

Last Sunday, Joan and I drove down to the farm after meeting for worship. We hadn't been there long, when our farmer neighbor, Jack, stopped to tell us a car had struck a deer and the deer was still alive and laying in our field. Our neighbor is a very gentle man, a Quaker. I asked him if he had a rifle, and he admitted that he did, but shrunk back when I suggested we use it to euthanize the deer. I could tell the thought of shooting the deer troubled him, and to be truthful I was speaking with more boldness than I felt. I've never shot an animal. The average Quaker is next to worthless in such circumstances. There's never a Baptist with a rifle when you need one.

I went inside and phoned the DNR officer, who called the sheriff, who told me they'd have an officer there in a short while. I walked up the road to where the deer lay to keep the buzzards back that were starting to circle. I know scavengers are a part of nature, but I thought circling the deer while it was still alive was inconsiderate. After a while the officer showed up and ended the deer's suffering. Then the Quaker farmer came with his tractor and took it away to bury. Later that evening, I saw a spider on the back porch and killed it. Joan said, "Did you get that spider?" I said I had and she said, "Good." If the animal kingdom were spying on me that day, they would conclude I was a cold-blooded killer. I've thought of the deer and spider several times since, about the nature of mercy, and the vagaries of death.

Coincidentally, I took my father to the hospital this week for some lab work and overheard a man and woman talking about a relative of theirs who was a patient there. From what I gathered, their relative was being kept alive through the use of respirators and intravenous medicines and nourishment. These are medical miracles our ancestors could hardly imagine.

The man asked the woman, “How will we know when it’s time to let him go?”

It was as if the medical intervention had no effect at all, for the woman answered, “It’s in the Lord’s hands. The Lord decides when it’s time for us to go.”

I’ve heard that said a lot, and I suspect you have too. It is a common belief that God dictates or controls the length of our lives. Sometimes we’ll hear people say, “If it’s my time to go, then it’s my time to go, and there’s nothing I can do about it.” They believe each life comes stamped with an expiration date, that God knows the date, and nothing we do, including medical intervention, can change it. Hence, the lady at the hospital saying, “It’s in the Lord’s hands. The Lord decides when it’s time for us to go.” This is a common perception, which I suspect has little to do with faith and everything to do with our fear of death, and our unwillingness to take charge of our own deaths.

These past few weeks, we’ve been talking about letting go and holding on. How do we know when it is time to hold on to life, and how do we know when it is time to let go of life?

How do we take ownership of that decision, instead of passing that off as God's decision or responsibility? For it seems to me that the moment we place someone on a machine that keeps them alive, conduct surgeries that correct potentially fatal problems, and prolong our lives with a variety of medicines, we can no longer say the decision of life and death is in God's hands. I am not opposed to those machines, surgeries, and medicines. Indeed, I am grateful for them. They have kept many people I love alive and well, and have improved my own health. But we can no longer pretend that the choice of life and death is out of our hands. It is squarely in our hands, by virtue of our intellect we have placed it in our hands, and we should not pretend otherwise by continuing to claim the timing of our deaths is entirely up to God.

I would further contend that God is neither pleased nor honored when we say, "It's God decision when and how I die." Just as I would not be pleased nor honored if my adult sons were to place their most personal decisions in my hands. For my goal as a parent is to raise sons who take responsibility for their own lives and decisions. I do not want them to bow to me, saying, "I will leave every matter of my life and death up to you." I want them to stand straight, look life square in the eye, make their own decisions, accepting full responsibility for them. I contend that any religion that cripples their ability to do that is bad religion, and displeasing to God, who is committed to our growth, not our slavish and mindless dependence.

There is a right and good time to let go of our lives. When disease has devoured our bodies, when we are a painful burden to others, when we are no longer of any use to ourselves or our loved ones, when life is full of agony, when, as Robert Ingersoll said, “in all the horizon of the future there is not one star of hope,” we can then say, as Jesus said, “It is finished.” This is natural. This is right. This is responsible. To avoid that decision, or assign it to another, is to abandon our first and greatest responsibility—the careful stewardship of our own lives.

It would have been unkind if I’d had it within my power to end the deer’s suffering, but had said instead, “I will let it suffer until God is ready to take it home.” It is equally unkind to sustain an unbearable and hopeless life by artificial means and methods, trusting God to end it in God’s own time, in God’s own manner. That is not faith. That is avoiding a difficult decision that is ours to make.

Our right to decide when we can and should let go of life is a precious right. Some people, forced to let go of life long before they would choose, never get that privilege. We owe it to them, ourselves, and our loved ones, to exercise our choice wisely, with eyes open, with minds unclouded by superstitions that pass for faith.

As Jesus was our example in his living, so too was he our example in his dying. For when it was the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light faded, the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands *I* commit my spirit."

There was no passive waiting here, no endless and senseless prolonging of life, no turning over to God a decision that belonged to man.

"*I* commit my spirit," Jesus said, then breathed his last.

Courageous in life, he was courageous in death. Responsible in life, he was responsible in death.

We do not always get to choose the time and manner of our passing. So when we are accorded that choice, we should, like Jesus, exercise it courageously and responsibly.

Though God does not determine when our lives end, it is nevertheless a sacred moment when we leave this world to enter another. We need not fear the moment the sun of our lives touch the horizon. What is night here, is dawn elsewhere. In this sense, death is the letting go of one gift to take hold of another.