



TALKING ABOUT DEATH WITH
YOUR DOCTOR

"You can't keep decorum up for very long with no clothes on."

A year later, we returned to see Dr. Noble to talk with him about George's medical directive. He wanted Dr. Noble to agree to his conditions of care when he moved closer to his death. He wanted to die at home peacefully with no artificial interventions such as a feeding tube, breathing devices, and no attempts to resuscitate him when he stopped breathing.

At bedtime recently, George had begun to talk in his sleep about some of his adventures while he served in the Korean War and Vietnam as a fighter pilot in the Air Force. As he grew weaker, those haunting memories surfaced more often. When my co-author, Dianne Kammerer, and I sat at my dining room table reading galley proofs for our forthcoming textbook, we could hear George upstairs shouting out about horrific incidents he'd witnessed during the wars. He stuttered as he described the violence of those wars, seeing young men die in frightened

terror—barely able to breathe before medics could get to them.

There were others with body parts blown off who waited for transport to makeshift facilities. The stench of burning flesh, the fear so clear in the faces of the young men were still vivid in George's mind. He'd earned many meritorious medals and two Distinguished Flying Crosses for rescuing many. He'd made me promise him he wouldn't experience a violent death.

As a Buddhist, George wasn't afraid to die. But it was essential to him that he be conscious and sitting up when he died. He believed that the purpose of life was learning, growing and evolving into a more humane person.

George and I arrived at Dr. Noble's office and sat in the same dismal waiting room as the year before. This time it was nearly empty. When he entered to get George, Dr. Noble seemed pleasantly surprised to see him alive, talking and walking. He smiled broadly as he extended his hand to George. "Mr. Thomas, how nice to see you," he said. Then he asked me to wait there while he examined George.

"I'd like my wife to come with me, if that's all right," George said.

"She can come later, after I examine you," Dr. Noble replied.

I didn't like his answer because George wanted me there. I knew he couldn't hear well since he had stopped using his hearing aids because they made buzzing noises in his ears. He refused to go to the audiologist to have