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[On the Faith & Values page, the *Times Union* displays a large photograph accompanied by two articles. The first is based on an interview with Dr. David Gordis, who will participate in a panel discussion to be presented on September 29 by Death with Dignity–Albany. The second is a profile of the organization’s director, Bonnie Edelstein.]

FACES OF FAITH



Cindy Schultz / *Times Union* Rabbi David Gordis and Bonnie Edelstein want to add New York to the list of states where the choice to receive medical assistance in dying is legal and acceptable. Edelstein is the founder and director of Death With Dignity-Albany, which provides a forum for people to discuss end-of-life issues.

Discussing how we die

RABBI DAVID GORDIS

Background: He is a visiting senior scholar at the University at Albany and president emeritus of Hebrew College in Boston where was professor of rabbinics for 15 years. He and his wife live in Voorheesville.

You're on a panel Sunday at the Colonie library with two Protestant pastors on "Clergy Perspectives on End-of-Life Options." What is religion's interest in these issues?

Beyond matters of faith and ritual, religions deal with communal and personal transitions. Birth is a transition from pre-life to life. Coming of age and the beginnings of family are other transitions with which religions are concerned. The end of life is the transition to death, and religions are naturally concerned with this transition as well. Death is universal and inevitable. Religions are all concerned with the events and reactions surrounding that final inevitable transition.

Other religions' views may be fundamentally opposed to yours on this issue. How do you understand differing views on how a person should deal with end-of-life issues?

Different views exist not only between religions but also within religious communities. For this reason, individuals must have the prerogative to choose, to shape their approach to end of life issues. Each person should have the option to follow the guidance of one or another religious authority if he or she chooses to, or to draw on other sources to shape their approach. Religious authorities should address their constituents and inform them of their traditions' perspectives but not attempt to impose their views on others.

I believe when there is a difference on this core personal issue, it should be up to the individual to decide, not a governmental, political or religious institution. Ultimately, end-of-life issues should be personal and private choices and that privacy should be protected regardless of one's theological perspective.

Abortion is an analogous issue. I understand some people's faith teaches that destroying a fetus is destroying life. Others have a different view. By and large, no one is saying abortion is a good thing. But whether it is a good decision in some situations should be left to the mother and parents to decide and not imposed by government or religious authority. Those who choose to accept the teaching of one or another religious tradition should do so but those who do not should not be compelled to accept what for them is unacceptable. The principal decision maker ought to be the person

What is the basis of your beliefs on the process of dying?

I grew up deeply connected to Jewish tradition and Jewish texts. I have explored the Western philosophical and literary tradition extensively. I am also deeply influenced by and committed to the American democratic tradition. All these have shaped my views. I have concluded that despite our diversity and differences, our human experience is universal. Even if we are fortunate to have many happy and fulfilling years, ultimately our lives bring decline, loneliness and pain.

What follows for me is that there are two imperatives: first, don't contribute to the pain of the other; second, if you can do something to reduce the other's pain, do so. Depriving a person at the last stages of life who is confronting pain, suffering, loss of dignity and degradation the option to choose to die with dignity and in peace, violates that fundamental imperative.

We all have or will have personal experience with the process of dying, our own and others'. What is yours?

My most poignant experience involved my father who was vigorous and at full strength until the age of 81. He then suffered a catastrophic stroke that left him fully aware of his plight but totally helpless. He was a scholar, rabbi and brilliant orator. He lost all capacity with the stroke. He had to be fed and carried to the bathroom, and he was in serious pain. During the three years between his stroke and his death he pleaded with me: "David, rescue me." I knew what he wanted but was helpless to address his need. He was angry, despairing and suffering. Shortly before his death, he again said to me tearfully: "Rescue me!" Shouldn't he have had the right to assistance in dying?

I'm 76. My wife's mother died recently at the age of 103. Her last years were dramatic evidence for me that decline is inevitable. It is part of our life span. If a person would like to receive help in dying, why should that person's prerogative be taken away?

That is why I support the work of Death With Dignity—Albany locally, and Compassion & Choices on the national level. These organizations are working to add New York to the states in which the choice to receive assistance in dying is legal and acceptable.

— *Rob Brill*

Advocate for change in the law

Albany

Bonnie Edelstein founded Death with Dignity—Albany after a visceral personal experience.

"I saw my mother through the end of her life, which was miserable and painful and prolonged. It didn't have to be that way," said Edelstein. Her work as non-paid director of a group that provides a forum for education, discussion and advocacy on end-of-life issues comes after a career as a management consultant for nonprofit organizations and colleges.

The Chicago native graduated from the University of Wisconsin at Madison and was a longtime resident of that capital city before coming to Albany in 1992.

In working for more humane options at life's end, she said, "The cause has become, in part, a spiritual mission for me driven by my experience and my faith. I see it as part of my obligation as a human being and a primary Jewish value of tikkun olam, to make a difference in the world."

The local group, whose website is www.deathwithdignityalbany.org, has collaborated with the national organization Compassion & Choices on advocacy for legislation that would allow the medical aid in dying. That option is legal in Oregon, Washington, California, Montana and Vermont, and is under consideration in at least 26 states.

New York's legislative proposal, like the Oregon law, would allow a terminally ill adult who is mentally competent to obtain a prescription from their doctor for a medicine that they would self-administer if and when they felt their suffering was too much to bear.

"In just over a year and a half, we have grown to 500 members," Edelstein said. "It's an indication of the strong community interest in this topic."

— Rob Brill

Interfaith panel perspectives

"Clergy Perspectives on End-of-Life Options" presented by Death With Dignity–Albany.

- Who: The Rev. Eric Shaw, pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Troy; the Rev. William Levering, senior pastor of the 1st Reformed Church of Schenectady; Rabbi David Gordis, visiting senior scholar at UAlbany
- Where: Colonie Town Library
- When: 12:15 p.m., Thurs., Sept. 29
- Info: deathwithdignityalbany.org