

Inclined toward God at the end of life

My friend adjusted his hospital bed. Then he said his final words.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [February 27, 2019](#) issue



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Getting the tilt angle set right on a hospital or hospice bed can be difficult, especially if you're the patient. When the bed is too horizontal, it's hard to navigate a straw for sipping water and swallowing those pills stuck in a tiny plastic cup. Yet if the pitch of the bed approaches too nearly a sitting position, your midsection can get uncomfortably compressed. Many people find it hard to fall asleep in an upright position. But if you lie down, fluid can build up in your lungs and cause the doctor to hound you about respiratory concerns. For the wearer of bifocals, the prone position makes it just about impossible to see other people in the room as anything but clumps of haze. Getting the bed just right is tough.

I saw my friend Vince in hospice care a few weeks ago, his 91-year-old body weakened to the point of exhaustion. Two days earlier, in the middle of the night, he had rolled over in bed to tell his wife that he was ready to die. It's hard to argue

against the wishes of someone who is at peace with the Lord, in love with his spouse, and satisfied with a well-lived life. So the family moved him into the local hospice house.

When I arrived, nine or ten family members were with him. Vince had woken from a deep sleep and was trying to hit the arrow button for sitting up. It didn't help that the control buttons for TV volume were situated right beside those for head and foot adjustments. Or that his fingers were fumbling to reach what he couldn't even see. But after some ups and downs, and with a little help, Vince found the perfect pitch.

With his voice now a whisper, he asked for a favor—that everyone in the room would take a turn sitting by the bed for him to share a private word. One by one, each of the sons, daughters-in-law, grandkids, and lastly, his wife leaned into Vince at just the right angle where he could hear and see them. He told them what they meant to him and how proud he was of their lives. Then he said good-bye. About noon the next day, Vince breathed his last.

Wallace Stegner's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, in which a retired historian chronicles his grandparents' life on the frontier, bears the title *Angle of Repose*. You'll have to read the book to guess at several possible meanings behind that title. It is a term in geometry. The steepest angle at which loose material on a slope comes to rest, without sliding further, is called the angle of repose. Ashes settle in at a 40° angle of repose, wheat at 27°, and dirt somewhere between 38° and 45°.

I have a hunch that throughout life we're all after that perfect angle into which we can settle with contentment. The angle we eventually locate, if we're lucky enough, is the sweet spot connecting our relational yearnings with our vocational passions and the depths of faith. On our best days, we lean into experiences with maximum slope. On our deathbed, we relax into whatever slope allows us to embrace God and loved ones together. For Vince, that final slope turned out to be a beautiful 35°.

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