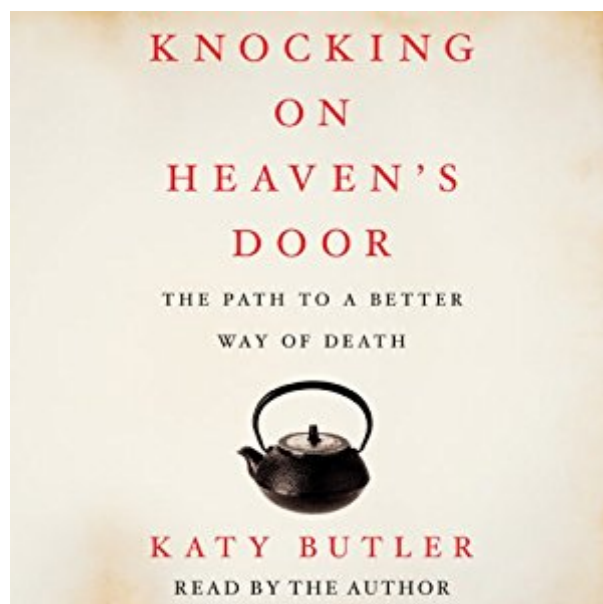


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# Knocking On Heaven's Door: The Path To A Better Way Of Death



## Synopsis

Like so many of us, award-winning writer Katy Butler always assumed her aging parents would experience healthy, active retirements before dying peacefully at home. Then her father suffered a stroke that left him incapable of easily finishing a sentence or showering without assistance. Her mother was thrust into full-time caregiving, and Katy became one of the 24 million Americans who help care for aging parents. In an effort to correct a minor and non-life-threatening heart arrhythmia, doctors outfitted her father with a pacemaker. The device kept his heart beating but did nothing to prevent his slide into dementia, incontinence, near-muteness, and misery. After several years, he asked his wife for help, telling her, "I am living too long." Mother and daughter faced a series of wrenching moral questions: When does death cease being a curse and become a blessing? Where is the line between saving life and prolonging a dying? When is the right time to say to a doctor, "Let my loved one go?" When doctors refused to disable the pace-maker, sentencing her father to a protracted and agonizing death, Katy set out to understand why. Her quest had barely begun when her mother faced her own illness, rebelled against her doctors, refused open-heart surgery, and instead met death head-on. *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, a revolutionary blend of memoir and investigative reporting, is the fruit of the Butler family's journey. With a reporter's skill, a poet's eye, and a daughter's love, Butler explores what happens when our terror of death collides with the technological imperatives of modern medicine. Her provocative thesis is that advanced medicine, in its single-minded pursuit of maximum longevity, often creates more suffering than it prevents. Butler lays bare the tangled web of technology, medicine, and commerce that modern dying has become and chronicles the rise of Slow Medicine - a growing movement that promotes care over cure. *Knocking on Heaven's Door* is a visionary map through the labyrinth of a broken and morally adrift medical system. It will inspire the necessary and difficult conversations we all need to have with loved ones as it illuminates a path to a better way of death.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Once in a while a book comes along that makes a significant impression on our way of life. Katy Butler has written such a book, based on and expanded from her original 2010 article (What Broke My Father's Heart) in the New York Times. In "Knocking at Heaven's Door", Ms. Butler exposes the often tragic end-of-life circumstances, caused by society's unrealistic expectations and/or religious beliefs as to the sanctity of life; prolong it at any cost (usually to the patient's & family's)! This is supported, and frequently encouraged, by the medical establishment out of incompetence, greed or fear of litigation. Other reviewers have given a good synopsis of the book from laymen's point of view; I shall add a perspective from someone who has been in the trenches. The inexorable advance in medical skills, nutrition, antibiotics, chemotherapeutics and overall technology has resulted in a significant boost to the overall health of society and its longevity; at the beginning of the 20th century life expectancy, on average, was 45 years compared to 78 years today. But a longer life is not necessarily a quality life. And that is where we fail as a society. We have become very adept at prolonging life no matter what, but what we are often really doing is protracting death. Over twenty percent of deaths in the USA happen in the critical/intensive care units "where 10 days of futile flailing can cost as much as \$323,000", or to put it differently about 80% of medical expenses occur in the last 2 years of life in patients with debilitating chronic intractable conditions or incurable diseases. The USA is one of the few 'first world' countries where this extravagant waste continues to happen.

Ostensibly, I was eager to read Katy Butler's Knocking on Heaven's Door because I wanted to find a book for my students. I advise students entering the medical professions from a major university. My stated mission is to help them find careers where they will be happy, but lurking behind my mission is a human being who has been hurt and healed by physicians. I want my students to be passionate about medicine, but for me, and the aging members of my generation, I ache with the hope they will be compassionate. Passion can be saving a patient at all costs--costs to comfort, costs to their wishes to die at home among family, costs to their family's need for freedom, and rest and closure.

To ensure their passion, I encourage my students to volunteer in the emergency department of hospitals; to ensure their compassion, I ask them to take a deep breath and volunteer with hospice care. Katy Butler's book is personal--for her and for me. She traces the steps many of us will follow as our parents, and in my case, a spouse, move from vigor to failing health, to death. I started reading for my students, but I soon was reading for me, staying up until dawn, crying and laughing as I recognized the universality of our common plight. I have already seen many beautiful and accurate reviews of *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, so I will leave the particulars to those authors I have come to respect and love in the scientific, yet spiritual, field of medicine.

Spoiler alert: Medicare is imperfect and so is your physician. Those are just two of the takeaways from Katy Butler's "*Knocking on Heaven's Door: The Path to a Better Way of Death*." Butler whipstitches together a personal story of family, life and loss, with a troubling but informative assessment of current medical practices and American cultural norms that surround end-of-life issues. I first encountered Butler's writing on the subject in a New York Times article in 2010 called "What Broke My Father's Heart." She laid out the multitude of personal and medical issues as her parents entered their 80s - a sudden health crisis of her father's that ultimately laid the groundwork for his years-long decline - stroke, heart disease, dementia, blood clots, brain hemorrhage. She explained how our current system more often than not intentionally draws out the process of dying. Medication, surgical interventions, technology - all of these things led to the shell of the man she knew as her father, simultaneously saving and dooming him. She also lovingly describes the impact his years-long dying had on her mother, who became a round-the-clock caregiver, bather, cook, cleaner and diaper changer. What stood out most to me, what I took away from that article, is explained more fully in "*Knocking on Heaven's Door*." That for many, many of us, being forced to make a split second decision in a medical emergency will likely lead to a much longer path of disease, decline, and pain. Your mother has a heart attack? "If you don't agree to a breathing tube/feeding tube/CPR/pacemaker RIGHT NOW, she will die, and it will be because you LET her.

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