

## TALK OF AGES TEACHING BRIEF

*Dear Sir or Madam*

*Contributed by:*

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**Activity Description:** The goal of this activity is to have students explore their personal perspectives as they apply information from course work to tackle questions about life and death choices. This activity also serves as a vehicle for exploring how different life circumstances may challenge our personal views and those of others. The assignment may be done in class (using small groups to generate responses), as a journal response (with individual students composing their own responses), or using other tailored formats. Groups/students may be assigned specific letters or be allowed to select their own. Letters may be exchanged and shared in class and discussed. Instructors may also revise the case scenarios to reflect particular issues they would like their students to consider.

**Example of Instruction for Journal Assignment:** Select one of the following cases, and write a letter in response in your journal. You may compose the response any length you wish, incorporating any information from our class work you think bears most on the issues at hand. In your journal, please also note why you decided to respond to the particular case you selected.

*Dear Sir or Madam,*

*I am a 79 year old man who has lived a good, full life. My wife passed away two years ago and I have been living alone in the beautiful home in which we raised our three wonderful sons because they are now off raising their families. I was a very active member of my community and of St. Paul's Church until I was recently diagnosed with an incurable form of colon cancer that is expected to end my life within the next year or so. The experimental medication that I am receiving to treat the spreading of the cancer makes me extremely weak and unable to participate in activities outside of my home. I am very troubled about ending my life in a hospital or some other impersonal, desolate, isolated, sterile place without the things around me that reveal the fullness of my life. Thus, I would like to make arrangements to terminate my life in my home with the assistance of a doctor who is willing to provide me with the means to do so. I would like to do this soon so that I can have the smell of my rose garden in the air. What words of information or advice can you provide that might help with my decision?*

*Thank you,*

*Waiting in Cambridge*

*Dear Sir,.....*

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*Dear Sir or Madam,*

*I am a 43 year old woman who has lived a life filled with agony and despair. I have endured debilitating migraine headaches as the result of a brain injury I suffered in a skiing accident when I was 10 years old. The headaches are so bad at times that all I can do is stay in my bed with cold packs on my head. Sometimes I can hardly bring myself to talk. My situation has affected many parts of my life. Because school was difficult for me, I dropped out when I was sixteen and since then I have worked at various convenient and grocery stores. Because I am so often in pain or depressed about my situation, people do not want to be around me for very long. Not surprisingly, I do not have any close friends. I do have a mother and a sister but they are busy with their own lives and troubles. I've tried several therapies for my migraines including special diets and acupuncture, but I haven't experienced the least bit of relief. I just can't live this empty, painful life one minute more. I would like to make arrangements to terminate my life in my home with the assistance of a doctor who is willing to provide me with the means to do so. What words of information or advice can you provide that might help me with my decision?*

*Thank you,*

*Suffering in Burlington*

*Dear Madam,.....*

*Dear Sir or Madam,*

*We are the parents of a 3 year old son who was recently diagnosed with the same condition that Joseph Merrick, “The Elephant Man” had. The condition is Proteus Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder typified by overgrowths on one side of the body, enlarged hands or feet, and tumor-like growths under the skin. As you know, Merrick suffered horribly and lived as a circus side show attraction. We do not want our precious son to endure such pain and agony. There is no known cure for this syndrome and our son will surely die as a result of complications from it before he reaches adulthood. Until that time, he will need substantial medical treatment and personal assistance that will interfere with our ability to care for our other three children (10 years, 6 years, 9 months). Thus, we would like to make arrangements to terminate his life with the assistance of a doctor who is willing to provide us with the means to do so. What words of information or advice can you provide that might help us with our decision?*

*Thank you,*

*Desperate parents in Springfield*

Dear Parents,.....

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**Advice to Instructors:** I use this activity following course work related to issues around death and dying. My experience has been that it works best with few “guidelines” (e.g., no length of response, recommendations about issues to highlight, references to use, etc.), as it is very revealing to see what comes to mind and is highlighted for different cases and letter writers. I also do not grade this assignment (other than give credit for on-time completion). However, I do provide feedback. It is a popular assignment and students approach it seriously.