

The Passy Press

Letter to the Editor

From: leegaillard@undisclosed.com

To: Nick Gardiner enpg@thepassypress.com

Date: December 16, 2014 11:28 a.m. EST

Subject: Essay on Death With Dignity by Charles Hamlin, MD

Dear Sir,

Having recently finished reading Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* in the dual-language Loeb edition and not having encountered any passage stating that when it comes to death, we live in an unwalled city, I checked further and found Epicurus to be the source of that epigraph, not Lucretius. Lucretius (who tremendously admired Epicurus) did not, in fact, view Death as that fearsome foe lurking just outside our gates: he stated up front that we are all mortal, and that when we die, both mind and spirit have left the body, which is therefore insensate; the 'we' that *was*, no longer exists and therefore can feel or experience nothing...and that therefore there can be no after-death 'experience' for us to fear during life: "scire licet nobis nil esse in morte timendum,/ nec miserum fieri qui non est posse..."(III, 266-7).

[Erratum: The writer is correct. Both the author and publisher cited Lucretius from a secondary source that was incorrect and has since been corrected on the essay.]

A minor quibble since Dr. Hamlin's essay addresses neither Lucretius nor Epicurus, but rather the "end-of-life paradigm" we must all face. He does so with sensitivity and insight, making a strong case for 'Death With Dignity' while at the same time laying out the three major objections.

One of my closest grammar-school friends watched her failing mother join the Hemlock Society in the early '90s. When the time came, her mother was able to end her own life with medicine her doctor had given her. This with the complete understanding and support of her daughter (my friend). Their preparations for this event comprised a beautiful and moving ritual.

Nevertheless, my wife (an Episcopal priest) does understandably *at this point* have

problems with the official and bureaucratic imprimatur that gets granted to individuals directly and, therefore, indirectly to doctors and family members. I get the sense that she feels, SO FAR that in the five states in which DWD has been legalized in *this* country, the concept has not *yet* (key word) been abused...but the danger is still there. It seems that in the Netherlands and Switzerland in particular, there may have been abuses of various kinds. And in this matter, there should (obviously) be NO abuses. It is a delicate issue... doctors/families 'playing God' in the worst case, perhaps without the consent of an unconscious patient.

In a closely related area, *Being Mortal: Medicine and what Matters in the End* by Doctor Atul Gawande points out that our medical system has trained its members to extend *length of life at almost any cost*. This doctor--and I feel sure Dr. Hamlin would agree--feels strongly that the patient has been left out of the loop. Therefore, Gawande feels that what is needed most is far earlier 'intervention' on the patient's behalf, asking him/her *what quality of life* do you want? What do you fear most? How do you want your end of life period to be...in terms of pain mitigation, absence of intrusive interventions (intubation, etc.). Excellent book. Gawande focuses mainly on the hospice approach and, before that, on truly assisted living. His comment on assisted suicide (DWD) seems somewhat brief and rather buried in all the rest: he did say that, *with caveats*, he felt it was appropriate.

Clearly, we are entering that 'undiscovered country' and must tread with care. Personally, I would appreciate having the option Dr. Hamlin suggests. But as a citizen, I want to see the most stringent and appropriate guidelines laid out and enforced. This should become a *national* debate.

Most sincerely,

Lee Gaillard

Lee Gaillard served in the Marine Corps Reserves in the 1960s; worked in industry, publishing, and secondary education; and has written widely on aviation and defense issues. He has a BA from Yale and an MA from Middlebury College.