

LIVING WISELY

REVIEWED BY SR. PATRICIA TALONE, RSM, PhD

From the first page of *The Graceful Exit*, you can tell that the primary author of this book is a wise woman who has “borne the heat and burden of the day” (Matthew 20:12). Aeschylus, the fifth-century B.C. Greek playwright, has the chorus in his classic, *Agamemnon*, warn the audience that “he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain, which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, until ... comes wisdom by the awful grace of God.” This short, direct, extremely readable book is full of practical, hard-earned wisdom intended to help people “face reality, make wise choices and find hope at the end of life.”

Author Mona Hanford tenderly cared for her husband as he neared life’s end. We know that everyone must die, and each family at one point or another faces the challenge and privilege of caring for loved ones in the final months, weeks and days of their lives. The author is no exception, but Hanford brought to these realities a rich experience of commitment to and work with persons at the end of life. An eldercare activist, consultant and speaker, Hanford is the founder of The Hope Initiative, a five-part course designed to help the terminally ill and their caregivers. She has inspired participants at The Collegeville Institute in Minnesota, the Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina, and Harvard University’s Initiative on Health, Religion, and Spirituality in Boston on caring for persons at the end of life.

The tone of Hanford’s book complements the Catholic Health Association’s “Shared Statement of Identity for the Catholic Health Ministry,” which proclaims “every person is a treasure, every life a sacred gift, every human being a unity of body, mind, and spirit.” Although *The Graceful Exit* is written both for caregivers and patients, the author’s primary purpose is patient-focused. She endeavors to assist each person to live with grace and dignity for every precious moment of life.

The table of contents reveals Hanford’s emphasis

on a holistic approach to patient care, embracing the physical, social and spiritual realities of sickness and death. She devotes a chapter to the *Five Wishes* document, noting that it was inspired by the work of St. Teresa of Calcutta in a Washington, D. C. hospice. Ecumenically sensitive, the book’s text does not purport to present a specific religious tradition. It draws upon wisdom and voices from diverse professions and backgrounds.

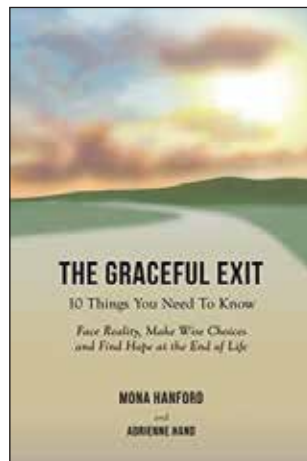
Unlike some contemporary commentators, Hanford does not eschew modern medical advances, but she incorporates respect for these modalities into her embrace of the comforts of hospice. Her approach is not an either/or, but a both/and.

Diverse professionals recommend the book, including physicians, psychologists, attorneys and politicians. Endorsements from William H. Frist, MD, the former Republican senator from Tennessee, and news analyst Cokie Roberts show the wide variety of persons to whom the book appeals.

Intended to be inspirational rather than academic or clinical, the book does not provide endnotes. It does, however, offer further resources for persons preparing advance directives, as well as resources for caregivers.

Catholic health care understandably prides itself on its excellent palliative care, hospice and home care programs. Many member systems maintain state-of-the-art cancer centers offering both traditional and complementary care to assist in their patients’ holistic healing. This book would be an inspiring and practical addition to resource rooms, libraries and waiting rooms in such facilities. It is a book to be read and discussed by patients, families and caregivers. As Aeschylus’ chorus reminds us, wisdom does not come to any of us cheaply. It is so important to share that wisdom with one another.

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**THE GRACEFUL EXIT:
10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW**
BY MONA HANFORD AND
ADRIENNE HAND
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