

Sources: A. Cohen, "Four Decades after Milgram, We're Still Willing to Inflict Pain," *The New York Times*, December 29, 2008; and A. Altman, "Why We're OK with Hurting Strangers," [www.time.com](http://www.time.com), December 19, 2008.

# Thinking Critically

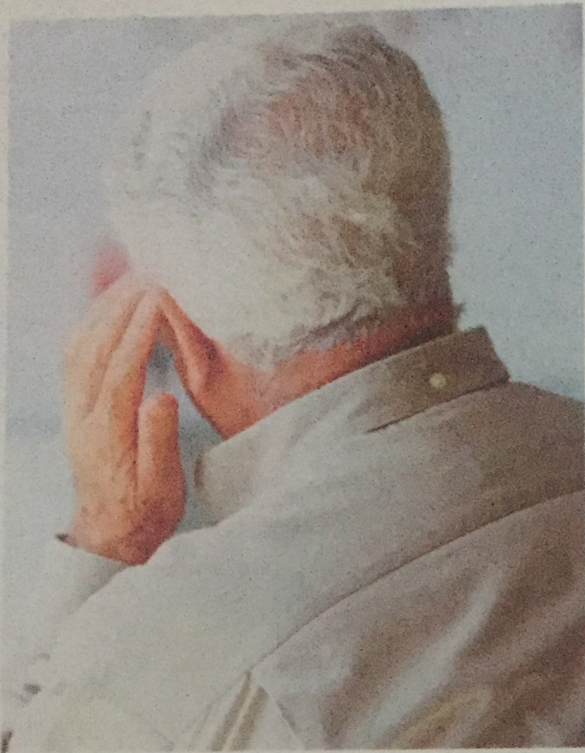
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## >> LIFE AND DEATH • Elder Suicide or Dignified Exit?

### A Letter from Ohio

*I'm 80. I've had a good life—mostly pretty happy, though certainly with its ups and downs. My wife died seven years ago. My children are healthy and happy, busy with their kids, careers, friends. But I know they worry about me; they feel increasingly burdened with thoughts about how to care for me when I can no longer care for myself, which—let's not kid ourselves—is coming all too soon. I live four states away from them so either they will have to uproot me and move me close to them or I'll have to go live in a nursing home. I don't relish either option. This town has been my home for nearly my whole adult life, and I don't fancy leaving. On the other hand, I do not want to live among strangers and be cared for by those who are paid minimum wage to wash urine-soaked sheets and force-feed pudding to old people.*

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*I'm in decent health—for the moment. But things are slipping. I have prostate cancer, like just about every other man my age. It probably won't kill me . . . but having to get up and pee four or five times a night, standing over the bowl for long minutes just hoping something will come out, this might do me in. My joints are stiff, so it doesn't really feel good to walk. I've got bits and pieces of skin cancer here and there that need to be removed. These things are all treatable, or so they say (there are pills to take and procedures to have done). But it seems to me a waste of money. Why not pass my small savings on to my grandkids, to give them a jump on college tuition?*

*What I don't understand is why people think that it is wrong for someone like me to just call it a day, throw in the towel. How can it be possible that I don't have a right to end my own life, when I'm ready? (But apparently I don't.)*

*I'm tired and I'm ready to be done with life. I'd so much rather just quietly die in my garage with the car running than eke out these last few compromised years. (Even better would be a quick shot or a small dose of powerful pills—but, alas, these are not at my disposal.)*

*But if I do myself in, I will be called a suicide. My death will be added to the statistics: another "elder suicide." How sad! (Doesn't the fact that so many elderly people commit suicide—and with much greater rates of success, I must say, than any other demographic group—tell you something?) Why can't this society just come up with a humane, acceptable plan for those of us ready to be finished? Why can't we old folks go to city hall and pick up our End-of-Life Packet, with the financial and legal forms to bring things into order for our children, with assistance on how to recycle all our unneeded furniture and clothes, and with a neat little pack of white pills: When ready, take all 10 pills at once, with plenty of water. Lie down quietly in a comfortable place, close your eyes, and wait.*

*How can choosing my own end at my own time be considered anything other than a most dignified final exit?*

— Anonymous, June 2003

1. Should people have the moral right to end their lives if they so please?
2. Does being near the end of one's life make the decision to end it justified?
3. What might the phrase "right to die" mean?
4. Do people have the right to seek assistance in dying?
5. Do people have the right to give assistance in dying?
6. What kind of restrictions, if any, should there be on assisted suicide?

Source: Jessica Pierce, *Morality Play: Case Studies in Ethics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005).