

Physician Assisted Suicide

Week 6

In the first installment of this series I recounted examples of what might these days be called physician-assisted suicide. They always took place with the consent of the patient or in the case of severe brain-injured patients, the immediate family. And in the case of the patients I sited with Lou Gehrig's disease, suicide would not a word those patients, their families or I would have chosen.

Some of you may remember the Irish Television series Ballykissangel, which takes place in Southern Ireland in the 1990's when the first challenges to the authority of the Roman Catholic Church were taking place. One of the central figures in the series is a young English priest, Peter, who finds himself on a steep learning curve about what it means to be a priest. By nature Peter is kind, humorous and tries to do the right thing.

A dying retired crusty judge, deeply distrustful of the church, confronts Peter with a story. A few years before, the judge lost his wife – the love of his life - from cancer. The two of them made a pact with one another – should her pain become unbearable, he would give her an overdose of morphine (which they presumably had stashed away for just such an eventuality). Finally the pain reached the point when she was in agony despite morphine and she asked her husband for enough to put an end to her suffering and life. He honored her wish and she died a short time later in his arms. Hearing this story, Peter blurted out, "but all life is sacred", at which moment the Judge angrily hammered his fist down on the chess board scattering the board and all the pieces and dismissed Peter. Shaken by the Judge's confession Peter thought about it and returning the next day, made it clear that he understood the Judge's decision. To which the Judge expressed his gratitude and told Peter that his mother must be very proud of him and that he should go far in the church. Peter left the church 2 DVDs later!

That episode struck home with me because my mother-in-law, after her husband died from cancer, squirreled away all his morphine for just such a day, should her life become intolerable in the future. A few years later the

morphine was found and although she gave it up, I think it was with some regret. Considering what lay ahead of her, what with progressive heart failure and the awful breathlessness at rest, she might well have taken that morphine. Had she done so, I hope I would have responded as Peter did. Physicians and hospice workers encounter these issues all the time.

The examples posed by the assisted suicide in the widely watched Ballykissangel series, gets to the heart of the matter. Is there no place for those suffering from unrelenting pain and disability, to call it a day, to take whatever steps are necessary to end their life or at least not keep it going? The supreme court of Canada last year said yes – there is a place for assisted suicide and it was up to the public, the medical profession and government to settle the terms of such practice.

On the matter of ‘just not keeping life going’ there’s the example of Diane Rehm. She is one of the most celebrated and thoughtful public radio show hosts in the United States and just stepped down at the age of seventy-nine from her job as host of her own show. Diane’s husband died recently of end-stage Parkinson’s disease. They made the decision together, that if and when the disease became overwhelming, he would simply stop eating and drinking. And that’s precisely what he did recently. After a few days, he died. She has been very public about the decision, which they reached together. Here the decision was made to withdraw life-giving support – a decision made every bit as deliberately and with the same consequences as the fictional Judge and his wife decided to take an overdose of morphine.

Lots to think about. It’s a huge subject but one worth personal, family and community discussion.

References

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This was written about Diane Rehm's husband's decision to fast and end his life.