

Life and death on their own terms

By KIT KETCHAM
For The Daily Astorian

"I'll be with you ... if you want me to be," I said to the frail gentleman on my couch, sitting propped up by his son and his brother.

Almost immediately, I regretted my words. Did I really mean what I said?

These three men had come to me that morning to ask how my congregation would react if they knew that "Jim" (not his real name) was preparing to cause his own death, under Washington's "Death with Dignity" law.



Kit Ketcham

I had voted in favor of the law myself and supported the Compassion and Choices organization (formerly The Hemlock Society) with donations and advocacy. I felt strongly that adults who were in the last stages of a terminal illness and were capable of making the decision rationally should be permitted to end their own lives on their own terms.

I knew that it was a several-month process, requiring certifications from doctors acquainted with the patient and a pharmacy licensed to fill the toxic prescription. Jim had fulfilled all the requirements, but he was still invested in life, wanting to belong to a faith community where he could socialize, giving and receiving friendship during the last months of his life. He'd visited other congregations and talked to other ministers, but he'd heard that the Unitarian Universalists were friendly and open to assisted suicide under the law. Was this true, he asked.

"Yes, it is true that we are open to this option for the dying," I told him. And then I added, "I'll be with you when the time comes, if you want me to be." He nodded and his son and brother seemed to sigh with relief.

Jim was in the last stages of esophageal cancer. He could hardly speak, swallowing was difficult, and he took most of his nourishment in liquid form. But he was passionate about many social causes, including the environment and civil rights. He was independent, living alone, but he was lonely. His brother and son lived hundreds of miles away and his only nearby relative was his daughter, whose household was already full of kids and pets. Jim felt overwhelmed by the activity there.

He had talked with his family members about his desire to end his own life when the time came, and they were supportive, though it was a hard agreement to make.

As it turned out, Jim died quietly in a



Protesters in favor of assisted suicide converge on the Oregon State Capitol.

File photo courtesy of the Corvallis Advocate

Writer's Notebook

hospital bed, slipping away without needing to swallow a toxic potion. While he had been part of our church community, he'd enjoyed friendships with several members who lived near him, going out with them for milkshakes, coming to church services, and attending musical events in our sanctuary. Several of us were with Jim in his last hours, some right there holding his hand as he slipped away. Jim had his wish — the comfort of friendship and a pain-free death.

A year later, another person in our congregation told me of his desire to end his life on his own terms. And this time, when I said "I'll be with you if you want me to be," I had no qualms. This man had suffered from chronic illness much of his life and recently had been told nothing else could be done. He discontinued his medications and undertook the process to end his life according to the Death with Dignity Act.

I knew when this man intended to end his life. I knew who else would be present. I knew that his friends and family members were all invited to come say goodbye the day before what he called "D Day." I knew what the procedure would be. I

felt profoundly honored to be part of this conscious, peaceful end time.

On "D Day," we gathered at his home as five invited guests. I had a white rose and some of the water we use when blessing children in our dedication ceremony. I invited those present to tell this beloved man what he had meant to them. And I invited him to say to us whatever he wanted to say. There were many tears, hugs, words of love and gratitude.

When all had spoken, I dipped the rose into the blessing water and touched his head, his lips, his heart and his hands, one at a time.

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"Thank you for your great strength of mind," I said as I touched his head. "Thank you for your ability to speak truth in love," as I touched his lips; "Thank you for your loving heart" and "Thank you for your helping hands," touching him with the rose and water on his heart and his hands.

"Are you ready?" I asked. He nodded. We helped him sit on the edge of the bed. He knew that he had to drink the potion down all at once and that he would quickly feel sleepy. He had already taken an anti-nausea medication to help quell the urge to vomit. At that time, we would help him lie down and within a few minutes he would be gone.

The potion had been prepared in advance and filled a small glass to the brim. He drank it down steadily as we waited, aware that this was his last conscious act. When he

got sleepy, we helped him lie down, spread a blanket over him, and let him go.

We sat quietly as his breathing slowed and his heart beat its last. His wife held his hand and kissed him. Together, we joined hands and said our last goodbyes to this dear man. After his heart stopped and we knew he was physically gone from us, a deep sigh seemed to sweep the room. Our dear one had left us in life but had given us a great gift — the knowledge that he was no longer sick, no longer in pain, no longer trapped in his failing body. And he had slipped away according to his own wishes.

As a minister, I have been present with many dying men and women. Assistance in dying is not the answer for many people, but it is a good answer for those who have the capacity to decide rationally and who have the specter of a painful and lingering death ahead. There have been several high-profile stories in the news since the enactment of the Death with Dignity Act in states around the nation, stories of courage and compassion. The not-for-profit organization Compassion and Choices has been an invaluable resource to me as a pastor and to those who have made the decision to end their lives on their own terms. For more information, see www.compassionandchoices.org

The Rev. Kit Ketcham serves the Pacific Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Astoria. She retired to the North Coast in August 2012 and is minister emerita of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island, Wash.

You think your winter was rough?

By NICHOLAS KRISTOF
New York Times News Service

In October, two young Americans set off on the most daring and foolhardy wilderness expedition since, oh, maybe Lewis and Clark.

They were trying to become the first people ever to backpack from Canada to Mexico on the Pacific Crest Trail in the dead of winter.

Once before, in 1983, two people set out to traverse the trail in winter. They never made it. Their bodies were found a month after they fell off an icy cliff.

A winter thru-hike of the Pacific Crest Trail seemed impossible. The trail is covered by many feet of snow that time of year, and, even if the two explorers managed to find their way, they risked triggering avalanches, plunging through ice into rivers, or simply running out of food while trapped in blizzards.

"People said it was a death sentence," Shawn Fory, one of the hikers, told me.

He had estimated half-jokingly at

the start that they had a 17 percent chance of succeeding.

But he spoke to me shortly after he and Justin Lichter reached the Mexican border Sunday, completing their 2,650-mile odyssey — and surviving frostbite, blizzards, tumbles into frozen rivers and 1,750 consecutive trail miles without encountering a single other hiker.

Perhaps it feels a little self-indulgent to celebrate two guys who took a long walk. But what a walk! Like the 4-minute mile or the free climb of the Dawn Wall at Yosemite, this is something that seemed beyond human capacity — and then humans did it.

So let's take a break from current affairs and recriminations about human venality to laud a triumph of human strength.

It helped that the two men were enormously experienced. Fory is a wilderness instructor for Outward Bound. Lichter works on a ski patrol and said he has hiked 35,000 miles, equivalent to nearly 1 1/2 times around Earth. He gave up one long backpack across



Nicholas Kristof

East Africa when lions were stalking him.

Both Fory and Lichter had hiked the entire Pacific Crest Trail in summer — itself an ultimate test of endurance (fewer people have thru-hiked the full trail than have climbed Mount Everest). But they wanted to see it in another season.

"With the snow, there's so much natural beauty," Lichter said. "It's so peaceful. And the frozen rivers have these strange ice formations."

They used snowshoes and, in California, skis, while carrying loads of up to 45 pounds, including food (they resupplied every week or so). Winter storms were frequent. When it snowed at night, they would get up every 30 minutes to push snow off their tarp to keep it from collapsing on them. In white-outs, they could barely see and stayed close to each other — except when crossing avalanche zones, when they had to separate to ensure that they

would not both get buried in the same avalanche.

Even drinking water was a challenge.

"You're surrounded by frozen water, but you don't have easy access to it to drink," Fory said.

They used a stove to melt snow for drinking water.

The worst period, they said, came in the Oregon mountains when a huge snowfall and below-zero temperatures left them with frostbitten feet. They were able to warm up and avoid permanent damage, yet they still had another 2,000 miles to go.

"At times, you're pulling your knee up to your chest to take the next step, to get it above the snow — and that's in snowshoes," Fory said. Barney Mann, the chairman of the Pacific Crest Trail Association and unofficial historian of the trail, said that after the frostbite incident he had doubted that Fory and Lichter would succeed.

"It's the unrelenting cold," Mann said. "It's the unrelenting snow. It's the moment-by-moment challenge of navi-

gation when everything is white."

One difficult day came in Northern California when a storm dropped 10 inches of rain in 24 hours, winds reached 70 mph and both men tumbled into a swollen torrent of a river that left them and their gear drenched and frigid.

Yet, in spite of all those challenges, they still urge people to try winter camping — carefully.

"I really encourage people to get out in the winter," Fory said. "You have it to yourself, and it's so peaceful. But start with a day trip — that way if anything goes wrong, you're near your car."

I'm delighted to announce that the winner of my annual win-a-trip contest is Austin Meyer, a journalism student at Stanford University. We'll probably travel to India and Bangladesh, although Congo is an alternate possibility. The runners-up are Ashley Bastock of John Carroll University, Taylor Graham of Ithaca College and Sam Friedlander of University of Pennsylvania. Thanks to the Center for Global Development for helping me pick Austin from a dazzling field of 450 applicants. Stay tuned for a great reporting trip!



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