ON ASSISTED SUICIDE

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THE *Dignity* SERIES

WORD on FIRE

Published by Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007

Printed in the United States of America

Cover design and interior art direction by Nicolas Fredrickson;
typesetting by Marlene Burrell

ISBN: 978-1-68578-135-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024931223

To my beloved husband Joe—
"God blessed the broken road that led me straight to you."

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Series Introduction

Why dignity? Because human dignity (*dignitas*, the worthiness of each person) is the foundation of all human society. Jacques Maritain, the Catholic philosopher who helped draft the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, affirmed this in saying, "The privilege connected with the dignity of the person is inalienable, and human life involves a sacred right."

In a time of political polarization, social division, and the ongoing "culture wars," the Dignity Series aims to refocus our attention on human dignity. The series enters into the great mystery of human life with wonder and reverence, and unflinchingly faces grave threats to human dignity, many of them ignored in the culture today.

Each volume in the series will examine one of those threats, drawing on rational argument, spiritual sources, and above all, personal stories that take readers into the lived experience on the frontier of the issue. This broad mix of ideas and approaches acknowledges that a wide variety of backgrounds and personalities shape how we interact with these questions—and that if a book is to help us grow, it has to stir our hearts as well as activate our minds.

The Dignity Series emerges out of and points back to the whole-life ethic of Catholic social teaching, which is grounded in the principle of human dignity. "Social justice," the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "can be obtained only in respecting the transcendent dignity of man" (*CCC* 1929). And that dignity, on the Catholic reading, can only finally rest on our status as creatures made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). However, these books are for anyone—Catholic or non-Catholic, religious or nonreligious—who wrestles with these issues and longs to see a more informed and considerate approach to them.

To see a full list of titles in the Dignity Series, please visit www.wordonfire.org/dignity.

Introduction

It happened back in 2015, but I remember it like it was yesterday.

It was late May, and it had been sunny and warm. It was my favorite time of day: "Golden Sunlight," as one of my photographer-friends refers to it, the best natural lighting for taking pictures outdoors. I was in my favorite city—Vancouver—which is also my birthplace and has been my home at various points in adulthood. Vancouver is situated along the coast of the province in which the license plates say "*Beautiful* British Columbia" for a reason. I was at one of the most stunning parts of the city, the peninsula on which rests my alma mater, the University of British Columbia. There are many lookouts for your eyes to feast on the breathtaking scene of vast ocean becoming one with the ever-changing sky. The sun was setting, and it was simply gorgeous out. But as I sat in the car with my fiancé, the darkest season of my life was about to begin.

Our engagement had just come to an end, and so did, it felt like, the dream of a lifetime. A purchased dress would remain unworn. A ring finger would no longer display glittering diamonds that indicated the wearer was *chosen*. But most significant of all, a heart that had finally fallen in love would now endure a death-like

loss. As I left his car to sit in mine, I remember beginning to cry. Wail is more like it. From the depths of my being the suffering—the anguish—was so profound that I sounded like an animal caught in a trap. I felt utterly crushed. Decimated. Hopeless.

I called my sister and my cousin, and I remember exactly what I said to them:

"I don't want to live. I want to die."

My cousin picked me up and my sister drove to meet us. My car was left behind, and that, in a sense, was a metaphor for what I was experiencing—the power of mobility trapped in a stationary state. Heaviness. Abandonment. But the response of my family members, the literal picking up, would also act as a metaphor for how I was to eventually find healing—to be lifted, carried, connected, and surrounded.

Suffering takes all forms. For the person who wants to be married, it appears as a broken heart or an unfulfilled desire for romantic relationship. For the person who wants children, it presents as an empty womb or empty arms. For the person who wants to walk, it presents as paralysis, broken legs, or even no legs at all. For the person who wants to see, it presents as blindness. For the person who wants a job, it presents as unemployment and mounting debt. For the person who wants to feel comfort or even just "normal," it presents as chronic pain. This list could go on.

Each experience is so different, and yet there is a common thread to them all: a wish that is not, and maybe cannot, be fulfilled. A deep longing that is temporarily, or even permanently, going to be unmet. And the clash of what one wants and what one has creates the explosive force that we call suffering.

Suffering is part of the human experience. It cannot be avoided. But it can be shared. And it is when we share it, when we enter into it, when we wrestle and do battle with it, when we respond to it with creativity, that we begin to discover the power of suffering—not just in the crushing, but also in the rebuilding, the drawing in, and the uniting. This makes me think of a song by Hillsong Worship: "In the crushing, in the pressing, you are making new wine."

Over the two decades of my public speaking and writing career, I have continually declared that we should alleviate suffering without eliminating the sufferer. As time passes, I am more convinced than ever of the truthfulness of that statement—not simply that we *should* do this, but that we actually *can* do it. But note this important distinction: to alleviate suffering is not to eradicate it. I do not think we can entirely eradicate suffering from the profoundly broken and imperfect world we live in. We can certainly try, but if we fail, we must remember that there is still hope—and that the hope lies in *alleviating* suffering; it lies in bringing beauty from ashes; it lies in living for the world to come.

The importance of alleviating suffering without eliminating sufferers is so needed in a world where suicide is on the rise, where there is a segment of the population whose suffering is so overwhelming that death seems better than life.

When I was a child, I remember being taught at school about suicide. I remember being told that suicidal ideation was one secret we shouldn't keep—that if a friend expressed that she (or he) was thinking about killing herself, we should get help. I was taught that we needed to make sure our friends were safe, cared for, and protected from self-harm.

A quick Google search of "I'm suicidal" provides results leading people to resources offering suicide prevention. Advertisements with messages of support for people in such distress are in bathrooms, schools, and, as I've noticed in my travels, even in airports.

So many have been personally touched by suicide. A couple decades ago, the dad of one of my friends committed suicide. About ten years ago, a friend I knew from my university days committed suicide. And as I write this, one of my friend's uncles committed suicide. When suicide happens, people grieve. When famous people die by suicide, whether it be Naomi Judd, Robin Williams, Kate Spade, or Anthony Bourdain (to name a few), the world responds with sorrow. When the news reports on suicide, whether with headlines like "Why US Suicide Rate Is on the Rise" from the BBC or "Suicide Rates Sharply Increase Among Girls" from *Forbes* or "Suicide Deaths Reached a Record High in the US in 2022, Provisional Data Shows" from CNN, suicide is presented as a bad—not a good—thing. Typically, at the bottom of news stories about suicide, there is a message to readers to seek help if they are suicidal.

And yet, there is an interesting dichotomy occurring: while society generally decries suicide, there is an increasing acceptance of it when the word "assisted" is placed in front.

Assisted suicide (and its close cousin euthanasia) is being legalized or at the very least debated throughout much of the world. With varying parameters, restrictions, and labels (such as Canada's term of "medical assistance in dying"), getting assistance with one's intentionally inflicted death is becoming legal, or at least not punishable, in more and more places. In my home country of Canada, Parliament enacted a law in 2016 that allows for some

suicide assistance. Other places where people can access that include the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, and Spain. Although the entirety of the US does not allow for it, a growing number of states do, including Oregon, Washington, Hawaii, California, Montana, Colorado, New Mexico, New Jersey, Maine, and Vermont, as well as the nation's capital.

Whether someone solicits another to provide a life-ending substance that he administers himself, or whether he asks another to administer a life-ending substance for him, the end result is the same: someone dies because he expressed a wish to, and another party assists him in some way in achieving his stated goal. Whereas suicide happens in isolation, assisted suicide involves another's participation.

And that leads to the topic of this book: Should suicide ever be assisted? When someone no longer wishes to live, and asks another to help him end his life, what is the right response?

If suicide is wrong and if homicide is wrong, then wouldn't uniting the two in a situation where you have a type of suicide/homicide be just as wrong? When it comes to profound suffering, some people wrestle with that, and so this book relies on the vehicle of storytelling to provide the narrative on the other side of the argument that is typically not heard.

Why stories? Stories are a powerful means through which principles are demonstrated. That's why major world religions—from Judaism to Christianity, from Islam to Sikhism, from Hinduism to Buddhism—make stories a core part of their teachings. In some sense it's as though learning-by-storytelling is built into our nature, starting with young children who delight in having stories read to them. This fascination with stories never really leaves us and can be

seen in adults' interest in movies, novels, magazines, and even social media—all avenues through which stories are told.

Stories captivate the imagination and engage the mind. They also are a way of sharing one's subjective experience. And that is where storytelling to defend a position on an issue can be tricky. Whenever you rely on a story to make a point, there is a risk that someone who holds an alternate view will dismiss the story as a subjective experience and argue for an alternative point using a different story. One subjective experience can seem to cancel out the other, leaving both parties no further down the road in bolstering one's position.

But sharing stories can be more than retelling a subjective experience. When objective principles are identified, they are more readily embraced when inserted *into* a story. In this case, the story does not become the argument. The story is merely the vehicle through which the argument is made clear. It becomes the means to help the mind comprehend the lesson.

Consider, for example, *Aesop's Fables*. In the story about the wind and the sun, the point is this: "Gentleness and kind persuasion win where force and bluster fail." Then, a story—namely, a fable about the wind and the sun debating about which of them can convince a man walking down the road to remove his coat—is built around that principle. The wind believes blowing hard will do so, but rather than blowing the coat off, it results in the man holding his coat close. The sun, however, quietly, calmly, and gradually comes out from behind the clouds, and as its warm temperatures heat up the environment, the man removes his coat.

When it comes to assisted suicide, this book suggests ten principles that should guide our thinking on the topic. It then

draws on various stories to make those points abundantly clear and easily embraced. If followed, these guideposts will lead to human flourishing.

1

Start by Asking "What?"

Matt Hampson and Dan James had many things in common. They were close in age, being born within a year of each other. They both hailed from England. They were both promising rugby players. And when the men were in their early twenties, they were in separate scrummage accidents, and they both became paralyzed.

As a result of this, they both suffered profoundly. Today, Matt has turned that suffering into a source of meaning. He started the Matt Hampson Foundation to help people who have been catastrophically hurt in sporting accidents. Through his foundation, Matt was instrumental in developing the Get Busy Living Centre, where people with injuries come to get rehabilitation, encouragement, and community. He is a mentor, motivational speaker, and writer. He does all of this while using a wheelchair and a ventilator.

When Matt gave a TEDxLeicester talk, he concluded it by saying, "We can get busy living, or get busy dying. And I've decided to get busy living." Matt's focus on life, on the positive contribution he can make, aligns with this scriptural advice from Philippians 4:8: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is

any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

While Matt got busy living, Dan, tragically, got busy dying. After his injuries, Dan was so overwhelmed that he attempted suicide multiple times. This culminated in him traveling to Switzerland in 2008, where, at the age of twenty-three, he went to a clinic and was provided a lethal drink that he consumed.

There is no denying that a life of paralysis is a cross of tremendous weight to bear. If you are a quadriplegic, you cannot feed yourself, turn yourself, or toilet yourself. If you are dependent on a ventilator, you cannot even breathe on your own. Secondary complications from paralysis can include bladder and bowel issues, deep vein thrombosis, sepsis, pressure sores, spasticity, and more. These realities point not only to physical suffering but to emotional suffering as well, since they lead to losing independence as one knew it, relying on others for deeply personal and private care. This can feel incredibly difficult, even producing feelings of shame or worthlessness. One might also experience deep spiritual suffering, wrestling with the question of "Why me?"

If it is fair to say both Dan and Matt suffered greatly in their paralyzed states, what explains the different responses of these men? I believe the answer lies in the insight of psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Dr. Viktor Frankl, who not only had experience guiding those who suffered but also endured profound personal suffering himself. In a recorded interview, Dr. Frankl remarked that "despair is suffering without meaning." He captured the concept with the following mathematical equation: D = S – M. His point was that S (suffering) is a reality of the human experience. But whether someone despairs (D) in light of suffering is entirely dependent

on whether they find meaning (M). To the extent that they find meaning in their suffering, despair goes down. But to the extent that they do not find meaning in their suffering, despair goes up. And it is despair that can lead to suicide.

Finding meaning is possible even when the situation is bleak. Dr. Frankl cites a teenager in Texas who became a quadriplegic yet did not despair as others in her situation (like Dan) have. What set this young woman apart was not her experience of suffering but her response to it. She spent her days reading newspapers and watching television for an important purpose: when there was a story about someone experiencing difficult and challenging times, she would have a stick placed in her mouth so she could use it to press keys to type out letters of encouragement, consolation, and hope to them. She turned her experience of suffering into a springboard to reach out to others; it enabled her to have empathy and share hope. In short, she found meaning.

Or take another person with quadriplegia, a young man who became paralyzed at seventeen years old. Dr. Frankl received a letter from him: "I broke my neck but it did not break me." Why, like the aforementioned young woman, did this man not despair? Because he found meaning in his situation: he decided to become a psychologist, realizing that what he experienced would help him connect with and aid patients.

When speaking of people like these two young adults, Dr. Frankl said, "They can mold . . . their predicament into an accomplishment on the human level; they can turn their tragedies into a personal triumph. But they must know for what—what should I do with it?"

The key word there is "what." Whereas bestselling author Simon Sinek teaches people to "start with why," one could say that suffering can teach people to "start with what." It teaches people to ask, "What can I do in light of this? What good can I draw from it?" Of course, suffering people are tempted to start with why, asking questions like "Why did this happen to me?" and "Why must I go through this?" In fact, in his TEDx talk, Matt spoke about going through the stage of asking himself "the whys." But when terribly profound suffering happens to one and not others, "Why me?" is not easily answered. When news headlines tell us about people kidnapped and tortured, about children turned into sex slaves, about people victimized by genocide, the question "Why?" leaves us feeling empty-handed. Sure, we might say it's because we live in an imperfect world, because evil exists, or because life isn't fair, but does that satisfy?

The inability to adequately explain or be satisfied by "Why?" can leave us feeling more frustrated, adding an additional suffering to the preexisting suffering. There is an element of mystery involved. But when we accept that mystery and ask "What?"—*What* can I do now? *What* can I do because of this? *What* good can I draw from it?—then we get answers. Then we get empowerment. Then we get transformation. Making our "what" something positive that comes in direct response to a suffering that is negative does not suddenly transform the negative into something that is good in and of itself. It does not make a case *for* suffering. Instead, what it does do is make a case for bringing good *out of* suffering.

It is worth emphasizing that when good comes out of suffering, that good does not make the original suffering good. For example, imagine a woman is raped, gets pregnant, and the resulting child

grows up to find the cure for cancer. It is an incredible good that an unrepeatable and irreplaceable individual accomplished such a wonderful thing. But that good fruit does not make the original rape (and the untold suffering the mother experienced) a good thing. The end does not justify the means, and so if we had a magical power to go back in history and prevent the rape from happening, we should do that. We could never justify committing evil (rape) just to bring about a good (conceive a human who will discover the cure for cancer). However, no such ability to undo the past exists. We cannot undo the evil and suffering that occurred. Since we are only left with the present and the future, we can choose to do good *in response to* bad things from the past.

And so, when anyone in a situation of profound suffering is tempted to ask "Why?" we should lead them to this insight: "Maybe you're starting with the wrong question. Maybe the question shouldn't be 'Why?' Maybe the question should be 'What?' Maybe the question should be 'What am I going to do about this?' Maybe the question should be 'What marvelous, amazing, wonderful thing am I going to create in response to this terrible, horrific, awful thing?' Maybe the question shouldn't be so much about the reason for the past ('Why did that happen?') as it should be about a response for the future ('What's next?')."

"What now?" or "What good can I do in light of this?" is a question Patrick John Hughes asked himself. In March 1988, when his son Patrick Henry was born, the exciting news of "It's a boy!" was met with a series of negative news: That boy had no eyes. He had scoliosis. He had an inability to straighten his arms and legs, which would mean life in a wheelchair. Patrick John and his wife experienced understandable suffering that accompanies an

unwell child and dashed dreams. Active sports like baseball would not be a part of their father-son relationship. There were so many things that Patrick Henry would never do. Patrick John and his wife naturally asked themselves "Why?" but eventually they shifted to "What?": What can we do in response to this unexpected reality? In a short matter of time, it became obvious that Patrick Henry was a musical prodigy. At only nine months old, he began playing piano, and today, having never seen a note, he is an accomplished pianist, singer, and trumpet player.

Patrick John and Patrick Henry are an inspiring father-son duo. When Patrick Henry got the opportunity to play trumpet in the University of Louisville Cardinal Marching Band, it was his father who pushed him in his wheelchair so he could "march" along. When Patrick Henry attended university, it was his father who accompanied him to classes. When Patrick wrote a book, it was his father who coauthored it with him.

There is much Patrick Henry cannot do, and that can be cause for suffering. But there is much he *can* do, and that is where he stays focused.

The Lord of the Rings even "starts with what." In the first film, Frodo says to the wise wizard Gandalf, "I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened." And Gandalf replies, "So do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is *what* to do with the time that is given to us."

"What now?" and "What good can I do in light of this?" are questions Michael Morton asked himself. There aren't words to fully capture the cruel suffering Michael endured for over two decades. It all began in 1986, when his beloved wife, Christine, was brutally

murdered. As if that weren't bad enough, their three-year-old son was home when the murder occurred. It gets even worse. Within weeks, Michael was arrested for murdering his wife and sentenced to life in prison—except he did not commit the crime. For almost twenty-five long, agonizing, brutal years (or, as Michael puts it, 8,980 days), Michael was robbed of his freedom through unjust incarceration.

Not only was he grieving the loss of his wife in a prison cell, ripped away from raising his son, and left with a destroyed reputation; he was also forced to live with some of the worst criminals, fearing beatings, rapes, and even murder from other prisoners. Michael spent time doing backbreaking labor under blazing Texas heat in fields amidst fire ants, mosquitos, snakes, and alligators. He endured freezing temperatures indoors during winter and overwhelmingly hot temperatures indoors during summer.

So much suffering, for so long. Why did such misery happen to Michael? Why him? How far does answering those questions get us? But *what* could he do about it? There we have answers; in fact, Michael chose a series of positive "whats" in response: he spent time in the prison library, studying case law and how appeals worked; he participated in a prison book club; he completed his college education from jail, majoring in psychology, and later pursued graduate studies from a different prison; he jogged and lifted weights; he journaled his experiences; he wrote arguments for his innocence and even composed short stories (some of which were published in small magazines).

When his case was eventually taken on by the Innocence Project, an organization that works to exonerate the wrongly convicted,

their brilliant efforts and DNA-testing technology identified the actual murderer and freed Michael in 2011.

Even though his suffering of unjust imprisonment was lifted, Michael continued with a focus on what he could do as a result of what he had faced. He became a public speaker before retiring. He pursued a case against prosecutor Ken Anderson for how he mishandled Michael's trial. He did this not out of revenge but out of justice. Michael wrote in his book,

> Even though I would have liked nothing better than to simply go home and begin rebuilding what was left of my life, I couldn't walk away from my case or the glaring problems it exposed. If making a difference meant spending more time in courtrooms, if it meant speaking to state lawmakers—if it meant becoming more of a public person than I had ever intended to be—I had an obligation to do it. . . . There were people just like me still in prison. If the system didn't change, there would be more in the future.

A very powerful "what" indeed.

"What now?" and "What good can I do in light of this?" are also questions my friend Lisa asked herself. Sixteen years ago, when Lisa was in her late teens, she found herself in a psychiatric ward, confined there for a month due to psychosis. She was eventually diagnosed with bipolar II disorder. Her reality of mental illness has led to all kinds of suffering, including suicidal ideation, depression, and manic episodes. And yet the word Lisa lives by is *resilience*. She has chosen to turn her deeply personal mental health struggles into a means to help and inspire others. She regularly writes a column

for a newspaper, is working on her memoir, hosts a podcast, and is a public speaker on mental health. More than that, in further asking herself "What can I do in light of this?" Lisa has joined multiple groups designed to teach wellness in various ways, including by drawing on the insights of cognitive behavioral therapy. Not only has she been a student of these programs, but she has been a mentor in them too, helping others find wellness. Her days are filled with God, work, friendship, family, connection, meeting new people, music, writing, poetry, walks, and purpose. Living with the challenges of bipolar disorder is not easy; at times, it's overwhelming. And yet, as a result of it, she has become intentional about what is needed to make her thrive in light of that reality. In identifying that, she then works to help others do the same.

"What now?" and "What good can I do in light of this?" are also questions my friends Peter and Anne asked themselves. Anne lived for decades struggling with debilitating environmental allergies and Parkinson's disease. Her allergies were so severe that she had to wear an industrial gas mask. Their home had to be isolated, meaning their windows remained closed—year round. As her condition worsened, trips away—something Peter enjoyed so much—were no longer feasible. After more than ten years of these challenges, Anne was diagnosed with Parkinson's, which she endured for seventeen years.

As her ailments worsened, she focused on *what* she could do nonetheless. And her "whats" became sewing for her grandchildren, creating memory albums, cooking at home, and praying for others. She enjoyed passing time with crossword puzzles, Sudoku, and chess. And of course, the gift of time was also passed with the gift of family—the presence of her husband and visits from her children

and grandchildren. Life went on, but life went on close to home. That slower-paced, housebound life of hers also became his. One day, in the spring of 2017, Peter and Anne would dance together, not at a fancy hotel ballroom, but in the simplicity of their living room, where home was simply "being with." Home was where the other was. Tragically, three days later, Anne would unexpectedly pass away, creating a void for Peter that words cannot express.

Besides the obvious emptiness in his heart, there was a whole new emptiness in his daily life, and Peter suddenly found himself with a wealth of time. And so, he asked himself *what* all the time and ability to be away from home now enabled him to do. Answering that has led to a wealth of experiences involving creativity, contribution, and connection. Peter wrote me, "I had come to know other people who were shut-ins in wheelchairs with chronic debilitating illnesses and decided that I would start visiting them regularly at home or hospital. It quickly became evident how lonely these people are (as visitors are very sparse and far in between) and are starved for conversation. Sometimes I am the only regular visitor. The visits are about 'being with, listening to, and talking to.' In reality, we are ministering to one another and new friendships are formed."

He also spent a year teaching a religion class to nine-year-olds. And he regularly ministers to homeless women who are street workers. His decision, in his pain and loneliness, to help others in their need reminds me of the words of Dr. Frankl: "The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is."

Peter's flourishing amidst suffering continues. He helped create and participates in a men's book club and joined a Bible study.

He made a serious return to the piano with weekly lessons and daily practice of at least two hours. He also encouraged his teacher to organize social gatherings with mini recitals of amateur adult pianists, telling me, "I believe that there are many people out there who play, that the sharing of good music has great transcendental and therapeutic value, and that such informal events should be encouraged."

Those words became very real to him in a recent encounter he had. Two Jehovah's Witness ladies knocked on his door while he was practicing piano. He decided to invite them in and play Beethoven's *Für Elise* for them. They had never heard it before and were quite moved; in fact, one of them started to cry.

He wrote me, "I feel that the music, played from the heart, took them aback, yet somehow spoke to them on a level transcending their norm, especially to the one who shed tears. The experience has further consolidated the awareness of my role in this life: I am just a steward and a servant making use of my limited talents to pass on some ineffable thing far greater, a discernment in no way diminished after becoming a retired widower."

The death of one's soulmate. Chronic physical illness. Mental illness. Unjust imprisonment. Birth defects. Paralysis. These are significant sufferings. People can, and do, respond to each in a negative way. But the above stories are proof that people can, and do, respond in a positive way too. The determining factor is in "starting with what," in the search for meaning, in the search for *what* good can come from suffering.

When someone no longer wishes to live and desires assisted suicide, those around them should assist—not with suicide, but with helping the person discover their "what."

Perhaps their "what" is to empathize with another suffering soul, to become a writer, to be a listener, to teach people how to slow down and enter into the present moment, to become an advocate for finding a cure for a disease, to leave a lesson for loved ones or perhaps even strangers working in a hospital of what really matters in life, of how to surrender, of how to release control. Their "what" could simply be to teach others, by their need and total dependence, the life-changing power of vulnerability and love.

The "whats" of the people featured in this chapter are proof that it is possible to not merely survive amidst suffering but actually thrive, to discover a whole new world of opportunity, beauty, creativity, joy, and relationship—even amidst the pain, and perhaps because of it. But typically we don't discover this on our own. Typically we need to be *assisted*. So, rather than assisted suicide, we should "start with what" and seek out assisted searches for meaning.