Is There a Safe Place Between Terra Firma and the Slippery Slope?

In my younger days, I was quick to espouse a view that some things in life were “absolutes.” It seemed to me then that some things remained true and right regardless of the situation or environment. Age has softened my stance somewhat. Yes, a belief in the absolute rightness of certain things is simpler and less messy in the long run. After all, the way is clear and the decisions are made without any pesky mitigating factors to get in the way. But as life has become less simple, so too have our choices and dilemmas. Nowhere has life become less simple, so too have mitigating factors to get in the way. But as the decisions are made without any pesky middle ground, can we be sure that enough safeguards are in place?

How many of us wish there was something in between—some way to help patients die without breaching ethical and moral covenants, some middle ground between the two extremes? A number of state legislatures are trying to describe this middle ground and put it down on paper. But will making it legal relieve us of our moral and ethical responsibilities? Some nurses will try to decide for themselves on a case-by-case basis. But do we really want these decisions made by anyone without regard to any sort of objective process? And what about the cases themselves? What about all those situations that do not fit neatly into categories—the person with Lou Gehrig’s disease or early Alzheimer’s who wants to act before he or she is incapable of acting; the person in a persistent vegetative state who is minimally conscious; the person who is more depressed by his or her disease than physically suffering? The Oregon experience described in this issue offers some hope that the decision-making system will not be inundated by “inappropriate” or marginal cases, but when we are trudging around in that murky middle ground, can we be sure that enough safeguards are in place?

In the end, I have come to believe that I am not yet confident that we can control the abuses, and, after much thought, I remain unconvinced that helping someone die, under any circumstance, should be sanctioned. I guess I still believe that this world does hold some absolutes. Whether or not we can explain away an act as justified, understandable, or forgivable does not take away from its inherent wrongness. Our time is better spent looking for ways to ameliorate pain and suffering at all levels, accepting that sometimes we will not succeed, and realizing that doing the best we can under the circumstances presented is the safer path.