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Deep Listening

Book Review

***Finish Strong: Putting Your Priorities First at Life's End*, by Barbara Coombs Lee**

Reviewed by Theresa Reid

Barbara Coombs Lee – registered nurse, physician assistant, lawyer, and president of [Compassion & Choices](#), the leading organization in America's end-of-life choice movement – has written an indispensable, nuts-and-bolts guide to taking charge of your end-of-life medical care. The book, *Finish Strong: Putting **Your** Priorities First at Life's End*, and the [Compassion & Choices](#) website are filled with warm guidance and concrete tools to help us navigate the labyrinth of decision-making and communication involved. You'll find action steps on these topics and more:

- Finding a partner-doctor well-suited to your values and beliefs who exhibits humanity, deference, and frankness.
- Countering “I don't want to think about it!” objections from loved ones.
- Staying off the “overtreatment conveyor belt” when hope for cure is gone.
- Identifying what matters most as advancing illness takes its toll. (Coombs Lee's chapter on dementia is an unflinching guide helping us discover within ourselves the answer to the jarring question, “Are you willing to become another person?”)
- Having meaningful conversations with medical personnel and loved ones about expectations and wishes for life's last precious months.
- Knowing when “slow medicine” is the best option to maintain quality of life.
- Navigating home hospice, and the crucial differences between hospice and hospital-based palliative care.
- Creating and distributing your end-of-life choice video so your loved ones and medical personnel know clearly what you want, and the values that underlie your choices. (Coombs Lee stresses that DNR orders and “advance directives” are grossly inadequate in their detail and very often ignored.)
- Crafting your farewell gathering, should you desire such an event.

Coombs Lee writes, “I think of this work as sacred work, work we were born to do, work that, when neglected, will keep us from achieving the joy in life and sense of completion at death that are our birthright.” Her tireless legislative advocacy and that of Compassion &

Choices has made “this work” – the process of choosing and communicating clearly how we want our last days to play out – a matter of personal choice in more parts of the U.S. than when she began. Nevertheless, religious and legal authorities continue to make end-of-life choice far more difficult than it should be in large swaths of the country. Coombs Lee opens and closes *Finish Strong* with a call to baby boomers to transform how we die as thoroughly as we’ve transformed how Americans live.

“A life coming to closure can provide a profound and sacred lesson in how to live,” Coombs Lee writes. *Finish Strong* is the best practical guide I know to help us learn and leave the lesson we choose.
