

The New Art of Dying: How to Personalize the Most Important Decisions for Yourself and Your Loved Ones

Diane Burnside Murdock

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Diane Burnside Murdock has an impressive résumé. She is a writer, blogger, and researcher; holds a master's degree in health services administration; and is cocreator of a mobile health app, My Health Care Wishes. She added *The New Art of Dying* to her list of accomplishments in an effort to help people make rational and personally meaningful decisions about how they want to die before they are caught in the medical web of end-of-life care. The assumption that one can simply ask loved ones to "pull the plug" is among the many myths dispelled by this well-written, thoughtful, and exceedingly useful book.

Death and dying are subjects that few people want to read or think about. Murdock understands this and writes with an empathic style that draws the reader into a frank and informative discussion that will disarm even the most squeamish sufferers of thanatophobia. She shares the agonizing frustration and helplessness she felt about both her parents' deaths and how she wished things could have been different. Murdock's openness and humility in using her own pain as an impetus to empower others brings a palpable intimacy and an obvious authenticity to *The New Art of Dying*.

In the first chapter, "How We Die," Murdock sets the stage by asking, "How can we help our loved ones die more peacefully? And how can we plan a better death for ourselves?" Death's inevitability is a given for everyone, and as Murdock methodically confronts the multitude of medical, interpersonal, and spiritual aspects of life's great transition, readers may feel relieved to finally have the tools to plan a good death.

There are an astounding number of medical interventions that can keep the heart beating, the lungs functioning, and the blood circulating long after quality of life and hope for recovery have dissipated. Murdock explains this quagmire well, and she shows how easily circumstances can overwhelm a family, even if there is an advance care plan. She repeatedly asserts that doctors are unable to make decisions about terminating interventions and that the importance of designating a proxy who can and will carry out one's wishes cannot be overstated. From saying no to a feeding tube, to dialysis, to antibiotics, to resuscitation for the nth time, a proxy's job is both daunting and invaluable. Murdock shares several real-life, heart-wrenching stories to underscore this maxim and then tempers them with several more heartwarming examples of what a positive end-of-life outcome can look like.

The New Art of Dying is attractively packaged, has well-organized chapters, and offers an excellent section at the end with resources for further discussion and planning. The carefully executed bibliography and index adds professional and academic value to the book. The only flaw can be found in chapter two, where the author asks several dozen general questions about one's background, attitudes about dying, family, and values. This short section, which has an amateurish and patronizing feel to it, is best skimmed over, and is easily forgiven in an otherwise high-quality and important book.

PATTY SUTHERLAND (December 19, 2013)

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