Testimony of

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"The Consequences of Legalized Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia"
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I'd like to start out by telling you a little about my mom's background. She grew up on the Philadelphia Main Line, raised by a strict German father and a deaf mother. She was given little independence, and was always told by her parents what to do. She was told to go to Mt. Holyoke College, which she did, and married my father, who went to Harvard Medical School. They immediately had five children. When it came time for my father to decide where to start his practice, they decided to move to Oregon. My mother had never been west of the Mississippi, and moved her entire family across the country based on one picture of the Oregon coast.

My mom loved Oregon. She often talked about the constraints and societal expectations that had burdened her in the East, and how much she loved the free thinkers and independent thought that she found in Oregon. She was intellectual and practical, and raised us all to evaluate and make our own decisions, and to take care of ourselves.

In January of 2000, my 67 year old mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. She had a surgery to remove the tumor, and was pronounced cured, though of course was not. When the tumor returned a few months later, she had another surgery to remove her lung. Each of these surgeries was an enormous undertaking, and she had a great deal of pain and long recoveries. In June of 2000, my mother's sister in Pennsylvania was diagnosed with the same lung cancer. My aunt spent 100 days in a small hospital prior to her natural death. A great deal of that time she was in a coma, and her three sons traveled from Seattle, Florida, and Geneva as much as they could to spend time in that hospital room. My mother and I visited my aunt several times, and it became very clear to my mom that she did not want that death for herself or her family.

In August of 2000, she was diagnosed as terminal, and began talking to her children about hastening her death under Oregon's law. Over the next 4 months she had multiple hospitalizations, ct scans, pet scans, bone scans, chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Also though, she very much continued to make the most of every day. She stayed very active in her book club, her bridge club, and in the lives of her five children and nine grandchildren. I wanted her to come live with me during those last months, but she had no interest in that. She wanted to be independent, and wanted to stay involved in her life.

One morning in December my mom woke up and could not get out of bed because her pain was too great. She was hospitalized for three weeks while we tried to control the pain and get her well enough to fulfill her wishes to go to the Oregon Coast to die. Two of my siblings are physicians married to physicians, and while my parents were divorced at the time of her death, my mother had been married for 40 years to a cardiologist. She had very sophisticated medical and palliative care. She had two MD pain specialists attending her, and had a morphine pump installed directly into her spine. She knew that she could control her pain by increasing her morphine to the point that she would be in a coma, but she did not want that. She wanted to be mentally present in her life, and her children's life, until she died.

I remember very clearly when she made the decision to switch from trying to stay alive, to allowing herself to die. She came home from that hospital stay, and made her first request to hasten her death under Oregon's law. This request was very consistent with my mom's personality, and with the forthrightness and acceptance with which she had treated her illness and terminal diagnosis. All of her five children immediately supported her. After watching this disease ravage her body, and after watching the dignity and grace with which she had handled a terrible year, we all felt she deserved this final bit of control. She remained bedridden and failed rapidly during the fifteen days of the mandatory waiting period. She lost control of her bodily functions, began having difficulty breathing because of the tumors growing in her airways, and began coughing up blood. My sister who is a pulmonologist began to worry that she would hemorrhage in her lungs and drown.

On the morning of January 25th, my mom made her final request to end her suffering and use Oregon's Death with Dignity Law. On that morning, she lay in her own bed, in her own home, surrounded by her five children, our five spouses, her remaining sister and a nephew, and her longtime internist and friend. We read some poetry, listened to some music, and she wanted to hear the 23rd psalm. We all hugged her, kissed her, and told her how much we loved her. She drank the medication, and fell peacefully into a coma within five minutes. She died 15 minutes after that.

I feel that my family was given a gift that morning. My final memories of my mother are profoundly loving and supportive. May we all be so lucky to die surrounded by those we love most in the world. May we all be so lucky to have the last eyes we see and the last touch we feel to be that of our children.

The inevitability of my Mother's death from her disease was not in question. Her choice to hasten that inevitability was a reflection of her values and emblematic of the personal freedom our country prizes. Her choice was not about making that choice for other's, as in euthanasia, nor was it about compromising the rights of people with disabilities. Her choice in no way demeaned or sought to critique the choices that others with different values make every day. On the contrary, my Mother would have wanted people with different values, whether grounded in their religion or otherwise, to be able to make their own choices about how their lives come to an end when faced with a terminal diagnosis. Oregon's law is about preserving those choices for everyone.