

Graceful exit
Mona Hanford

Full of Hope at the End and practical advice to get there

Mona Hanford was born for a life of service. Her husband Bill's eight year decline before death was a strengthening, toughening and learning experience. I knew Mona and Bill during those years and admired her strength and courage.

Mona quotes Einstein: "genius has limits." She omits the second half of the sentence which goes "but stupidity is boundless." She might well have used that too – she is advocating an intelligent approach to end-of-life decisions as an alternative to the mindless application of every conceivable medical intervention to forestall the inevitable.

She writes about her belief in God. She advises it to her readers, but without any sect-specific parameters. She writes "some of us have a deep faith in the God of our choosing, be that the Spirit, the Light, a Higher Power, or whatever faith gives us hope and peace. Some of us refresh our spirit in nature, or strolling through an art gallery, or listening to great music. And we can all strengthen our spiritual life by spending time in quiet reflection or prayer. Prayer is known to bring a sense of calm and stability in hard times."

The grandfather to whom she dedicates the book was a Russian Orthodox Archbishop. Orthodox Christianity is more spiritual than intellectual, and Hanford's expressed belief fits right in with that. Although she and I knew each other through the Episcopal Church we both attended, her belief is deeper and less constrained than any sectarian doctrine. Russian has two separate words for spiritual, душевный and духовный, the first being more like soulful and the second more like reverent and at peace. They use them frequently and with greater meaning than we do. She is a духовная женщина – dukhovnaya zhenshina, a spiritual woman.

Hospice Care, she writes, is a key part of a graceful exit. With the support system in place, it is easier to talk to family and friends about the impending death. It is easier to accept the inevitable by staring it in the face, and to overcome the medical establishment's bias in favor of treatment under any circumstance.

Mona is skeptical of the world of medicine. She cites a Wall Street Journal article from July 2017 to the effect that 1/4 of all patients are harmed while in the hospital; Americans experienced 12 million serious misdiagnoses every year; and only 25% of the top 10 prescription medications do any good. I certainly concur. My shelves are laden with prescription drugs that I refused to take after reading up on them...stuff for acid reflux and arrhythmia for example. The answer – difficult though it may be to accept – always seems to be in lifestyle. Cut out drinking, exercise more, and eat more fruit. It works. I am Mona's contemporary and I have no regime of daily pills.

Mona has read extensively and offers the titles of several books that see the world her way. It is an old-fashioned point of view. Take responsibility for your own life and don't fill the coffers of the already bloated medical establishment any more than necessary.

Mona questions the role of today's mainstream church. Just as doctors are afraid to talk to people about death, the clergy seems reluctant these days to talk to people about God. They see themselves as avatars of social justice, their focus almost entirely on earthly rather than heavenly considerations. They too don't deal well with death.

A belief in God and an afterlife is often essential to alleviate the fear of death. The idea is that one must have a belief that it is all part of a grander plan. Yes, but. I offer the counterexample of my father, a man of science and a confirmed agnostic, who accepted his end stoically. Biologists will tell you, and he would have repeated that death is essential for life to renew itself. Thus he bid his goodbyes with utter calm, even with no notion that he would have any future existence. It can be done, although I am with Mona and believing that trust in God offers the better consolation.

Mona writes of a living will called Five Wishes. The wishes are worth repeating:

- Who will make medical decisions for me?
- What kind of treatment do I want, or not want?
- How comfortable do I want to be?
- How do I want people to treat me?
- What do I want my loved ones to know?

These questions are simple enough that it seems everybody should have written answers that their family members can reference if need be. Certainly we members of the next generation to go should have done so. Mona stresses that it is vitally important that doctors get the word. It often does not happen. Graceful Exit provides a guide for composing complete answers to these questions.

Mona's wonderful chapter on hospice care highlights the vast difference between the medical world's treatment of death as a clinical failure to be fought tooth and nail and a religious view that one must graciously accept when his time has come. Hospice care begins when the patient has decided that the end is coming. Accepting that as given, hospice can focus on making the patient comfortable and helping they wrap up loose ends, both with relationships and with their life's affairs.

Mona writes candidly about mistakes she made in caring for her husband Bill during his eight year slide toward death. She says she should have had the guts to acknowledge his situation earlier and spare him agony and indignity.

Mona writes extensively about medical marijuana, which she has been prescribed for her own cancer. If she had gone through the 1960s in San Francisco she would've known most of it long ago. Marijuana, like opioids, makes a lot of sense for the terminally ill. I have to say that my dope smoking buddies from the 1960s didn't generally benefit from its use. Yes, it does have a place in our world, and this is it.

The closing chapters, appropriately enough, are about the dying person's need to be open to God and to look forward to what's on the other side of the transition called death. God has granted many people the opportunity to peek through the partition so they can anticipate what is coming and provide hints to the rest of us. We all must accept our mortality, sooner or later, and the right approach and frame of mind can ensure us a Graceful Exit.