

# DEATH CHOICE: *Unassisted, Book-Assisted, or Physician-Assisted?*

A theological reflection on the 2001 (56-minute) film "Live and Let Go: An American Death"--"A film by Jay Niven & Jay Spain"--Live & Let Go Productions, LLC--919.833.5454--liveandletgo.com

1 None of us is going to get out of here alive, & most of us choose to stay here as long as we can: our deaths are passive in the sense that we do nothing to hasten our end (if we think there's no afterlife) or our getting out of here (if we think that death is not the end of us).

2 Some of us have active deaths in the sense that we do something to hasten the terminus of at least our earthly life. God has given us "free will" (however we may construe it), & we may choose death: as you can see by this Thinksheet's title, that fact is what I'm beginning this movie-review with. To center attention on this fact, the Hemlock Society recently renamed itself "End-of-Life Choices."

And here are the choices:

(1) Unassisted death-choice: suicide, Latin for "self-killing." Amos Wilder, great scholar-poet, once blue-penciled my use of "suicide" as a verb. His point was that using the word as a verb decriminalizes it: as a noun, it's criminal because the accompanying verb is criminal: one "commits" a crime. So, say "commit suicide." Almost all self-killings are in this category of **high-level** suicide. Societies rightly put them under the ban, for most even of the premeditated suicides occur when the self-victim is in an upwrought state of temporary meaning-loss & resultant hopelessness. As an individual, you've a right to do away with yourself: as a person (in relation to other persons), that right is qualified by the communal dimension of your being, your nature, your reality face-to-face with your Creator & neighbor.

(2) Book-assisted death-choice (the book being Derek Humphrey's FIN-AL EXIT [1991; 1997 2nd-ed. subtitle, "The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying"]). Let's call this **middle-level** suicide.

(3) Physician-assisted death-choice--let's call it **low-level** suicide. In the U.S., legal only in Oregon. (Holland has the longest experience of it.) We in End-of-Life Choices speak & work for legalization & are aware of the traditional taboos (in the common life, in the medical profession, & in religion) arrayed against it. But the human need for it is clear--as e.g. in this film.

3 **STORY:** The film begins with numerous persons recalling their parents' deaths with few redeeming features. Deaths of grandparents & siblings are added. Here are some quotes, to give the flavor of the conversations (including a grandfather's World War II memories & a scattering of death-anticipation statements):

...."Proctitis is going to kill me, anyway; so I may as well continue to smoke."

....Widower recalling what he'd said to his wife on her 70th: "I loved you young, I loved you old."

....One son: "When Mother passed,...." Another: "She went...." Their bereaved father: "I'm lonesome. It's boring. Very lonesome." The daughter: "She was with me when I was born; I wanted to be with her when she died" (but wasn't). Father again: "I'm going to walk away from my misery." A son: "I've always believed in doctor-assisted suicide" (unlike "Baptists and Catholics"). The other son: Everybody has the right to remain "in control." But their sister: "Life is sacred, a gift from God. I'd put up with it. It's up to God when you die." Another woman: "The Lord gives and takes away." A neighbor-housekeeper, of no religious background: "I think God forgives."

4 The remainder of the film is the **SCENE** of the death of Sam, in the presence of a son & daughter. Page 1 of an issue of "TIME LINES: Hemlock Society" appears. Says Sam, "The book calls for six [lethal] pills, & I've got 58" + suffocation bag. Daughter: "You're going on to something. Or nothing." Sam: "I'm just going to go to sleep, that's all." His final sermon: "Live by what I told you, the Golden Rule. God bless you, my son, God bless you." "I just lost my last son." "Don't rely on some outside minister....Make up your own set of beliefs, and you'll be a Christian... a good Christian." Then he drinks the potion & puts the plastic bag over his head. "Give me another rubberband." Son & daughter kneel Sam has a few gently labored breaths, then is still.

Elliott  
△  
Thinksheets

309 Lake Elizabeth Drive  
Craigville, MA 02632  
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 \$20 per year  
elliottlw1@comcast.net

Noncommercial  
reproduction  
permitted

4.19.04

3210

## COMMENTARY

5 Sam's is a middle-level (book-assisted) suicide. Far better than high-level (unassisted), in that (1) loved ones are present, (2) death is certain (whereas many unassisted attempts are unsuccessful), & (3) no cleanup (whereas most unassisted suicides are messy). But worse than low-level (physician-assisted) suicide, which has the advantages of (1) professional (medical) skills, (2) no secrecy (with fear of discovery & interference), & (3) no police investigation following or (worse) before the coroner's visit....In Sam's case, three police arrive with a board-of-health officer, & the son & daughter are angry when it is suggested that there may have to be an autopsy (Sam's case having been clearly terminal: he was in the last stages of a widely metastasized [especially in the lungs] prostate cancer).

6 In choosing death, Sam was both self-regarding & others-regarding. Eating has become difficult, though he manages the fatal few ounces of what looks like pudding. "It's no fun living any more. It's a terrible chore." "One constant threat after another. When is the pain going to get so bad I can't stand it?" He loathes being a burden, & wouldn't consider a nursing home: "Nobody's going to wipe my ass."

7 How does God function in the film? Marginally. Sam's the only man who mentions God, & then only in the once repeated "God bless you." One woman says that life, as "a gift from God," is sacred, so "it's up to God when you die"--& another says the same by quoting Job ("The Lord gives and takes away"). A third woman says "I think God forgives." But God is largely inert, neither means nor end.

8 The afterlife? Only one mention: Sam says "I worry about where my soul may end up." But he tries to cancel the worry: "I'm just going to go to sleep, that's all." And the housekeeper states Grandpa Upstairs theology: "I think God forgives."

9 No evidence that anyone practices any religion, though a few show residual religion. Sam preaches the ethic of reciprocal regard ("the Golden Rule") & takes it as sufficient to being "a good Christian" without benefit of clergy ("outside minister") or church (which nobody mentions: though Christianity is essentially communal, such religion as anyone in the film has is purely private, individual, egocentric).

10 As a practicing Christian & promoter of physician-assisted death for the terminally ill, I sorrow that some use End-of-Life Choices not as a means of joyfully going to God to join the church triumphant but as a shrunken substitute for full Christianity, weekly worshiping with the church militant, receiving & giving forgiveness, praying for guidance in all aspects of life toward God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven." I found the film to be honest, helpful, & depressing.

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS  
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive  
Craigville MA 02632

