



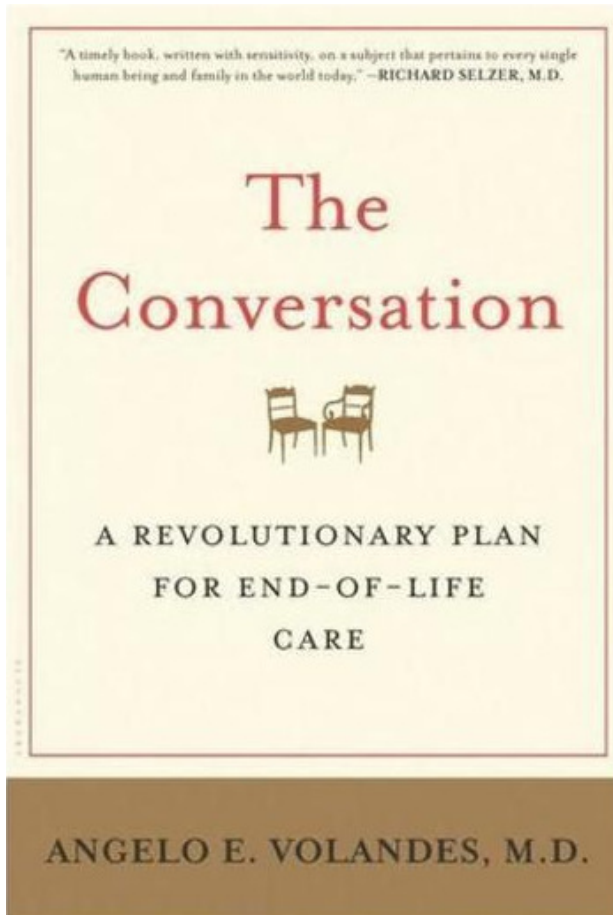
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# PARK CITY DAILY NEWS

## 'Conversation' provides comfort

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*"The Conversation: A Revolutionary Plan for End-of-Life Care," by Angelo E. Volandes. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Co., 2015. 240 pages, \$26.*



"In this era of high-technology medicine, people have come to see cutting-edge advances and medical miracles as the norm," Angelo E. Volandes explains in the introduction to "The Conversation: A Revolutionary Plan for End-of-Life Care," his new treatise on dying in America. "The dizzying array of decisions that must be made as people with a serious illness approach the end of their lives is part and parcel of a modern American death."

"What people need most on this journey," he continues, "is not the promise of the next new technology but rather a guide to help navigate this dark forest in which they will undoubtedly find themselves. People need doctors who are capable of explaining new technologies with the accompanying risks and benefits, and discussing whether those technologies would truly benefit them. The health care system is teeming with brilliant scientists, but there is a dearth of effective communicators and advocates."

This book really hit home with me as my father died recently after a 19-year battle with

prostate cancer. He outlived many who were diagnosed with the disease at about the same time, primarily because his body seemed to respond to every therapy the doctors threw at it for almost two decades. Eventually, however, they ran out of options and the cancer started to take its toll with a vengeance.

As is no doubt the case with many readers, I have had to face many of the realities Volandes describes so eloquently in this remarkably insightful foray into an experience that awaits us all in one manner or another. I could definitely relate to his account of an all-too-common occurrence when the culprit is cancer: "Even today, some oncologists are hesitant to discuss medical care with patients out of fear that they will dash any hope the patient clings to, despite the extensive medical research that indicates many patients do, in fact, want to talk about these topics with their physicians."

One suggestion that inevitably emerges when working with cancer patients relates to the importance of maintaining a positive attitude when facing such a devastating diagnosis. Both the patient as well as the family are usually encouraged to see the condition in a more optimistic

light, with the intent of positively influencing the attitude and demeanor of the person with the affliction. But, as Volandes observes, “no large, well-conducted scientific study has ever shown a significant association between personality traits and survival from cancer, but my guess is that no number of negative studies will ever extinguish this deeply held belief.”

Here is a writer who is clearly on a quest to change the way we approach dying in this country – which is, in many respects, profoundly different from how it is experienced in other countries and cultures. In short, the book is designed to advance the discussion about end-of-life planning and care. He argues persuasively for a better way, one that truly puts the best interest of the patient at the center of the decision-making process.

Volandes points out quite clearly the disconnect between what most of us see as the ideal way we would want to spend our final months and weeks and the reality of what most of us will encounter unless we work to dramatically alter the way we conceptualize and respond to the process of dying.

“When asked where and how they want to spend their last few months, nearly 80 percent of Americans respond that they want to be at home with family and friends, free from the institutional grip of hospitals and nursing homes, and in relative comfort,” he explains. “However, only 24 percent of Americans older than 65 die at home; 63 percent die in hospitals or nursing homes, sometimes tethered to machines, and often in pain.”

Volandes is a medical doctor and researcher with appointments at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital. He is co-founder of Advance Care Planning Decisions, a nonprofit dedicated to encouraging more dialog about end-of-life issues and patient empowerment. He and his team have developed a series of videos designed to help patients make more humane and benevolent end-of-life decisions. Although his ideas have been debated widely in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Boston Globe* and various other high-profile media outlets, this is his first book.

The narrative is extensively researched with 36 pages of source notes and a selected bibliography at the conclusion of the introduction, six main chapters, and the afterward which comprise the main text. Four appendices are also included, which serve to reinforce and support the ideas and protocols presented.

“The Conversation” is a good mix of data-driven best practices tempered with individual stories and anecdotes that serve to personalize the issues and concerns raised in a manner that makes it easy for virtually everyone to understand and relate to what is being communicated. The author speaks to the heart as well as the mind, and his genuine empathy for those who are in the final stages of life is evident on every page. You get the sense Volandes has had to deal with the issue at hand extensively throughout his long and distinguished career as a healer.

“In the case of those people who did not have the benefit of discussing their options, the stories of their end-of-life care exhibit the neglect that deeply permeates the U.S. health care system,” Volandes asserts near the end of the book. “We answered the call of medicine in order to do good, yet the overwhelming majority of us treat patients with serious illness in a manner we would never want for our loved one, or even for ourselves.”

I believe “The Conversation” is an important book for both individuals as well as society as a whole. I found it comforting on many levels; the subject matter is certainly universal. The older you get, the more you realize that our time here will have an end. The more we plan for the inevitable, the better we will be able to enjoy the immediate. I recommend it highly.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*