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Compassion Fatigue or Ethics Exhaustion?

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Who I Am

- Full-time private practice DVM (and owner) > 15 years
 - AAHA-accredited hospital
 - Diplomate American Board of Veterinary Practitioners
- Director on the Board at the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA)
- Euthanasia Guidelines Committee, AAHA
- Electronic Health Records Taskforce, AAHA

Who I am NOT

- I am NOT ...
 - an armchair social worker
 - A Monday-morning psychologist
- Because...
 - My social work and psychology training and knowledge is nil.
 - I have too much respect for those professions to dabble.
 - (Therefore, please excuse any mangling of the profession that I may do during this talk.)
 - I am speaking from my experience as a veterinarian in private practice.

"I know that I know nothing" – Socrates

Why This Topic?

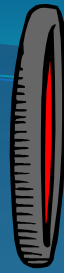
Seeing and reading a lot about Compassion Fatigue and Burnout in veterinary journals, but...

Doesn't quite encompass something else, something additional, that I see in practice.

Why Words Matter

- “Gee, doc, my dog is peeing a lot”...
 - Diabetes
 - Adrenal Disease
 - Too many Jack and Cokes?

- “Gee, doc, I’m feeling blue”...
 - Depression
 - Compassion Fatigue
 - Brain tumor?



the long way of saying that different diseases need different treatment

Definitions

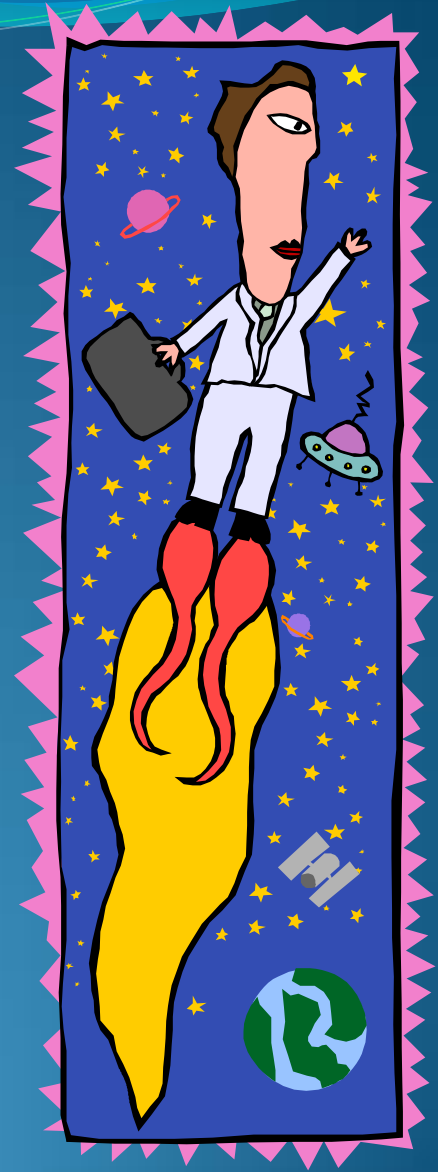
(as my veterinary brain can understand them)

- Burnout
- Compassion Fatigue
- Ethics Exhaustion



Burnout

- Termination of rocket operation because of fuel exhaustion
- Physical or Emotional exhaustion caused by and leading to
 - long-term stress
 - low job satisfaction
 - feelings of powerlessness



Compassion Fatigue

Fatigue, Emotional Distress, or Apathy

- Leads to



- Loss of interest in work
- Decreased productivity
- Increased absenteeism
- Gradual wearing of compassion over time

- Caused by

- constant demands of caring
- emotional appeals
- constant exposure to suffering



Ethics Exhaustion?

My own term for...

Fatigue, emotional distress, and lack of will to continue to act in a way that is consistent with what you believe is the ethical thing to do.

Having failed to square behavior with belief so often that you no longer care to try.

Ethics, as used here, is

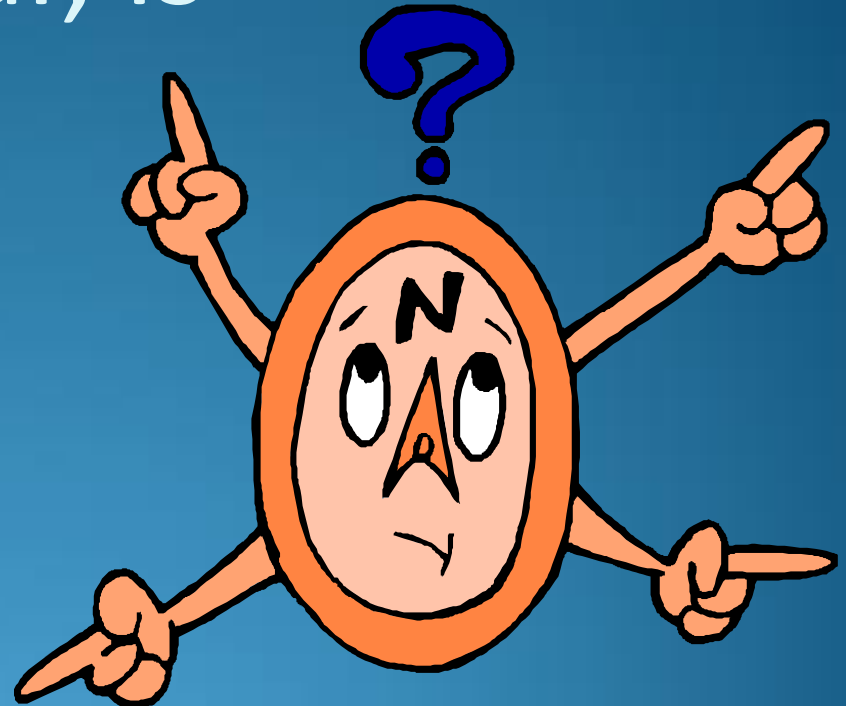


Socrates

- a code of moral conduct or rules
- following duty, not convenience
- not alterable by circumstance
- a sense of duty, right or wrong
- doing the thing that I should do

Ethics, to be clear, is

- “user-defined”
- It’s personal.
- I am not stating a universal truth.



Ethics Exhaustion is caused by

- a conflict between what I believe is right versus what I “must” do
- doing what you don’t feel is right
- your feelings of helplessness being minimized by others

Ethics Exhaustion is

NOT a loss of compassion,
but being prevented from acting on
what you believe is
the compassionate, caring thing to do.

Ethics Exhaustion is caused by

- a conflict between what I believe is right versus what I “must” do
- doing what you don’t feel is right
- your feelings of helplessness being minimized by others
- having trouble defining what that right thing is

Ethics Exhaustion

How do I prioritize my ethical duty?

Human Client

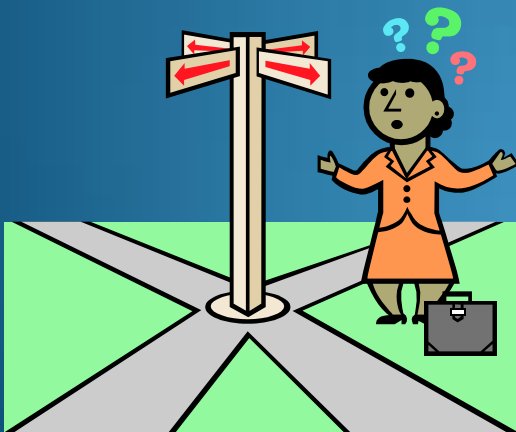
vs. Pet Patient

vs. Boss

vs. Profession

vs. Family

vs. Self



Ethics Exhaustion is caused by

- a conflict between what I believe is right versus what I “must” do
- doing what you don’t feel is right
- your feelings of helplessness being minimized by others
- having trouble defining what that right thing is
- a mismatch between your ethical belief and your actual behavior

Ethics Exhaustion

A Mismatch in Belief and Behavior

I feel that I must do this action,

Behavioral drift...

even if it isn't the right thing to do.

Behavioral Drift

Did you change your beliefs
or
just give in?*

*It is one thing to actually change what you believe to be ethical, yet another thing entirely, to believe one thing, but to do another.

Behavioral Drift

“convenience” euthanasia as an example

End-Stage
Heart Failure,
non-
responsive to
treatment

Severe
Periodontal
disease / pain
and cannot
afford
treatment

Arthritis and
owner does
not want to
medicate
daily

De-claw vs.
euthanize 10
year old cat

Owner died
and put in
will for family
to euthanize
the healthy 4
year old dog

Moving and
no longer
wants healthy
4 year old dog

Old black cat,
New white
furniture



Ethics Exhaustion

as it relates to Cognitive Dissonance

- **Problem:**
 - My behaviors are incongruous with my beliefs
- **Action:** lie to self, suppress feelings



Ethics Exhaustion

Result:

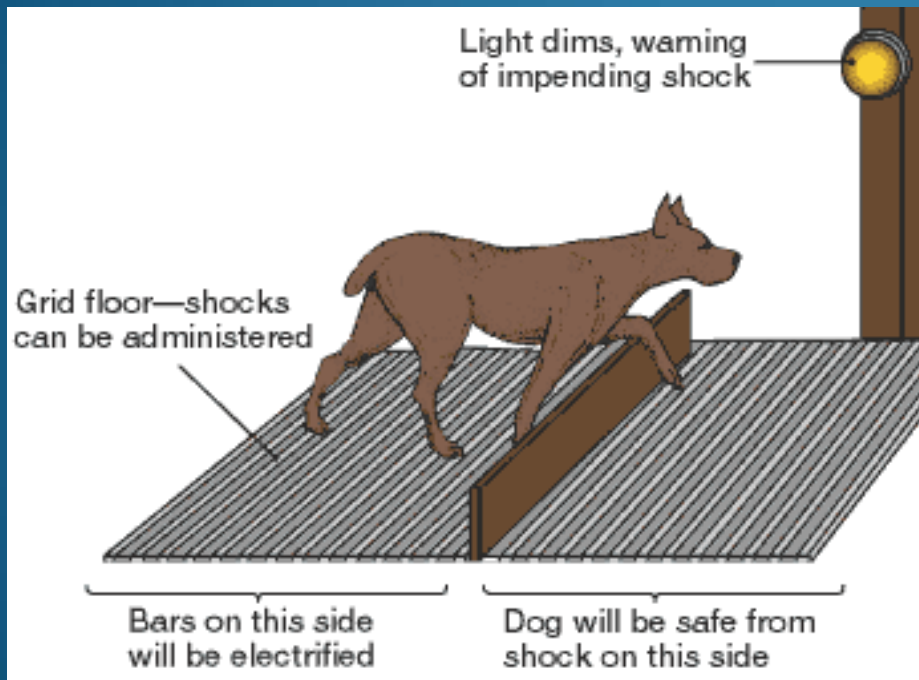
DENIAL

as a coping mechanism

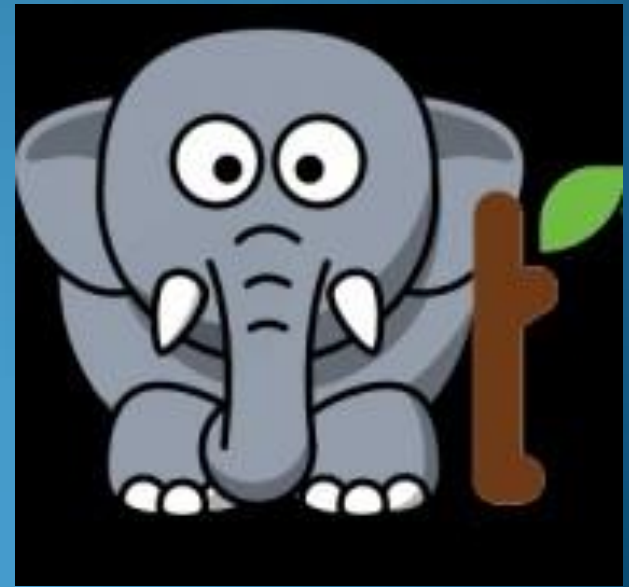


Ethics Exhaustion

as it relates to Learned Helplessness



I've never been strong enough to break this big, tough twig.



Seligman and Maier, 1965

Ethics Exhaustion

“Ethical Learned Helplessness”

- Too exhausted to continue to do what we believe is right.
- No one else cares, why should I?
- Might as well do it because someone will...
- Not my fault; I had no choice.
- Just following orders...

Ethics Exhaustion

as it relates to Obedience to Authority

"...often it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act."

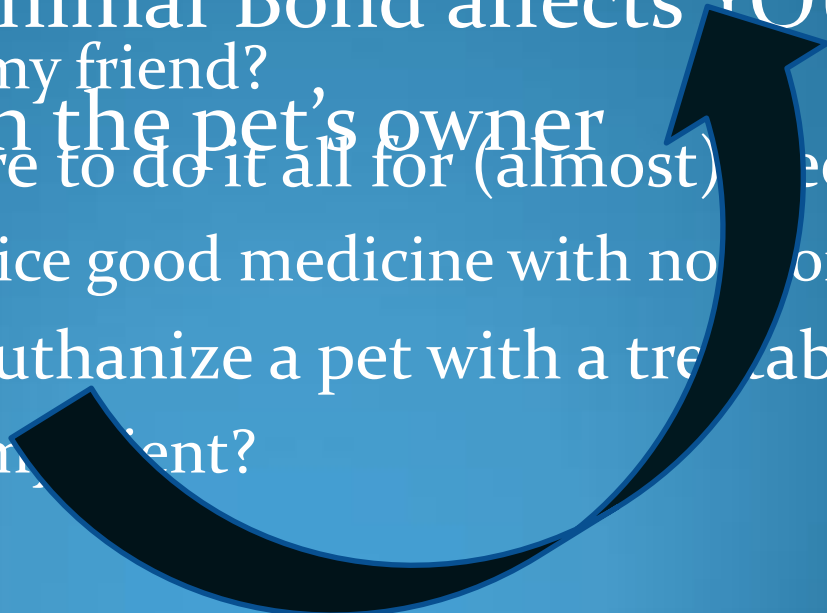
–Stanley Milgram, 1974

Ethics Exhaustion

The Source

- a boss insisting that you crop ears
 - What if I lose my job?
- a colleague who no longer wears caps, masks and gowns for surgeries
 - What if I lose my friend?
- financial pressure to do it all for (almost) free
 - How do I practice good medicine with no money?
- Being asked to euthanize a pet with a treatable illness
 - What if I lose my patient?

when the Human-Animal Bond affects YOU more than the pet's owner



Ethical Dilemmas in Veterinary

Ear Cropping

Unrestricted

Banned

Afghanistan,
Argentina,
Bolivia, Chile,
Egypt,
Indonesia,
Kuwait,
Lebanon,
Malaysia,
Morocco

Mauritius,
Mexico,
Nepal, Peru,
Philippines,
Sri Lanka,
Taiwan, &
US

Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Manitoba, New Brunswick,
Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech,
Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France,

Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel, Latvia,
Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern
Ireland, Norway, Poland, Portugal,

Romania, Scotland, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain
(Barcelona and Andalusia), Sweden, Switzerland, Virgin
Islands, Wales

Ethical Dilemmas in Veterinary

Does it matter what we call it?

Euthanasia

Humane
Killing

pain, distress or suffering
exceeds manageable levels

health or welfare of animals is
irredeemably compromised

research animals at the end
of studies

Strays

unwanted pets that cannot be
rehomed

slaughter of livestock



Ethics Exhaustion

Practical Consequences

The Profession

- Poor job performance
 - disastrous in the medical field

- High turnover

Inter-Personal Relationships

- Lack of camaraderie

- Withdrawal

Personal Issues

- Stress, Depression, Frustration, Anger

- Loss of Respect for Self/Low self esteem

 - Not a nice person

- Loss of respect from others

 - Not a “good” vet

(fear of becoming the vet that as a new grad, I swore I would never become)



Ethics Exhaustion Treatment

Same as Compassion Fatigue and Burnout?

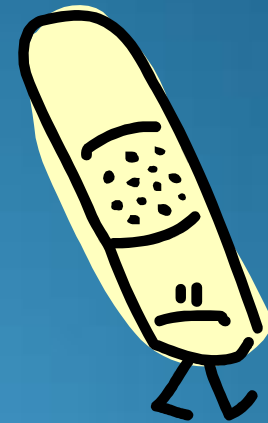
Can you change your environment?

Change jobs?

Change profession?

Seek help?

**Does this work with
Ethics Exhaustion?**



Or is there more to it?

Treatment for
Ethics Exhaustion
starts with recognizing
that there is a problem.

Ethics Exhaustion

What are we looking for?

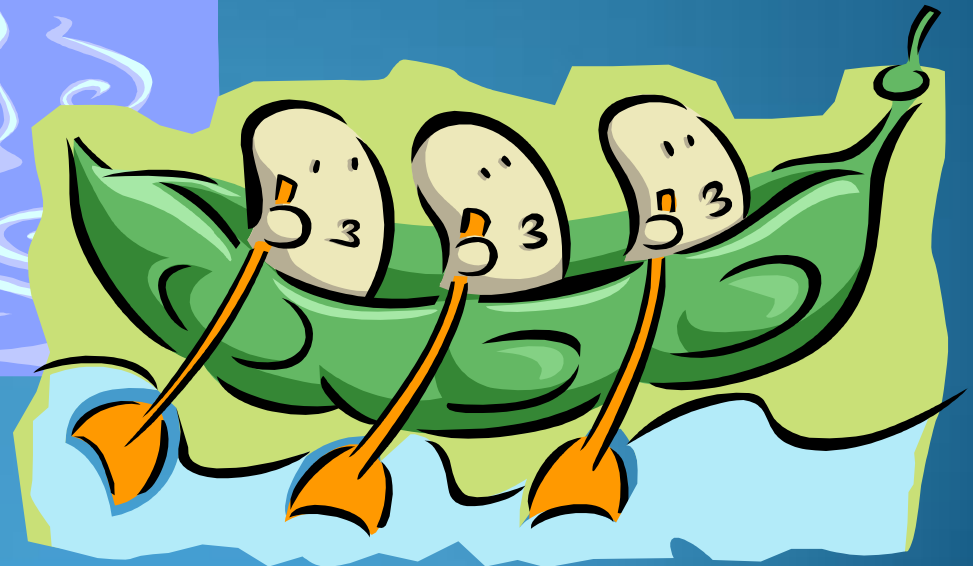
Resolution!

Absolution?

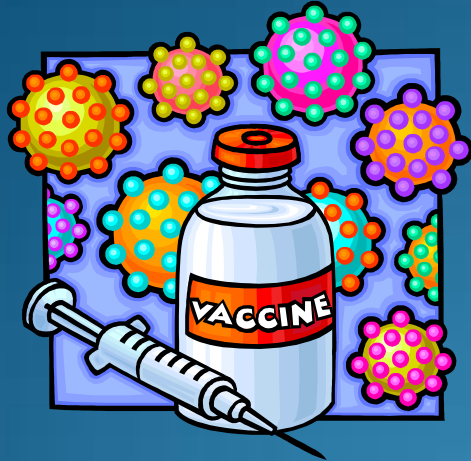
Ethics Exhaustion

Treatment

No more behavioral drift...



What else can we do?



maybe you can put on a little armor.

If you can't vaccinate yourself against Ethics Exhaustion,



- Don't take the guilt of a decision all onto yourself.
- State concerns and perform under protest
- Be honest, be sincere, but not angry
(remember, ethics are personal...)
- Seek help or unite.

Ethics Exhaustion

Our ethics are our own

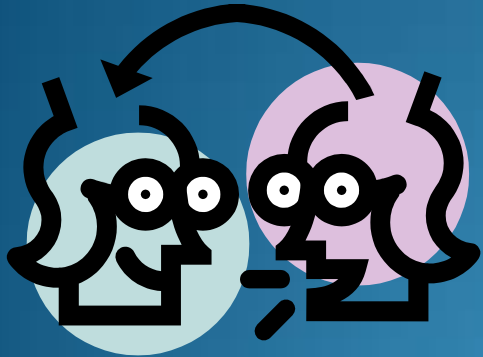
- And if we speak up frequently enough, we may
 - Get our way
 - Change the world
 - Get fired
 - Or Lose clients, which is the practice owner equivalent

...maybe Win - Win?

Ethics Exhaustion

Goals?

- These topics must not be taboo!



- Get to a better place through dialogue and idea EXCHANGE!!

- Be a team!!!



Ethics Exhaustion

Prevention

- Employees

- Prior to interviewing for a position

- Write down your hot-button issues
 - Ask yourself where you are truly NOT comfortable compromising
 - Ask the interviewer what the policy at the hospital is. (Are they open to discussion?)

Ethics Exhaustion

Prevention

- Bosses and Supervisors
 - Recognize the power of Obedience to Authority
 - Create a safe environment to discuss these conflicts
 - Recognize that ordering an employee to do something he feels is unethical will actually lead to worse job performance
 - Have written policy

Ethics Exhaustion

(An Ounce of) Prevention

Committing to Ethical Guidelines is every bit as important as our other **Standard Operating Procedures**

- Surgery
- Anesthesia
- Pain Management
- Euthanasia
- Firing a client

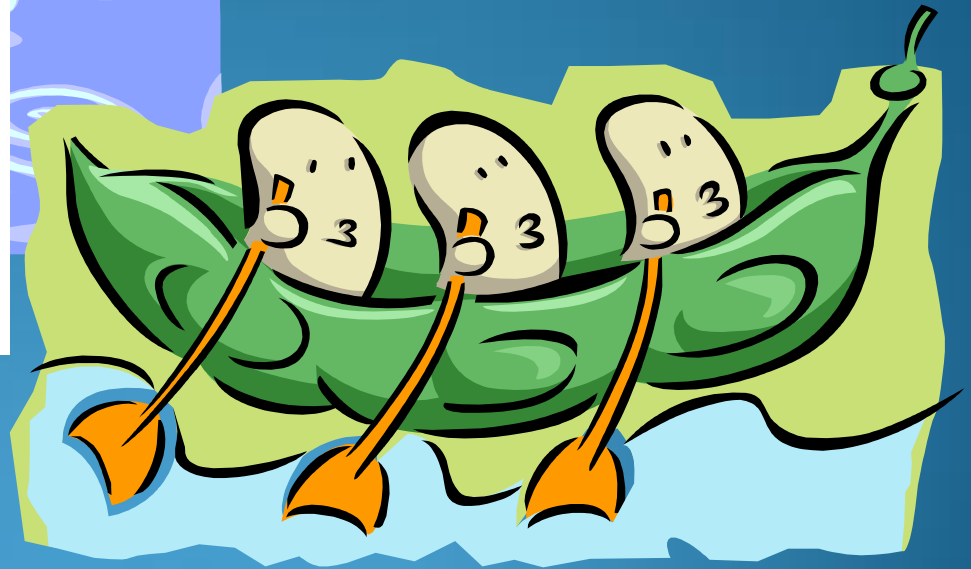


- Everything that ever went less well than we would have liked!
(It is like having morbidity and mortality rounds for ethics.)

AAHA[®]

ACCREDITED

The Standard of
Veterinary Excellence



Ethics Exhaustion



- Leadership
 - Standards of Care
 - Guidelines
 - Position Statements
- Support
 - Camaraderie with TEAMS who have similar values
 - My Veterinary Career
- Education
 - High Quality
 - Availability & Flexibility
 - Veterinary & Life

Ethics Exhaustion

- Correct diagnosis is critical for proper treatment.
 - Different diseases may have same symptoms.
 - Palliative is good, cure is better, prevention is best!
- Ethics Exhaustion may be comorbid with Compassion Fatigue.
- *Ethics Exhaustion is fatigue, emotional distress, and lack of will to continue to act in a way that is consistent with what you believe is the ethical thing to do. It is having failed to square behavior with belief so often that you no longer care to try.*
Ethical Learned Helplessness.

Ethics Exhaustion

- Sources: finances, bosses, colleagues, co-workers, et al.
- Treatments for compassion fatigue may palliate Ethics Exhaustion, but may not treat or prevent unique causes.
- Prevention and treatment include: having open dialogue (no taboo topics) with individuals or teams, having written position statements and SOPs, being part of the greater good.
- Tilting at windmills? No. We too easily look at idealistic, new graduates and quash those ideals that we, ourselves, used to hold as truths.
- Goal: healthier profession, healthier caretakers, healthier pets

Ethics Exhaustion

Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

– Dylan Thomas



Thank you for listening.

Questions? Concerns?