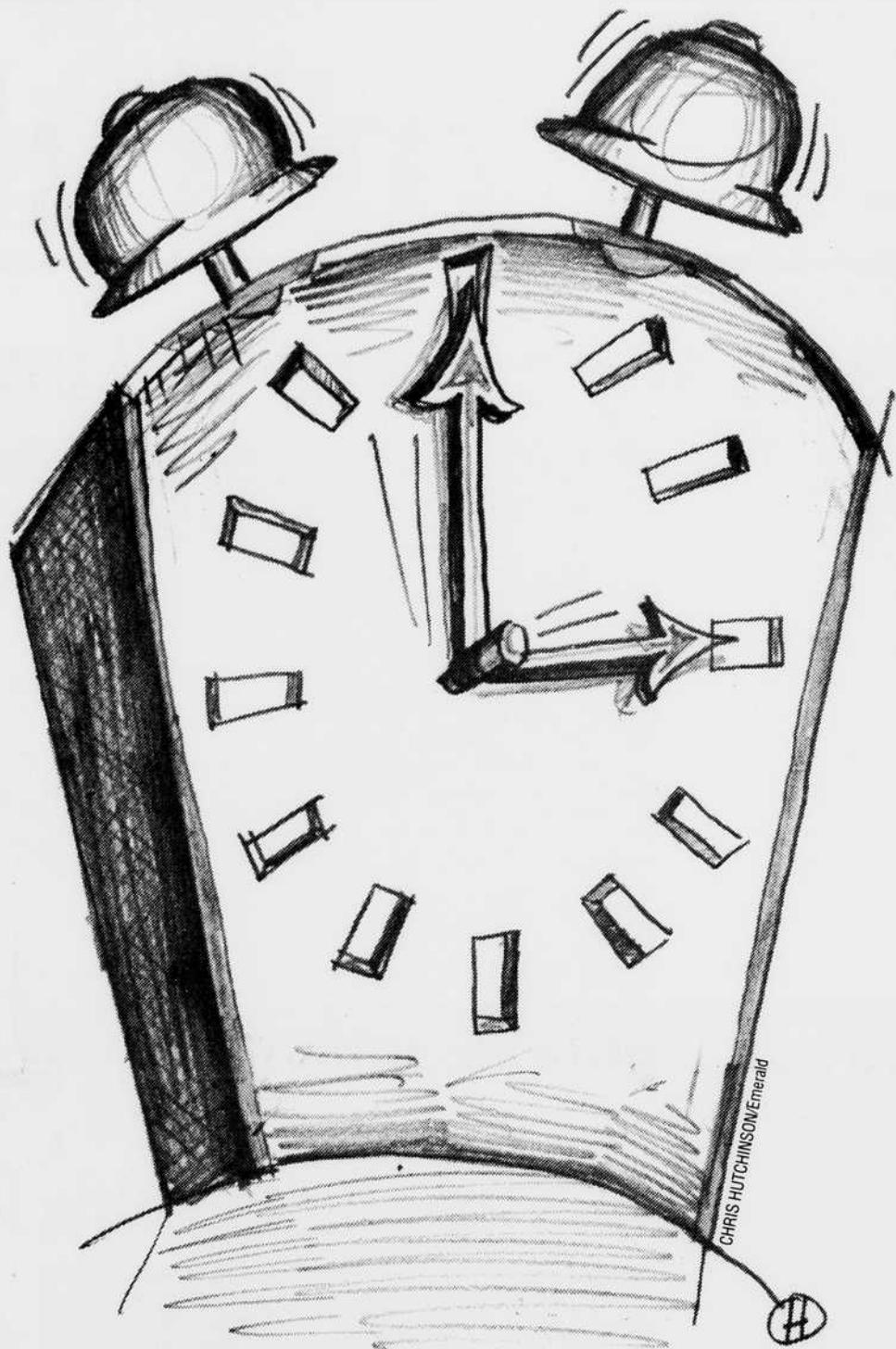
His toes are swollen and black, oozing clear liquid. They are wet cigar stubs.

The charge nurse warns us a toe or two could appear somewhere in the sheets anytime. He pronounces Steven's feet dead, preceding him in death.

Mildred's stoicism crumbles; hurting, agitated, distracted, crying for home, throwing pillows, Kleenex boxes, banging on the side-rails, trying to climb over, squeeze through them, worrying about the war outside, the constant shooting, the crying baby. Bone cancer. Finally to the brain. What she feared most.

We sit with her. She doesn't know us anymore, nor her daughter. We try to remember her.

At first she was confounded at her increasing dependence, apologetic



CHRIS HUTCHINSON/Emerald

for it. Proud of her life, her career, her daughter. Philosophic about her end. Humorous about her lapses of memory. Meticulous, stylish dresser. Voracious reader. Fiercely independent. It was breast cancer 10 years before.

Now, she spends the mornings trying to peel her red cloth napkin with drooping fingers that can no longer hold and thickly asks about the baby crying all night outside her window. Her stunned eyes wait for an explanation she can no longer process, waiting for peace. The fetor from the hole between her shoulder blades that digs wider and deeper to her

spine, despite our efforts, and shortens the stay of the shortening round of visitors. We, too, balk before entering her room.

Wanting to die, needing to die and doing it don't always jibe. In that luff-time, much suffering happens. And for those who watch and wait, too.

Those of you who voted No on Measure 51, thank you, again.

*Hannah Dillon is a columnist for the Emerald. Her columns appear alternate Fridays. Her views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.*

### Thumbs



**TO SEX EDUCATION IN SPRINGFIELD:**

The Springfield School Board is considering expanding their sexual education programs, starting classes on the subject in middle school rather than ninth grade. This makes a lot of sense. Sex ed classes don't teach children to have sex — a recent study showed condom education programs decrease the incidence of teen pregnancy while having no effect on sexual activity. They merely help sexually active children make better choices. By the time children reach high school, their attitudes toward sex will be firmly shaped, even if they are not already sexually active.

**TO MARIJUANA:**

Despite ongoing efforts by the federal government to compare marijuana to Satan, the evidence continues to suggest the drug can have medical applications. A study that was recently released showed that marijuana can be effective in reducing pain without the addictive side effects of opium-based pain killers.



**TO SPICE GIRLS HYSTERIA:**

Nelson Mandela and Prince Charles recently met to talk about the world and a variety of issues. While the conference was more of a press opportunity than a summit meeting, it was an opportunity for the media to ask valuable questions of two important policy-makers. Instead, the press drooled and gawked at another set of meeting attendees — the Spice Girls. Mandela and Charles joined in, climbing onto a bandwagon that we sincerely hope plunges off a cliff in the near future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Mats won't stop violence**

Please allow me to weigh in with my thoughts (as un-P.C. as they may be) regarding the urinal mats, posters, etc., around campus that declare, "You Have the Power to Stop Rape." Do I? Am I a rapist? Isn't rape a violent crime against people? Therefore, aren't the people who have the power to stop rape the rapists? Can I stop murder if I have no inclination to kill? Can I stop robbery if I have no desire to forcibly separate you from your property? How does being a man make me any more in control over another person's violent criminal behavior, except after the fact? Don't give me that crap about rape being a sexual crime; rape has nothing to do with sex. It is about hurting and degrading another person. Penises are only secondary to the act, which can be, and

often is, perpetrated through the use of other objects. If the purpose of these mats, posters, etc., is to enlighten people, then please give out some correct information. Don't resort to the same old feel-good sloganeering that accomplishes nothing.

**Jim Wood**  
Environmental studies

**M&Ms page ridiculous**

I opened up the Emerald and it looked like a comic book. What is this? I know this isn't The New York Times, but this is ridiculous. Where is your dignity?

When I think of controversial public issues, I think of abortion, gun control, poverty and hmmm ... blue M&Ms of course. It is good that the editors

have a strong opinion about candy. And it is times like these that make me glad I am no longer a journalism major.

**Joshua Gold**  
English

**Must save species**

We are at a critical point in the campaign to save endangered species. As each day goes by, we lose more and more species, including plants, animals and insects. The loss of these species will affect the quality of our lives. As citizens of the Pacific Northwest, we need to take a stand to protect the endangered salmon and birds that are a part of our ecosystem. Once they are gone, the quality of our lives will seriously decline.

**Shannon Barker**  
Pre-journalism