

GRATEFULLY YOURS

For those of us affiliated with Catholic health care, who may also have relatives in their waning days, and who are inevitably growing older day by day ourselves, the end of life is unlikely to be a topic we tire of soon. New treatments and technologies bring new questions and beg us to attend to our own advance directives, and the effort to legalize physician-assisted suicide grows stronger every year. Our minds will be continually challenged by the ethical issues; our hearts softened and expanded by the frailty of loved ones as they dwindle toward death.



**PAMELA
SCHAEFFER**

We are, therefore, fortunate in this issue to hear from distinguished professionals and authors as they view the last stage of life through a variety of lenses: the political (Fr. Bryan Hehir), the medical (Ira Byock, MD), the spiritual (Tina Picchi and Woody English, MD), the pastoral (Professor Allen Verhey), the sacramental (Fr.

Bruce Morrill, SJ), the biblical (Dan O'Brien), the deeply personal (David DeCosse.)

Journeying with these writers over the past few months, in preparation for this issue, led me to explore the contents of some very fine books. My reading list included Verhey's *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus*; Byock's *The Best Care Possible: A Physician's Quest to Transform Care Through the End of Life*, and Morrill's *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death*. Little could I have imagined that, on a rare fall afternoon in a hammock, when I might otherwise have reached for the latest novel on my stack, I would find myself unexpectedly enriched by the wisdom these magnanimous works contain. Each emanates from personal and pastoral experience with people close to death, and we are truly grateful that these authors agreed to produce original material for our pages.

When DeCosse's article appeared unsolicited in my email — "over the transom," in the jargon of editorial houses — I saw in it an echo of one of the best books I'd read in the past year, a collection of short stories by George Saunders titled *Tenth of December*. In the title story, a sick and frightened man, slouching toward suicide rather than risk becoming a burden to his loved ones, discovers the power inherent in weakness

to elicit and deepen love.

It is perhaps the most important lesson in these pages: When people are faithful to one another to the end, doors to transformation unexpectedly open. Stripped of habitual pretenses and defenses, we awaken to the beauty and truth of the other.

On a personal and final note, sending this issue on end of life to the printer marks, for me, the end of life as I know it. After 35 years of working as a journalist and editor (and before that, co-parenting five small children), I am moving on to other projects. (Not "retiring," as some astute CHA colleagues have suggested, but "rewiring," or "refiring.") I plan to delve more intensely into a subject of long interest — the historical development of the concept of *theosis*, or divinization, as the goal of the Christian life, possibly producing a book on that subject. I look forward, too, to writing about the recent history of CHA in anticipation of the organization's upcoming centennial, and to spending some less distracted time with my spouse of 50-plus years, my 95-year-old mother in her waning days, and the rest of my family, who include 13 busy grandchildren.

I dare to hope, too, that I might now and then grab a few extra hours in that hammock, where reading material is likely to include future issues of *Health Progress*, produced by my well-qualified successor, Mary Ann Steiner, and the rest of the magazine's talented staff.

To the many wise and wonderful people I have met and worked with in these past five years at CHA — colleagues, authors, acquaintances and friends — my genuine gratitude for the countless ways in which you have graced my life and supported our work. To me, the helping hands on our cover represent not only the family members and caregivers of vulnerable people at the end of life, but also each of *you*.

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