



# DISCUSSING ADVANCE DIRECTIVES WITH ADULT PATIENTS AS A STANDARD OF CARE

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD, FACP

*Oh build your ship of death, oh build it!  
for you will need it.*

*For the voyage of oblivion awaits you.*  
— DH Lawrence, “The Ship of Death” (1933)

**THE BENEFITS OF** completing an advance directive are compelling and evidence-based. They include a greater satisfaction with care [1, 6], a reduction in both hospitalizations and ICU admissions at the end of life [4-6], increased use of hospice services [4], and a decrease in the emotional and moral distress in family members and the medical team [1, 2, 3].

Almost every day in my primary care practice I have a dialog about death and dy-

ing using the advance directive as the pretext and context. On turning 50, my patients will be scheduled to discuss advance directives along with colonoscopies, prostate exams, and regular mammograms. Other prompts to an AD conversation include a recent significant change in their own health or that of a family member.

My interest in bioethics may trace back to an experience I had as a preteen walking on the sands of Huntington Beach with my then middle-aged father. A line from a popular mid-’60s rock song (“We’ve Gotta Get Out of This Place” by The Animals) was playing on repeat in my head: “See my daddy in bed he’s dying/see his hair is turning gray.” At

the time, my 41-year-old father’s hair was, in fact, graying at the temples. The song, the beach, and the grayness awoke in me the nascent idea of the inevitability of aging, dying, and death, and the need to somehow prepare for them.

I’ve told the story of my meandering dialogues with death in the accompanying poem using the phrase “free and clear.” It’s a slang term from real estate indicating that a property is completely paid off. It caught my ear a few years ago as having other potential connotations. I’m using it in this poem to mean a condition of having come to grips with mortality. The rhythm or scan of the poem is a little tricky, so I have bolded the emphasized syllables in case you want to read it out loud. **SDP**



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## Free and Clear

I remember **being** twelve and **walking** with my **father** on the **beach**  
A **figure** from the **foamy** waves came **riding** like a **spectral** Paul Revere  
The **crashing** waters **offered** up the ruthless sermon **it** had come to **preach**  
**Death** is coming. **Death** is coming. **Time** to make your **own** life free and **clear**.

I **wandered** texts and **churches**, and **behind** the baffled **doorways** of my **mind**  
Meeting **self**-proclaimed messiahs who were **clever** and some **even** quite **sincere**  
They **wanted** my **allowance** and a **promise** to leave **worldly** ways **behind**  
But they **lacked** robust **instructions** on the **way** to make your **own** life free and **clear**

In **loin** clothes and with **prayer** beads, a **monk** with humming **mantras** on his **lips**  
**Told** me he could **meditate** until his flesh **dissolved** to mystic **sphere**  
He **judged** my worldly **ways** with his thin **arms** akimbo **planted** on his **hips**  
With **all** his talk of **freedom** he was **trapped** outside the **way** to free and **clear**

I **knew** a man of **towering** wealth, the **world** would step and **fetch** at his **command**  
He **regaled** me with the **stories** of his **travels** and the **coups** of his **career**  
To **help** him feel **immortal** he kept **stem** cells and a **doctor** close at **hand**  
But **all** his money **couldn't** book him **passage** to the **land** of free and **clear**

I **met** a man of **simple** ways, his face would deeply **wrinkle** when he **smiled**  
He **stripped** his shirt to **show** me scars that **marked** his body **here** and **here** and **here**  
**These** are just mementos of **missteps** to which my **life** is **reconciled**  
My **goal** is not to **be** unscathed but **stay** upon the **path** to free and **clear**

The **way** up to the **mountaintop** is **littered** with the **holy** and **profane**  
On **days** of wind and **cold** you will be **tempted** to come **back** another **year**  
**Travelers** spouting **gibberish** are **either** quite **enlightened** or **insane**  
To **tell** the two **apart** is an **essential** task en **route** to free and **clear**

There are **many** stops and **detours** on the **incidental** **road** unique to **you**  
**Know** that on your **journey** trusted **friends** will shrug you **off** and foes will **jeer**  
If it's **daunting** and **familiar** that's a **hint** that it may **actually** be **true**  
Your **deepest** intuition is your **compass** on the **road** to free and **clear**

No **matter** what your **core** beliefs, the **sun** goes down each **evening** as a **death**  
And **whatever** prayers or **chants** you call each **morning** it is **bound** to **reappear**  
To **grasp** this cyclic **resurrection** **hidden** in the **tide** of every **breath**  
**Is**, I say, your **marching** order **pointing** on the **map** to free and **clear**

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