

Amy Getter. *The Lamaze of Dying: Practicing For The End Of Life.* 89 pages. 2010.
Review and Reflections by K. D. Kragen, KaveDragen Ink, kdkragen.com & amygetter.com

In such a small space of pages, Amy Getter eloquently examines a key conundrum of modern human existence: care-giving at the end of life. Lack of wisdom in knowing how to respond to the fact of universal human mortality is a problem which has been greatly exacerbated over the last century by medical science and the pharmaceutical industry. If the military-industrial complex ruled much of the 20th century, a runaway scientific-pharmaceutical industrial complex dominates much of the 21st.

But *The Lamaze of Dying* isn't primarily a political or sociological treatise or expose. Rather, it is the journal of a compassionate hospice-care nurse telling personal stories of helping people face death—assisted dying. Getter offers a crucially needed answer to a growing trend in our age, "assisted suicide," often euphemized "death with dignity"; as "to pass away" is a euphemism for "to die." Medically assisted suicide is becoming our culture's primary response to the uncomfortable human condition of being mortal. As an alternative, *assisted dying* challenges our culture's tendency to that easier option, *assisted suicide*.

Amy Getter's voice is one not heard often enough in our modern world of science-obsessed behavior and TV medical show solutions to sickness and old age and dying. Getter eloquently challenges that simplistic philosophy of existence of "keeping death at bay"—when Death will have none of it.

With over two decades of experience in critical care nursing and hospice work, Getter writes with wisdom and grace. When in the presence of death for her first time (an elderly patient having just died), Getter writes: "Surprisingly, nothing was frightening about that little lady quietly resting in her bed. I've realized since, that there is much more I am frightened of before a person reaches that point. The goal of an intensive care nurse is to avoid such a situation. I was trained to respond with advanced life support, and the whole team always had a cloud of failure hanging over their heads when we lost a patient.

"I have witnessed the striving of a bevy of doctors and medical personnel as the patient moves toward actually dying. As though the director has called 'ACTION', the trappings of the code cart are hauled out, the defibrillator is purring.... We all move like an orchestra, playing our separate but essential parts in the symphony named 'Don't let them die'. And when the realization dawns that medicine, science, and our supreme human effort is useless, we hang our heads and clear the room of all the paraphernalia. My experience of death in a hospital room is a clanging of energy and a lack of real preparation for death—almost as though it sneaks up on all of us unaware. Especially when a patient is in 'critical condition', all the medical personnel feel a responsibility to keep death at bay." (pp. 45-46.)

If one is a secular materialist, then "keeping death at bay" is all there is to do. It is this conviction of dogmatic medical science which Getter challenges with her philosophically insightful thesis. Her alternative conclusion: instead of the greatest good of medicine being the desperately obsessive, sometimes cruel goal of "keeping death at bay," the efforts of hospice and nursing care, family members and friends should be "keeping hopelessness at bay."

Medieval hospitals (such as the 14th century Hospital of Santa Maria Della Scala, Siena, Italy) didn't have the knowledge to "keep death at bay"; yet they afforded monks, nuns, "doctors," nurses and volunteers an opportunity to develop the art of preparing for and practicing for the end of life. This existential art form has been mostly lost to us in the "developed world" of the 21st century. Amy Getter's *The Lamaze of Dying* offers a handbook and enlightening introduction to the lost art of caring for the dying.

While reading *The Lamaze of Dying*, I've been working on a series of short stories related to end of life concerns. Some of my science fiction has also addressed issues surrounding "life-extensionism" (the Alcore Institute, alcor.org; the Methuselah Foundation, methuselahfoundation.org; Life Extension Network, lef.org). Therefore, I appreciate Getter's timely and crucially important book. From start to finish her writing is heartfelt and empathic, her words and insights filled with grace. "End of life with dignity" must replace "death with dignity." We're all going to be there soon enough—at our own end of life. Some of us are already care-giving for family or loved ones. Amy Getter's book is a wonderful place to begin thinking about the journey from mortality into immortality, the end and the beginning.