

A Good Dying and Death

Richard Fuller

As I think about how to share with Friends what I hope is the road ahead for me, I find myself turning to the experience of others.

Ava Dale Johnson

In 2014 I witnessed Ava Dale Johnson's death by Voluntary Stopping of Eating and Drinking (VSED). She was supported by several TCFM Friends and Ava Dale's daughter, Susan Garrett. In her final hospital stay Ava Dale learned that what allopathic medicine could offer her, for her chronic and increasing back pain, was drugs which would decrease her mental acuity. She checked herself out of the hospital, against doctor's wishes.

Betsy and I visited her about half-way through her fasting, I believe. She was the same quiet, luminous soul we had known for many years. We were at her bedside about 20 minutes, some of them spent together in Quaker silence. I think it was one of the most sublime experiences I had ever had. Not remarkable in any outward way but a quiet, sacred, acknowledging of her transition. And an affirmation of what she valued in life.

However, I had learned from discussion in the TCFM community that some members were in consternation and distress. I know a few left the community, feeling they were not fully supported in their views about the sanctity of life.

Compassion and Choices

Compassion and Choices "is the nation's oldest, largest and most active nonprofit working to improve care, expand options and empower everyone to chart their end-of-life journey," according to their website, compassionandchoices.org.

A Quaker review of a VSED textbook: [*Hastened Death Preparations: A New/Old Means for Providing a Healthy and Peaceful Death*](#), a review of a compilation of essays by authors who reflect diverse perspectives on VSED in disciplines including clinical, legal, ethical and institutional. The book is [*Voluntary Stopping Eating and Drinking: A Compassionate, Widely Available Option for Hastening Death*](#) by Timothy E. Quill, Paul T. Menzel, Thaddeus Pope, and Judith K. Schwarz (2021).

From the review: "The book is organized around a group of cases, with commentaries from several

representative perspectives.... The authors reflect diverse perspectives in disciplines including clinical, legal, ethical and institutional.... This book is now the standard introduction and reference on VSED."

There is no reference to Quakers in this book. Quakers, like hospice, often cooperate and assist with VSED, but are not public on the subject.

Other Quakers considering dying and death:

The Compassion and Choices website tells the story of John Griffith and his son Ben. "After years of research and planning, at the age of 99, Ben Griffith's father John Griffith chose to voluntarily stop eating and drinking (VSED) to control his end-of-life experience."

From Ben's story: "The following week demonstrated how Dad's meditation practice and stoutheartedness fortified his ability to follow through on his decision. On Sunday, March 20, we attended a Zoom worship service with his Friends meeting, where he read from his declaration to VSED. On Monday, he asked me to submit his story to Compassion and Choices. Dad was grateful for all the help and resources he'd received from Compassion and Choices over the years. He submitted his story in hopes that sharing his experience would inspire more conversations about end-of-life care and options. When they called the following day, he was talkative and engaged. As we were hanging up, he joked, 'I'm in neutral.'"

A similar article, focusing on the law, appeared in the Washington Post Magazine last year: [A Son's Decision to Help His Father Die](#).



Ava Dale Johnson and Richard Fuller

Another Quaker testimony on the subject is the QuakerSpeak video “On Quaker Deathways: Practices Around Death and Dying,” July 14, 2022, by Carl Magruder, Strawberry Creek Friends Meeting.

From the transcript:

[M]y Quaker belief [is] that there is that God in every person . . . but they might need a little mid-wifery; they might need a little witness; they might need someone to create a container or to affirm their instincts where those instincts are intuitive rather than rational—that it might be a little something to do but basically, it’s just an honor to be able to be present to people.

How Are Quakers Prepared for Death and Dying?

There are some aspects of death and dying that I think Quakers do very well, and one is that we tend to be able to prepare. We tend to be able to say, “this is what I want.” We tend to do a better job, I think, of recognizing when there is no real curative treatment and it’s time to opt for hospice, and to turn ourselves towards our dying and think about how we want to die well. . . . I have known quite a few Quakers to have done VSED, including Kenneth Boulding and Scott Nearing, who are well-known Quakers, but also Quakers in the Grass Valley Friends Meeting, and it’s regarded as a very holy thing and very respected...

How Can Quakers Better Prepare for Death and Dying?

I think the first thing is for Quakers is to talk about death and dying in the meeting and to talk about what we might want, and to just make it okay to talk about death and dying. . . . I would like to see Quakers do “death potlucks” where we would talk about our death and dying in an intergenerational way because if we can think about it and face it and talk about it and compare notes and answer queries like, “when has someone died in your life where you felt that there was beauty and connection in it?” and to tell those stories, and to think about how we might do it differently.

. . . we don’t think about it, we don’t talk about it, then we catch a diagnosis and it’s very hard and scary to think about and talk about.

. . . 100 years ago, for instance, people died. There wasn’t a lot to be done about it. . . . we need to really look at that, and see how we arrived where we are, and how we might enrich our Quaker deathways.

My Good Dying and Death

I had made a plan similar to Ava Dale’s many years before, and Betsy and I went through a clearness process with some members of our 1989 marriage clearness committee, which resulted in a signed agreement in September, 2007.

Now, as I look forward to my eventual dying process, it is time to start alerting my community to what may lie ahead.

I have several reasons for this advance notice.

- I think the shock of Ava Dale’s announcement contributed to TCFM members’ lack of care in conversations about it. I count myself as an example.
- I am at the leading edge of a bunch of Baby Boomers who will make the same transition, and I hope my meeting community will come to talk easily among ourselves about dying and death. Maybe, occasionally, even share a celebration.
- My father lived four years beyond his well-span, with dementia, and I wish to avoid that for myself.

How do I hope to alert my community to my choices?

I have written this article, of course. I hope friends who know me will approach me with their questions and opinions, and I also invite community members who hardly know me to introduce themselves, as an advocate of this approach to end-of-life.

I need to talk about this.

Also, I will convene the Friends Forum hour this April 23.

My main goal is to get us talking about dying and death. Therefore I hope to limit my remarks at Friends Forum to the few minutes necessary to give the conversation a good rolling start.

I feel my understanding of my death comes naturally out of my love of, and service to, Gaia. We can talk more about that at a later time.