



Choosing life or dying with dignity

Clay Nelson © 11 October 2020

New Zealand has a very strong right-to-die movement and polls suggest that at least 60% of us support voluntary euthanasia.

However, the minority is equally passionate in their opposition. From the perspective of a politician, supporting the right to die with dignity is a no-win situation. This issue has been avoided for twenty-five years since a bill presented in 1995 was soundly defeated. This election the issue is before us again as a binding referendum.

This issue has been being debated since the Ohio state legislature failed to pass a bill legalising euthanasia in 1906. Since then the right-to-die debate is littered with court cases, papal encyclicals, the establishment of right-to-die societies, bestselling books on how to die with dignity (one of which was banned in New Zealand), referenda, and votes in parliaments and US state legislatures. Resistance to death with dignity legislation has been strong, but the tide is turning. Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Colombia, Canada, Portugal, Germany, the Australian states of Victoria and Western Australia and the US states of Colorado, Hawaii, California, Oregon, Maine, New Jersey, Washington, Montana, Vermont, the District of Columbia and one county in New Mexico have made it possible for people to die with dignity by either euthanasia or physician-assisted death.

So why has it been so difficult even in places where the idea is generally popular? Part of the reason is confusion about terms. While euthanasia is the most commonly used term, it differs in an important way from physician-assisted death. Euthanasia allows the physician or someone other than the terminally ill to cause death. Physician-assisted death only allows the doctor to prescribe drugs to hasten death but not to administer them. Only the dying can administer them. European countries allow for euthanasia, US states allow physician-assisted dying. Our referendum will permit either.

Another challenging issue is passive euthanasia invoked in three ways: the patient refuses treatment that would prolong life, a physician gives palliative care to reduce suffering which will also speed up death, or a physician or family member refuses extraordinary measures to prolong someone's life. Twice I have had

to be the one to make that decision. The first time was for my grandmother who developed gangrene after a massive stroke. The second time was when my mother, suffering severe emotional distress due to advanced Alzheimer's, developed pneumonia. I refused treatment in both cases, permitting both to die peacefully and painlessly.

Many believe that this is the only acceptable form of euthanasia in a world where the ability to alleviate pain in a hospice environment dedicated to dignity is now widely available.

However, the biggest obstacle to passing right-to-die legislation is religion.

Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Mormons, Roman Catholics, and most Protestant and Pentecostal denominations reject euthanasia, or physician-assisted death, although most support the patient's refusal of further treatment if the burden is too great to justify a treatment with little to offer.

The primary reason most of these faith groups oppose euthanasia or physician-assisted death is because they consider life to be sacred. They use language like, "Life is sacred because it is a gift of God. Only God has the right to end it." Buddhists, who have no belief in God, nonetheless believe that it is morally wrong to take life, which implies its sacredness. Hindus believe ending life negatively impacts Karma, which could interfere with one's next life. Again, sacredness is implied.

If we accept unquestioningly that life is sacred because God gave it to us, then that ends the debate on euthanasia and physician-assisted death no matter what the quality of life is; no matter how much physical and psychological suffering is to be endured. However, asking whether or not life is sacred is a legitimate question. And if life isn't sacred, what is it?

For Humanists the question has no meaning. Something that is sacred belongs to God. If God does not play a role in your belief system then nothing is considered sacred. That does not mean Humanists do not hold that life is without value or meaning in and of itself. It is a wonder to be protected and appreciated and should not be interfered with lightly.

For those who do believe life is sacred there are questions worth asking. If God is the reason for its sacredness, why does not God appear to consider life to be sacred? There are innumerable times in the Bible where God takes life — as in the flood — or demands that his people commit genocide. If life is so sacred why have holy people been killing each other since God was a boy? Did the

Inquisition consider life sacred as it put people on the rack? When Muslims declare jihad, mostly on other Muslims, are their brothers' and sisters' lives not sacred? When Hindus and Muslims terrorise one another in India or when Israel and Palestine attack each other where does the question of the sacredness of life get raised? How do some Christians who argue for the sanctity of life where a foetus is concerned support the death penalty or not wearing a mask during a pandemic? Are only the lives of humans sacred? What about all "God's creatures" dying because we are destroying their habitats?

Comedian George Carlin had a bit that focused on the hypocrisy in sanctity of life arguments. "We can't blame God for the idea of the sanctity of life because... we made it up. Why? Because we're alive. Basic self-interest. Living people have a strong interest in promoting the idea that somehow life is sacred. We aren't hearing a whole lot from Mussolini on the subject. What's the latest from JFK? Not a thing. The reason Mussolini and JFK aren't talking about the sanctity of life is, they are all dead. Dead people couldn't give less than a [expletive deleted] about the sanctity of life. Only living people care about it... and we're biased. It is one of those things we tell ourselves so we will feel noble. But if everything that ever lived is dead and everything alive is going to die, where does the sacred part come in? Even when we preach about the sanctity of life we don't practise it. Look at what we kill: mosquitoes and flies... because they are pests. Lions and tigers...because it's fun. Chickens and pigs...because we're hungry. Pheasants and quail... because it's fun...and we're hungry. And we kill people...because they're pests and it's fun. And you may have noticed something else; the sanctity of life doesn't seem to apply to cancer cells. You don't ever see bumper stickers that say 'Save the Tumours' or 'I brake for advanced melanoma.' At best the sanctity of life is kind of a selective thing. We get to choose what forms of life are sacred and we get to kill the rest."

So, I'm not prepared to say life is sacred. But because I find it valuable, important, and even worthy of reverence, I think there are legitimate concerns to be considered about euthanasia and physician-assisted death. I want protections against the terminally ill being in anyway coerced to hasten the end of their life. I want them to have plenty of time to change their mind. I want them to have counselling. I would want their physician and minister or designated proxy present to witness the death to assure all protocols are followed to protect the patient as well as the family. Unfortunately, that is not required in the act. My biggest reservation about passing right-to-death legislation is that the most vulnerable in our society such as the disabled or the poor could be victimised. We haven't treated them all that well when they were healthy.

There are definite pros and cons to be considered before voting for or against the act.

That said I concur with the ethical argument that suggests that life for the terminally ill should last only as long as the person feels life is worth living. Only the terminally ill can determine if for them the pain is insufferable and their quality of life is no longer worth enduring. No one can decide this for them if they are of sound mind. If they subscribe to teachings of any one of the faiths I've described they will not even consider it, nor be required to do so, but those not so encumbered by their faith should have the option.

In closing, let me acknowledge that the Unitarian Universalist Association passed a resolution in 1988 advocating "the right to self-determination in dying." The UUA position is grounded in honouring the integrity of the individual conscience. These ultimate questions of life and death belong with the person most intimately affected.

Discussion / Meditation

I invite you to reflect on whether having the right to die would be a comfort or a burden.