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## SUNDAY CONVERSATION WITH ... Ted Goodwin

By Rosalind Bentley  
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Last month Ted Goodwin and three other members of the right-to-die group Final Exit Network were charged with assisting in the suicide of a Cumming man. The 58-year-old inhaled helium through a hood until he stopped breathing, authorities say. They also say Goodwin witnessed it and helped. Goodwin, 63, denies helping. He lived in metro Atlanta for 33 years and founded Final Exit here in 2004.

Last week, Goodwin spoke with the AJC for two hours about death, fear and activism.

Q: Tell me about the first "exit" you participated in. Were you scared?

A: Yes, I was apprehensive. This was with a man who had become a friend of mine over a year and a half's time. He had metastatic prostate cancer, and it had gotten into his bones. He was widowed and wanted to die in his home he had shared with his wife of 50-some years. He had told me when we met, "Ted I'm not sure whether you're a ghoul or an angel." On the day that he died, he told me that he firmly believed that I was an angel.

Q: Watching your father die of emphysema, was that truly the catalyst for getting involved in this?

A: In the last three months of his life we wanted him to have hospice care, but he did not want strangers in his house. A doctor friend of mine told me, if you can get morphine it will ease his breathing problems and he will be more comfortable. I called [his father's doctor of 10 years] and asked for morphine four times. They would never let me speak to the doctor. My mother's doctor, she called him, and he talked to me and he prescribed an under-the-tongue morphine. That kept my father comfortable. But at that point it sparked within me the desire to never have someone suffer if I could help alleviate that. My father's physician could have helped and chose not to. ... And to me that was the travesty.

Q: So are you doing this for others because you couldn't do it for your dad?

A: I suppose that's fair. But also I came to learn that the medical profession can be very unfeeling, very unsympathetic when people are in real crisis... Well, maybe someone who can be more supportive, from a compassionate standpoint, can offer some hope that is now not being offered.

Q: But is it really a person's right to decide to die?

A: Society gives us the right from the time we are legally adults to live our lives unmolested as long as it does not conflict with society or other individuals, if we do not maim, rob or kill. Why should this not apply up to the end of life?

Q: But I'm struck by this idea of control. Why do you have to control everything, including your own death?

A: We're talking here about the inevitable decay of the human body to the point to which any quality of life is sufficiently eroded. The people we've served ... every one of them has determined that they have come to a point at which they would rather be dead than alive. We do make sure that they are mentally competent to make that decision.

Q: Are you religious?

A: I was raised in the Methodist Church. But I came to a point in my teenage years where I just wasn't sure what I was being taught. And my parents said, "Well Ted, we want you to work this out for yourself. This is important stuff." Every day of my upbringing my parents taught me decency and generosity and compassion for others. And so that's my spirituality. I look upon what we do as a ministry.

Q: Once someone's expired, how do you feel? In the moments before, do you talk with them about their lives?

A: This is a very difficult job to be able to befriend someone, to visit them sometimes four, five and six times — talk with them over the phone — and then to know that someday you're going to be in attendance when they end their own lives. It takes a real mental strength to be able to deal with that and not emotionally dissolve... It is a fellowship. I was with a Catholic gentleman, very devout Catholic — one of my early cases. He'd gone to Mass twice a week until he became so debilitated — he had MS — that he was on the verge of quadriplegia. On the day of his death, his wife said, "Ted, he's going to ask you whether or not you feel God and Christ would damn him for what he's about to do." He asked me that

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question exactly the way she said he would. And I said, "No, I don't believe in a God, a compassionate God, or Christ, that would damn you for doing what you're doing." And I don't. And with that he closed his eyes and crossed himself and was muttering a silent prayer and never opened his eyes again.

Q: You talk about trying to give comfort in that moment. There's a reference (in the affidavit) to being with someone and holding their hands. Is that a grip of comfort or a grip of, "No, you shouldn't move your hands because if you do you could make this go bad?"

A: I hold their hands compassionately, and that's all I'm going to say.

Q: But you hold them?

A: Every time. They ask me to, generally. Sixty percent of the people that I've been with have had family with them. The other 40 percent have been alone. I believe that no one should die alone. This is one of the major tenets of our group. People, as they die, want someone to hold them. Holding their hand is the least that I can do.

Q: Earlier, you bristled when I said "assisted suicide." So, "right to die," "death with dignity," "compassion in death" — how do you describe what you do?

A: What we are able to provide in these people is the hope that they will have a compassionate and loving group of supporters at the end who will enable them to do what is right for them at the time that is right for them.

Q: Some would say that's semantics; that basically what you're doing is helping somebody die.

A: We're not helping them. We do not assist them in any physical way. We do not provide the means for them to do this. We do not encourage them to do this. If anything we discourage them until we know that they've looked at all the medical options and all the other options; hospice care.

Q: The other day I had a doctor who does hospice care refer to Final Exit as "the snuffers."

A: Yes, there are those people who don't like our mission, who say we kill people. Within the right-to-die movement, you've got [some who] are focused on their legislative goals. They are willing to set aside the hopes, the needs of those who are non-terminally ill because they don't think they can bring in enough chips from legislators. They don't want their little boat rocked by people they consider to be these radical activists.

Q: Why not wait for a legislative approach?

A: We felt this wasn't moving fast enough, if at all. What you had in this country was the passage of the Oregon law, which guaranteed physician-assisted dying to terminally ill people in 1992. Initiatives in Hawaii, Maine, Vermont; these things came close in some cases but were beaten back. I had despaired of things (not) really happening without some sense of spark initiated. Every movement has had this. In the civil rights movement, the people that walked across the Edmund Pettis bridge, they're the ones who moved it forward, not people having drinks with legislators in the back room saying, "Gee wouldn't it be nice to give our people their civil rights."

Q: Why do you accept people who are not terminal?

A: Why should we make that decision for someone, that their suffering is any less than those that have, by the grace of God, a time limit on their suffering?

Q: Are you prepared to go to prison?

A: I hope not to go to jail. I don't think I've done anything wrong, and therefore I think it would be an injustice. But a test case will probably help clear the air. These [anti]assisted suicide laws have never been tested. It is a patchwork quilt of words that have no meaning unless someone puts meaning to them.

Q: What are your plans for your own death?

A: My plans are to die in bed surrounded by family with my boots off. But that is not given to any of us... I don't believe in the nobility of suffering. There's nothing noble about suffering. And people who say that have never experienced suffering in a very meaningful way.

Q: You say the death is painless. There are doctors who say there's a 10 second window where there is extreme pain.

A: We will provide incontrovertible evidence in court that it is not the case. Look, after the horror I went through with my father's death, do you think I would be a party to have someone else suffer?

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