



# Wisconsin Update

Newsletter of Compassion & Choices of Wisconsin

Vol. 19, No. 3 Supporting the option of aid-in-dying for the terminally ill Sept. 2009

## Death with Dignity, Religious Freedom and Authentic Wholeness

By Barbara Coombs Lee

*(Barbara Coombs Lee is the President of Compassion & Choices. On July 12, 2009, she spoke from the pulpit of the First Unitarian Society in Madison. Her appearance was arranged by Dr. Jim Allen of Shorewood Hills an active member C&C of WI. The text that follows is a series of excerpts from her remarks).*

Centuries ago the philosopher Epicurus noted, “The art of living well and dying well, are one.” In my work at the organization Compassion & Choices, I focus on the “dying well” part but am acutely aware that a vibrant, sweet life is more attainable when we accept mortality and learn to treasure its precious gifts.

Conservative religious thinkers talk in terms of absolute opposites, and they accuse people like me of rejecting the “culture of life” and embracing a “culture of death.” It’s a false dualism, because life and death aren’t cultural opposites. They are simply two stages in the great arc of life – human beings, along with every other living thing, being born, growing, blooming, casting our seeds, fading and dying. This eternal cycle is both fundamental truth and fundamental mystery.

[As a nurse I developed] supreme respect for the values, beliefs and preferences of any per-

son close to death. The realization that respect for decisions of the dying had a political component came many years later, and marked a turning point in my life. As a lawyer, I staffed the Oregon Senate committee through which Senator Frank Roberts, a revered statesman, introduced a Death with Dignity bill. He wanted people in his position, mentally competent and terminally ill, to be able to ask their doctor for medication they could take to ease their passing. The Senator had terminal prostate cancer, the stature of a long and distinguished career, and the advantage of being married to the Governor at the time. But in spite of his compelling situation and unquestioned prestige, Frank could not get a fair hearing for his bill. It was 1991, and aid in dying had to await citizen action at the polls 3 years later.

I should mention the key role the UU denomination, and specifically First Unitarian Church of Portland, played in Death with Dignity history. Janet Adkins, Dr. Kevorkian’s

(Continued on p. 3)

### September Membership Meeting

The September Membership Meeting will be held in Madison at the First Unitarian Society on Saturday, September 26, 2009 at 9:30 A.M. See the meeting notice on page 5. Come to the meeting and bring a friend.

Visit [www.compassionandchoiceswi.org](http://www.compassionandchoiceswi.org) for the latest information regarding end-of-life issues.

## Letters to the Editor: What Should We Do?

Dear readers, I have no letters to share with you because you did not send me any. Let me ask you then to give me your views regarding a weighty matter.

Some proponents of death with dignity say we should not introduce Oregon style death with dignity bills into legislatures, where there is no hope of passage . They probably

### Compassion & Choices of Wisconsin Board of Directors

#### President

Allen Birmingham.....(608) 758-3925  
(abirm@charter.net)

#### Vice President

Susan Wester .....(608) 792-2566  
(smwester@mac.com)

#### Secretary

Dawn Stucki..... (608) 849-8078  
(destucki@tds.net)

#### Treasurer

Betty Dovenbarger.....(608) 833-2774  
(bdoven@charter.net)

#### Membership

Dick Grum .....(608) 873-8277  
(dickgrum2@yahoo.com)

#### Member-At-Large

Karen Deiro..... (414)282-3249  
(kdeiro@aol.com)

#### Newsletter Editor

Jim Greenwald .....(608) 233-7867  
(cantlongreenwald@tds.net)

#### Program

Warren Olsen .....(608) 845-7972  
(wolsen@chorus.net)

#### Publicity

Shirley Williams.....(920) 748-9615  
(magdalen@dotnet.com)

#### Member-At-Large

Anne Zimmerman.....(608) 745-1530

have Wisconsin in mind. Some are tired of losing in state legislatures. Better, they argue, to introduce legislation that a majority of the legislators will agree to such as a patients' rights bill. Such bill would give patients, who become terminally ill, the right to ask their doctor to tell them what their legal options are at the end of life, such as having palliative care and that sort of thing. C&C could get this kind of law passed. Then at a future time, we could sponsor legislation allowing the dying to decide for themselves to end their suffering when it becomes unbearable. What is the best policy for legislation? Rally the forces for death with dignity and publicize the issue or set very modest goals, that some would say amount to nothing, and wait to fight the hard battle another day? Is it best to choose one approach or the other? Does it make sense to sponsor both types of legislation at the same time? Would it be best to concentrate on states that permit the voters to decide such questions and forget about legislatures for a while altogether? What is your view?

Let me know by writing to the Editor at 3934 Plymouth Circle, Madison, WI 53705. If I receive a letter from you, I will feel free to publish it with you name and the name of your community, unless you request otherwise.

### To Paraphrase and Extend Wiesel

Indifference to the suffering of others is what makes the human being inhuman. Terminally ill persons who plead for a quick and gentle death—not to respond to their plight—is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity, we betray our own.

Elie Wiesel, at the White House, 1999

(Continued from page 1)

first patient, was a member of that congregation. Rev. Alan Deale, its senior minister, was the only minister to testify in support of Frank's bill, and Elvin Sinnard, an elder of that church, campaigned at my side in 1994, traveling throughout the state to tell the story of his wife, Sara, who died alone, with a plastic bag over her head, after sending him away to create an alibi for himself. In 1988 the UUA had adopted the first, and still the only denomination-wide resolution in support of legal aid in dying, and Rev. Ralph Mero, recently retired from the UUA, was a key backer of a ballot initiative that failed in Washington State in 1991 and a founder of my organization in Seattle two years later. Unitarian Universalists form the backbone of our movement.

Like Frank and Sara, the terminally ill people I work with want simple things. They want effective pain care. They want to remain conscious and engaged in life as long as possible. They want assurance that their treatment wishes will be honored and they want choices that will allow death to come peacefully, tranquilly and without needless suffering. When I ask myself why these simple requests are so hard to fulfill I conclude that it's because our

society wants desperately to reject death and leaders collude with conservative religious forces to maintain a set of authoritarian, dogmatic rules.

Here's where religious freedom comes in. If life and death are two sides of truth, they aren't "cultural." There is not a "culture of death" versus a "culture of life" struggling for dominance. What there is, is a culture of Dogma, versus a Culture of Dignity.

It's an ancient controversy. Those living in the culture of dogma find God's guidance and moral authority in a source outside their own individual conscience. They accept stories and rules from that source, and feel guilt and shame if they don't follow the rules. Those living in a culture of dignity find God, by whatever name they signify the divine, by looking deep within, and individual conscience is their moral compass. They aim toward an authentic wholeness grounded in truth, love and mystery. They feel, not guilty or ashamed, but empty, destitute, when truth, love and mystery are missing in their lives.

When we've built a set of values and beliefs over a lifetime it can feel like torture to have them wrest from us as our death approaches. Lived values constitute our personhood.

Sometimes we are so passionate about our values that to die in a manner that abandons them feels like the ultimate meaning of our life is being stolen.

I do believe it's possible to heal the wounds our society suffers through its pathological denial of death. A truer and greater national dialogue has begun in earnest. May that dialogue, and the heartfelt conversations at your own kitchen table further a sense of common shared humanity and authentic wholeness, and complete the very human quest to embrace both life's sweetness and death's certainty with equal grace. May it be so.



Barbara Coombs Lee and Dr. Jim Allen

## Honor Roll of Supporters Who Gave to the June Fund Raising Appeal.

The response to the June newsletter fund raising appeal was very good with many donors adding their names to the honor roll as supporters of the death with dignity movement. Twenty-two (22) supporters, which includes members and donors, gave \$820, including those listed below.

Charlotte A. Bleistein Greendale

Susan DeWitt Davie Green Bay

Gerald A. Gruen, Sr.,  
Port Washington

Henry C. Hart Madison

Ralph & Peggy Hudson Eau Claire

Arvid Iverson East Troy

Nelson Moffat, M.D. Marshfield

Norma Jensen Middleton

Elinor M. Moore Madison

Mary Louise Symon Spring Green

Claire Weber Madison

If you have not sent in a contribution thus far this year, please consider doing so. This newsletter is accompanied by a card you can fill out and an envelope. Please note, on the card is a box you can check to give us permission to print your name and community on the honor roll of supporters in the next newsletter. This

is a way of not only sustaining our movement but letting other supporters and the world know that you support the cause of death with dignity.

If you would like to do more to advance our cause, please consider hosting a fund raising event. If you have a large home or a home in the country with a large lawn, you might consider having it at your place. We would invite other supporters to attend and you could invite all your relatives and friends. Unfortunately, the C&C of WI board does not have a fund raising person or a social event person to plan such an event. However, if you would agree to host such an event, I'm sure the board would go all out to render ever assistance. Any supporter who would like to undertake this challenge, should include with her or his donation a note that she or he will hold a fund raising event.

## Sir Edward and Lady Downes End Their Lives at Dignitas in Zurich, Switzerland.

LONDON — The controversy over the legal and ethical issues surrounding assisted suicide for the terminally ill was thrown into stark relief on July 14 with the announcement that one of Britain's most distinguished orchestra conductors, Sir Edward Downes, 85, had flown to Switzerland the week before with his wife, Lady Joan Downes, 74, and joined her in drinking a lethal cocktail of barbiturates provided by an assisted-suicide clinic.

Sir Edward, who was described in a statement issued earlier by Mr. Caractacus Downes, the couple's 41-year-old son, and his sister, Boudicca, 39, as "almost blind and increasingly deaf," was the principal conductor

(continued on page 6)

# Notice of September Meeting of Compassion & Choices of Wisconsin

Members, friends and the public are invited to a meeting featuring Dr. Daniel C. Maguire. Dr. Maguire teaches Moral Theology and Ethics at Marquette University in Milwaukee and is President of The Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health and Ethics. His topic will be “*Death As Enemy: Death As Friend.*”

Saturday, September 26, 2009  
First Unitarian Society  
Gabler Living Room, Landmark Building  
900 University Bay Drive  
Madison, WI

9:30 A.M. Coffee and Conversation  
9:45 Announcements  
10:00 Program

Notice of Third Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors. This meeting is for the purpose of electing a Board of Directors for the ensuing year and will take place immediately after the meeting featuring Dr. Maguire. All current board members and all members of C&C of WI who would like to serve on the Board or become more active in our chapter are urged to attend.

If you need directions to the meeting or a ride call Betty at (608) 833-2774 or Jim at (608) 233-7867

<b>Compassion &amp; Choices Membership Form</b>	<b>Yes! I want to join Compassion &amp; Choices *</b> ___ \$45 Individual ___ \$60 Couple ___ \$450 Life Member ___ \$600 Life Couple Member	
	<i>Please supply complete address:</i> Name/s _____ Address _____ City _____ State Zip _____ Telephone ( ) _____ E-Mail _____	Make Checks Payable to and Send To: <b>Compassion &amp; Choices</b> P.O. Box 101810 Denver, CO 80250-1810  Or Call: 1-800-247-7421 Visa or MasterCard accepted  <b>Dues are not tax deductible</b>
	* The payment of dues includes your membership in <b>Compassion &amp; Choices of Wisconsin</b> . You are invited to call <b>1-800-247-7421</b> if you cannot afford the \$45 membership. Every effort will be made to accommodate your circumstances.	

(Continued from page 4)  
of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra from 1980 to 1991. He was also a conductor of the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden in London, where he led 950 performances over more than 50 years.

Lady Downes, who British newspapers said was in the final stages of terminal cancer, was a former ballet dancer, choreographer and television producer who devoted her later years to working as her husband's assistant.

The couple's children accompanied the Downes on the flight from London to Zurich, where the Swiss group Dignitas helped arrange the suicides. The children said they watched weeping as their parents drank "a small quantity of clear liquid" before lying down on adjacent beds holding hands.

"Within a couple of minutes they were asleep, and died within 10 minutes," Carac-

tacus Downes said. "They wanted to be next to each other when they died." He added, "It is a very civilized way to end your life, and I don't understand why the legal position in this country doesn't allow it."

"After 54 happy years together, they decided to end their own lives rather than continue to struggle with serious health problems," the Downes children said in their statement.

"Even if [the police] arrest us and send us to prison, it would make no difference because it is what our parents wanted," Caractacus Downes said.

Since the Zurich clinic run by Dignitas was established in 1998 under Swiss laws that allow clinics to provide lethal drugs, British authorities have effectively turned a blind eye to Britons who go there to die.

*The New York Times*, July 15, 2009

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

*See address label for your membership expiration date.*

<http://www.compassionandchoiceswisc.org>

**Compassion & Choices of Wisconsin, Inc.**  
**P.O. Box 55276, Madison Wisconsin, 53705-9076**

