

## Control over life and death is nothing but illusion

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I think in billboards. Greeting cards are my next favorite medium. I'm always joking that someday, SOMEDAY, I'll start a greeting card company. There are just so many events and opportunities that don't have an appropriate greeting card.

Admittedly, my sense of humour is somewhat dark, and I probably skate a little too close to the line of tragedy to find comedy. So when I find myself at the recently held 'End of Life Care: A National Dialogue' Town Hall Meeting in Regina on May 7th, dreaming up greeting card slogans in my head, you know I'm in trouble.

I must applaud the CMA (Canadian Medical Association) and Maclean's for putting on a top-notch event. I fully appreciated the four panelists - two who travelled the country, and two local experts/participants. The evening

began with framing the conversation - offering common definitions regarding advance care planning, palliative care, euthanasia and physician assisted suicide. They tackled some other terms that are often misconstrued or misunderstood - medical aid in dying, palliative sedation and dying with dignity.

And from there the conversation ensued. It was a lively dialogue (no pun intended), with excellent contributions from both panelists and public. Many lenses were used to look at the issues - medical, ethical, moral, legal, and spiritual. Many lenses, many voices and many stories were told of end of life experiences. Some were beautiful, and some were tragic.

I thought there was a missing voice. It was missing, because to date, in Canada, it is still hypothetical. It is the voice of someone 'left behind' to process the conscious choice of a loved one who has engaged the health care system to end their life. My imagination runs to the future bedside of a loved one who has chosen their own death date. I find myself filled with dread, like I'm playing out a scene in a bad movie.

And then bad fiction becomes reality, when in the course of the evening I hear that in the Netherlands (where euthanasia is legalized), a citizens' initiative called *Out of Free Will* is demanding that all Dutch people over 70 who feel tired of life should *have the right to professional help in ending it*. (I think I actually gasped). This organization, which includes a number of prominent Dutch citizens, has started collecting signatures in support of this proposed change in legislation. Dutch euthanasia law, initially designed for those suffering from serious medical conditions and in considerable pain, was made legal and limited only to those with '*hopeless and unbearable*' suffering. Well, forget the old ways of strict criteria and protocol for euthanizing, in progressive Netherlands, once you've arrived at the arbitrary age of 70, you have the right to end it all ... if you're tired of life, have no fear, the end is now *legally* near. The greeting cards are writing themselves again in my head.

Ahem. Back to Regina.. as I gather my thoughts, listening to the closer-to-home stories, I am hit with a sudden waive of naivety. I have yet to sojourn with someone whose suffering is so great that I would entertain their hastened death as a blessing. With sincere pause, I sit with my philosophical convictions, not wanting to simplify suffering, or engage in the drawing of black and white boxes around this complex issue. But I question - at any other stage of life, isn't choosing your own death seen as tragedy, spurring on some of the most complex grief and bereavement work imaginable?

I find myself flinching throughout this debate, not because I can't understand an individual's perspective regarding choice and rights, or the reality and fear of suffering, but because the debate is not pondering the voice of the families and communities that remain. Can we afford the short-sightedness of thinking that the choice of the 'one' won't lend itself to the potential confusion, regret and loss of the 'many?' Do we really trust that legalized euthanasia will leave us in a greater place of peace and feeling un-burdened, for ourselves or our families?

Helping to solidify my thinking were the reflections of Karen Ziegler, Catholic Chaplain at Wascana Rehabilitation Centre in Regina. Following the CMA event, she shared this story with me, "A young man who had been estranged from his dad was not going to come to his dad's dying bedside. As he told me his story, something moved him to go. Having been in a coma for days, the father opened his eyes and looked right at his young son with a smile, then closed his eyes and died. This final gift from his dad brought healing and relief to this young man. Had the father's life prematurely ended, this final healing would not have had the chance to take place, leaving a family member to continue on with his life feeling angry, hurt, and confused."

This story touched me, because I firmly believe that life is a gift from God - and not simply a gift for one to use or consume, but to share with many. The tenants of Catholic health ministry would uphold that all human life is a gift of God's love, that we possess an inherent dignity (not lost by any bodily malfunction), and that we are interconnected in community - designed to develop our greatest health and potential in relationship to one another.

Certainly, healthy societies value human rights, but how shallow an existence if we didn't see ourselves as human gifts as well. In fact, our human rights should serve to leverage us to become greater human gifts. Radical and counter-cultural Gospel values continue whispering wisdom and irony throughout the ages - that in order to be whole, we must give ourselves away, to be truly happy we must give up our rights, not demand them.

And yet, we live life as though we could be in control of everything, including our death. Control is a persistent illusion. How do we know in which day, we become the greatest gift to another? Even, and especially, from our death beds, if we are intent to control the number of our days, will not the integrity and genuineness of our spontaneous human moments and touches also become more controlled, more contrived? And worse, do we risk the gifts at the end of life being altogether lost? This loss, not suffering, nor death, is truly the tragedy waiting to happen.

Dear society, (who may think euthanasia is a good idea), I send you this dark and sobering greeting card:  
*picture a stone falling into water but mysteriously, no ripples form* - Happy Death Day - may the choices  
you make today have no ramifications on anyone else.