

AND SO THE TOLL BEGINS...

Death will soon be referred to as Choice, and politicians will solemnly dedicate themselves to making it “safe, legal, and rare.”

By Paul Greenberg
Editorial page editor, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

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In the future, when patients are wheeled into the euthanasiast the way women now go to the abortionist's, someone will wonder if there was ever a time when it was any different, when law was on the side of life rather than death, when killing was considered unnatural.

Maybe that someone in the future will even write down a few questions in a private journal—for it will not be done to ask such questions out loud. The questions will be simple:

“When did it begin? When did the life easement clinics appear, the easy passage clubs, the bonuses for volunteers, the barbiturate cocktails, the million and a half Friendly Farewells a year, the forms routinely filled out by friends and heirs volunteering The Voyager for termination?”

Well, I know just when it began. Decades from now, someone may come across a copy of today's yellowed newspaper, maybe in the bottom drawer of a dusty old computer table from this pre-telepathic time, and idly turn to this page, with its language even now as quaint as its ideas.

Or maybe a curious hypercruiser will encounter a copy of this newspaper column on an antique Web site that somehow escaped the attention of the Euthanized Thought Bureau when it purged Unacceptable 20th Century Americana from the data bank.

So to whom it may concern:

It began the night of Tuesday, March 24, 1998, A.D., somewhere in the vicinity of Portland, Ore., U.S.A.

According to a dispatch from the Associated Press, that's when the first state-approved, physician-assisted suicide was carried out in the United States of America. The subject was in her mid 80s, a cancer patient whose doctor said had less than two months to live.

Because her own physician refused to assist in the suicide, another was found by a group called Compassion in Dying. It issued a tape of the woman's voice saying she looked forward to it. She would become the country's first government-approved suicide.

It was all perfectly legal under that state's Death With Dignity Act. Suicide is one of the procedures available to the 270,000 low-income residents of Oregon covered by that state's health-insurance plan. Oregon has always been a very progressive place.

The AP story did not say whether, like the old man in "Soylent Green" a film made in the pre-legal suicide era, the subject was first shown a brief video of flowers and trees, mountains and shore, animals and plants, and other beauties of life before being killed.

We do know she was given a lethal dose of barbiturates mixed with syrup and washed down with a glass of brandy.

We do not know her name; it wasn't released. But on hearing of her death, at least one person in far away Arkansas, another American state, prayed for the unidentified woman and her family. And for his country.

For something told him the woman in Oregon would be only the first. And that in the future, more and more would be killed—or rather, euthanized—with their consent. Or without it. For there will always be others willing to sign the forms. They will do it out of compassion. Or perhaps for other reasons. And later, others will do it for them, and to them. We're already aborting more than a million a year; it was only a matter of time before we began the same process at the other end of life's spectrum.

How do you say kaddish, the prayer for the dead, for an idea—the idea that life is sacred? For suicide, too, will soon become legalized, institutionalized, ritualized. You'll be able to find consumer guides and an appropriate Hallmark card for the occasion. Death will soon be referred to as Choice, and politicians will solemnly dedicate themselves to making it "safe, legal, and rare." The death sciences will demonstrate dramatic growth. Copies of the Hippocratic Oath will still be found in antique stores, valued mainly for their frames.

The United States is much less advanced in this sphere than a country like the Netherlands. Its government reports that more than a thousand patients are put to death each year without their consent, with a doctor in attendance. Why not hospices and sedatives for the dying? They take longer, they cost more, and, who knows, the patient might live.

The same economical process now has begun in this country. And we know just when and where the first step down this slippery slope was taken: March 24, 1998, in the state of Oregon. This unidentified woman will surely be but the first. Just as abortion became an industry, so will euthanasia. There's a big market for death out there. The first advertisements already have appeared: "Is someone in your family terminally ill? Does he or she wish to die—and with dignity? Call Physician Consultant." (From an early classified ad placed by Dr. Jack Kevorkian.)