

AN OPEN LETTER TO GOVERNOR BOOTH GARDNER

By Chris Carlson

(Carlson is a long-time business Democrat, former press secretary to Idaho Governor Cecil D. Andrus; former assistant secretary for public affairs at the Department of the Interior under President Carter; an early, early supporter of U.S. Senator Patty Murray; founding partner of The Gallatin Group, and a founding member and the chair of the Coalition Against Assisted Suicide).

Dear Gov. Gardner:

As we greet the arrival of spring, nature's promise of the renewal of life leading to a bountiful harvest in the fall, it seems fitting to respond to a recent letter you sent across the nation soliciting funds for the initiative you hope to place on the November ballot allowing physician-assisted suicide.

First, please accept an apology. In an earlier interview I said you were acting selfishly. That was wrong of me. Much as I think suicide is an irrational and selfish act, I should separate the act from the person. I should not and will not question your motives. Not only do you and I share the same affliction, which is Parkinson's disease, we also share a love for politics and baseball. With respect for each other, we should just agree to disagree, but avoid being disagreeable.

I do go you one better, though, in that I would qualify under the terms of your initiative to avail myself of a physician's prescription to obtain the lethal drugs the initiative would permit. In November, 2005, I was told I had Stage IV cancer and the probability was I would not last six more months. But 16 months later I'm still here which, in and of itself, identifies one huge problem with your initiative: doctors are usually just making an educated guess when they predict how long one might live.

Certainly you have a right to your opinion, and a right to express it. Where in my humble opinion you go badly astray is asserting that there is a human and constitutional right to what you call "death with dignity."

Really, Governor? Just where does it say that in the Constitution or the Bill of Rights? As Seattle Post-Intelligencer columnist Joel Connelly recently said in a column: Isn't the correct expression that all are endowed by the Creator with inalienable rights including the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"? That's a right to life, not death, or do you place this fictional right under the "pursuit of happiness" clause?

Let me ask a few other questions regarding claims made in the fund-raising letter.

Where in the Constitution does it say we have been endowed with a right to "unfettered personal liberty"? Really? I thought in society we accept constraints because we all understand the chaos that would result if we all had "unfettered personal liberty"? Most people understand we have responsibilities to our fellow human beings, not an absolute right to do as we please.

The letter conjures up a picture for its recipients of their dying loved ones having to endure unbearable pain, anguish and suffering. Is that really the way it is? Most proponents of assisted suicide now acknowledge that modern palliative medicine has become so effective that claiming assisted suicide is needed to prevent unbearable pain is just no longer credible. And isn't it true Governor, that in Oregon pain is rarely invoked as the reason for requesting the lethal concoction of drugs?

The letter claims the initiative protects privacy, requires informed consent and provides safeguards, Governor, but isn't it true there is no requirement to notify one's family of this request for a lethal prescription? Isn't it true, too Governor, that studies show almost all those given a terminal diagnosis exhibit signs of depression with some even expressing a desire to hasten their death, but that most change their minds when the underlying depression is treated? Isn't it thus deeply concerning that not a single person availing themselves of Oregon's assisted suicide law in 2007 was even referred to a mental health professional for evaluation and true assistance?

The letter claims the Oregon law works, but how do you know? Isn't it true there is no penalty for non-reporting by a doctor either in Oregon or under the Washington initiative? So how can one claim it works when there's no checking and no enforcement?

And how can you claim taking a lethal dose of drugs to kill yourself is not suicide? The definition of suicide is clear and unequivocal. Isn't claiming, as the initiative does, that the underlying cancer or incurable condition is the cause of death, and not the lethal dose, completely inaccurate and in fact disingenuous?

And by the way, aren't we all terminal? Life itself is a terminal condition, Governor. Following your logic, couldn't healthy people avail themselves of your proposal? Aren't current laws focused correctly on protecting life and wouldn't your assisted-suicide initiative really shift the entire focus of the laws built over a period of 2000 years?

You say this is all about the individual having power over how their life ends (though none of us had any "power" over how, where, or when we were born) yet aren't you really inviting government into a heretofore very private and personal situation and actually ceding power to doctors – who clearly don't want it – or to HMOs, which may very well want it?

How about a friendly wager, Governor that your campaign will end up spending more than the \$1 million your letter says is budgeted to try and convince the voters of Washington to sanction government getting into the business of killing people? An exaggeration? Haven't you said several times this is just a first step? A first step to what, Governor?

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