

*THE GLOBE & MAIL*

FIRST PERSON

# MAID awaits me. I am a little nervous, but I am also grateful

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It was one of the first sultry evenings of early summer, last June, when I had to ask my husband to drive me to the hospital. After a surprisingly short time that night, I was shipped off for various tests and scans. And that is when the young ER doctor at the Ottawa hospital sat beside me and calmly said: “We found a mass on your brain.” That was the moment when my world fell apart – with me still in it. His caring, and in retrospect solid advice, I still remember word for word. From now on, he said, take it one step at a time. Later on, the neurosurgeon said it was probably glioblastoma multiforme, one of the deadliest and most aggressive forms of cancer ... and he was right. That night, things sounded so dire that I actually thought I might die in the next few days if not hours.

Obviously, I did not.

Seven months later, I am still here – mostly happily – having survived a craniotomy to remove the tumour, followed by aggressive radiation and chemotherapy treatments.

We often hear complaints about our public health care system. Having worked at the highest levels of the federal public service for several years, I understand only too well the difficult policy and operational decisions that have to be made in managing public resources.

At the same time, I can also appreciate a well-functioning organization. From a highly complicated surgery to sensitive and compassionate palliative care, the level of professionalism, competence, and sensitivity displayed by the health care professionals at the Ottawa Hospital has been remarkable. Astonishingly, even during the (intentionally) awake surgery, the surgeon kept me informed of exactly what he was doing – which I found very reassuring, if uniquely weird. In fact, I was made so comfortable that my babbling became a little too much: I distinctly remember the surgeon saying to the anesthetist, more than once, “Tom, time for a little nap” before everything went black again. May you never have to hear the words “Nurse, could I have another brain separator No. 8 please?”

And yet, these last few precious months have given me a unique perspective on my good fortune at being a Canadian, living in this country.

You may wonder why I speak of my good fortune. First, I am thankful that I have been able to access world-class health care even during a pandemic. Just as important, perhaps more so, because I am Canadian, I can opt for the Medical Assistance In Dying procedure. Having access to MAID, as it is commonly known, has provided enormous relief to me, and given me strength to face the uncertainty that comes with the management of this disease.

When you receive a diagnosis like mine, the impact on family and friends is almost as devastating as it is for the patient. The outpouring of love, support and encouragement

was immediate and overwhelming and has continued to soothe me and bring me much relief. I am grateful to all my loved ones for all they have done for me, and to my beautiful husband who was propelled overnight into a relentless and demanding caregiver role.

For all their amazing skill and competence, the diverse team of professionals who have been with me each step of the way cannot save my life: there is simply no saving the life of someone with glioblastoma multiforme wild type, grade 4. But they have offered me ways to prolong and enjoy my life with dignity and quality for as long as possible.

Most importantly, there is MAID. I am so grateful to have access to this humane procedure and to have had these precious last few months to talk this option through with my family members, and for all of us to adapt to my choice together. More than anything else, I am grateful for their support regarding my decision to contemplate physician-assisted death.

The resilience, courage and strength of those closest to me have allowed me to face the future with serenity. Of course, there are immense waves of sadness at the grandchildren I will not see grow up, at the adventures I won't share with my husband and, as a mother, at the cruel feeling of abandoning my children. But I let the sadness wash over me, as my yoga practice has taught me, and allow myself to still feel joy every day.

And so, inspired by the words of Pablo Neruda, I too will understand what he felt when he wrote these lines of poetry: *And I, infinitesimal being, drunk with the great starry void, / likeness, image of mystery, / felt myself a pure part of the abyss, / I wheeled with the stars, / my heart broke loose on the wind.*

I thank all those I love for letting me go when the time comes. In the future, when you are moved by an unexpected jolt of joy, I hope you will think of me. You will be sad, but I know you will be fine.

I am ready, I am a little nervous, but I am calm.

Nicole Jauvin lives in Ottawa.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/first-person/article-maid-awaits-me-i-am-a-little-nervous-but-i-am-also-grateful/>