

Support
House Bill 399 End of Life Options Act
2/15/19

Rev. Dr. Alexa Fraser

When passed, Maryland's End of Life Options Bill would allow adults who have less than 6 months to live to request a prescription from their doctor for a fatal dose of medication. Yes, there are lots of safeguards.

I am an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister and I accompany people through illnesses and death as part of my work. Based on those experiences I support this bill. But additionally support of this bill is incredibly personal for me. Some of you may have been here in 2015, 2016 or 2017 when I told the story of my father taking his life in response to his worsening Parkinson's. At that moment he may have had more than 6 months to live, but because he feared falling and ending up in a nursing home where they would not let him end his life, he proceeded proactively. But it didn't go well. He tried pills, then cutting his wrists. Neither worked. Finally he used a gun. I've heard people say "oh his ultimate success proves that this bill isn't needed." I'd like to ask them to compare the experience of holding your loved one's hand as they drift off to the experience my father had preparing to end his life with a gun. Additionally imagine the distress my husband experienced walking into my dad's room and finding his body. Yes, this bill is needed and I knew it back then.

But now I know it more. In December of 2016 I was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive type of gynecological cancer. I love life, I love being a parent to my 19 year old son and serving as a minister. And now I know what I'll likely die of. I want the ability to choose a peaceful death with my family around me rather than one filled with pain, or drowning in my bodily fluids, or with my abdomen bursting as happened to a good friend with abdominal cancer.

As a minister in training I was a chaplain intern in a local hospital. I worked specifically in the pain and palliative care unit. I was amazed and delighted by what the unique palliative care approach of doctor's deeply listening to their patient's needs and expertly providing medication to relieve pain. I support and believe in hospice and palliative care. It is possible that I would even choose to be a chaplain in a nursing home or hospice at some time in the future. And you know that hospice and palliative care aren't always enough to stop suffering. I'm in favor of excellent hospice care available to all who need it as well as this bill. To call for one or another presents a false dichotomy that does a disservice to patients nearing the end of their life.

I respect those who say that this option is not for them. Don't choose it. I also respect our disabled friends who feel vulnerable about this bill. In a deep twist of fate, however, my son, yes that 19 year old son I love so much has been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. He now has exactly the type of condition that some who object to this bill have. His diagnosis, however, has done nothing to diminish my support of this bill. If, when he's old and sick, at a time I can hardly imagine in the distant future, he concludes that using the death with dignity provision is HIS choice, I would support this for him as well as those who haven't been disabled through their lives.

Fate is odd – here I am with 3 parts of my life and the lives of those I love tied to medical options at the end of life. Yes, this bill is personal for me. Please pass it now.