

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Should we be allowed to choose to die?

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Question: British author Sir Terry Pratchett recently presented a BBC documentary called “Choosing To Die,” about assisted suicide. Pratchett, the bestselling author of the “Discworld” series of fantasy novels, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 2008. He is a patron of Dying In Dignity, a group that lobbies for the laws in the UK to be changed to give terminally ill people control over ending their lives, and has said, “I believe everybody possessed of a debilitating and incurable disease should be allowed to pick the hour of their death.”

The documentary kicked up a storm in the UK by broadcasting the final moments of Peter Smedley, a 71-year-old motor-neurone disease sufferer who traveled to a clinic in Switzerland run by Dignitas, an assisted-suicide group. Smedley is shown drinking a cocktail of barbiturates while his wife sits next to him. Although the camera cuts away from his face, his final words — “My wife’s very good at putting me to sleep just by rubbing my hands. Be strong, my darling.” — are clear.

In a blog post, Michael Nazir-Ali, the former Bishop of Rochester, calls Dignitas “agents of death.” He adds, “The Judaeo-Christian tradition is a surer guide. ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is about acknowledging the gift and dignity of human life — which, whether ours or another’s, we do not have the competence to take.”

Care Not Killing, a British-based alliance that is strenuously opposed to any assisted-suicide laws, said, “There is a real risk that copycat suicides will follow the screening [of the documentary].”

Should a terminally ill patient be allowed to choose the time and manner of his or her death? Is it more ethical to keep someone alive who wants to die than it is to allow them to die at a time of their own choosing?

Answer:

In June 1994, Oregon voters passed a Death with Dignity Act that legalized physician-assisted dying with certain restrictions. Passage of this initiative made Oregon the first U.S. state, and one of the first jurisdictions in the world, to permit some terminally ill patients to determine the times of their own deaths.

In 2005 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Oregon law. There was a fear that such a law would open the floodgates for those who wanted to hasten their own deaths, or for relatives who wanted to encourage others to die so that they could reap financial benefits. However, neither of those two things has happened.

Then there were religious groups who came forward, saying that people choosing to participate in causing their own deaths were sinful and were trying to play God. The fact is that doctors play God throughout our lives by curing us of life-threatening illnesses. Why is it different when a doctor acts to help a person who is suffering terrible pain or debilitation to end his or her life? If God is merciful, it would seem reasonable that the easing of suffering would be a positive thing. And, unfortunately, all pain cannot be mitigated by medication.

Although the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations has not taken an official stand on euthanasia, I believe that our covenant to “affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; and justice, equity and compassion in human relations” speaks to this issue. I am not saying that we should encourage people to take their own lives, or to act out of situational depression. I believe that each person must make his or her own decision about when life has become untenable. And I believe that we who are not suffering their pain

cannot make judgments for them.

May we think deeply and seriously about our lives, live our days in purpose and joy, and find dignity and integrity in our deaths when meaningful life is no longer possible.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church Of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

Questions about life — the right to it, the right to end it, and who decides — occupy our column this week and last. These matters are deeply personal and intensely private, yet so fundamental that we must discuss them candidly in public.

My problem with those who would interfere with life decisions is that many who oppose abortion seem to believe that the right to life begins at conception and ends at birth, but also oppose public help for needy families. Some who think suffering people shouldn't be allowed to end their mental or physical pain also want government to stay out of our Medicare.

Needless agony simply shouldn't be tolerated in a rational, advanced society. A life so painful that it cannot be eased should be allowed to end, with assistance if needed. Yes, it is killing, but it is merciful. In rare cases, in accordance with the patient's wishes and the best ethical guidelines, care may equal letting someone go.

In other cases, I suggest that forthwith we adopt “care not killing” as our minimum standard guiding all policy, foreign and domestic.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

This is one of those topics that I think I am going to get mail about either way. While I do believe there is a moral standard we are to live by as Christians, I also know we are fallen humans, we feel great emotional and physical pain, and we are forgiven. So if someone is terminally ill and in grave pain, I cannot judge their humanness.

I can be clear on what my beliefs are, but to blatantly write here that it is a “sin and wrong,” is not going to be helpful to someone suffering who has chosen this path. Judgment won't talk them out of it or show them another way; but grace and love might.

I know that this is another one of those topics that Christians will give a resolving, “Sin!” shout to, just as they might divorce, abortion and emotional or sexual affairs. But I have learned that the world and human life is just not that cut-and-dry. People suffer, and suffering leads to choices perhaps never reached if pain hadn't been involved.

So I am aware my stance here may be different from other responses. But I treat too many people who have not been able to be “perfect” and make moral decisions amidst pain — and I know they love God and they are in agony. So I personally understand from a professional point of view and I do not judge. I just try to do my small part to listen and guide in love. Then, it is every human's right to make their own decisions.

I believe if we are saved, we are forgiven. I do not know what God thinks about this when someone is in too much pain to “not kill,” but I do know he frowns on adultery and murder; and yet King David was a man after God’s own heart — and forgiven. So isn’t every Christian?

The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian, LMFT

Kimberly Zakarian Therapy

Montrose

Let’s consider what scripture says about this very emotional and personal issue. God our creator made Adam and Eve in his own image and this is true of every human born since. Though God set in place a natural process of procreation, through it he is still the author of our lives. He told the prophet Jeremiah: “I formed you in the womb.” (Jeremiah 1:5). He could say that to every one of us today. God made us, he sustains our lives in his providence and he possesses the sole right of ownership to our lives.

The psalmist reminds us that God has a plan and a purpose for every day of our lives: “In thy book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them” (Psalm 139:16). God has ordained a first and a last day for every life. In Solomon’s wisdom book of Ecclesiastes we’re told, “there is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven — a time to give birth, and a time to die” (3:1-2).

This is a different issue than removing life support from a person whose body can no longer sustain life. Before God it’s wrong to interfere with his plan for our lives by purposefully terminating them. And if it’s in our power to keep someone alive, it’s the right thing to do.

This is undoubtedly one of the heart-wrenching issues of our time and nobody with a conscience enjoys or encourages the suffering of another person. But it is simply not our place to interfere with what belongs to God.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

For a long time I have been in favor of a person's being able to choose how to end his/her life. If that means I support “assisted suicide,” then call me such a supporter.

Interesting that such a question should arise now, so soon after Dr. Jack Kevorkian died. As a pioneer in the movement to allow choice in end-of-life issues, he went to jail for helping a man with a pitiful condition end his own life, and he did it on the CBS program “60 Minutes.” To me, Jack Kevorkian was a hero, not a murderer.

In this very emotional debate, so many have tried to justify their so-called “pro-life” stance by referring to a scripture they like. One of the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt not kill,” is often quoted, and my guess is that most of those who point to that commandment probably see nothing wrong with the death penalty, which also happens to violate “Thou shalt not kill.” As I have said before in this column, we always need to keep compassion in our religious views.

One of the Wesley hymns has the line, "Jesus, thou art all compassion." Can it be wrong to allow someone in terrific pain, with no hope of getting better, to choose to end his/her life? I don't think so. Also, is it right to force someone to live who is brain-dead? Again, I don't think so.

We have God-given minds. We have choices. To leave compassion out of the equation is like the woman who came before King Solomon (I Kings 3:26) and wanted the wise king to cut the baby in two in the interest of justice. (The word "compassion" is used in that verse, by the way.) You know the rest of the story; go and do likewise.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

La Cañada

"Soylent Green is people!" So said Charlton Heston in the movie named for that food product composed of the remains of those euthanized in some future dystopia. When folks got old, they just got put to sleep like diseased pets, then they were ground into nutritious wafers for all those who voted for legalized assisted suicide. Crazy?

Generally, I feel that Hollywood contributes to an atmosphere of heroic self-extermination, and it tugs our heartstrings with endless examples of agony that force us to prefer death for the story's protagonist. How many films have displayed bloodthirsty aborigines capturing someone with designs to torture said person, then off on a distant hill, a compassionate friend with a long-range rifle takes aim and sends his buddy immediately to Jesus so that he won't have to endure the indignities of cannibal fervor? Audiences nod approvingly.

Here we have what is essentially a snuff-film, idyllically killing people with the victim's approval. What's more glorious than sanctioned murder? C'mon, their affliction is awful; wouldn't it be better if they were dead? No more pain — in this life, anyway. And we can watch! Have a heart, you Christian naysayers!

Listen, if someone prefers death, they don't need a sanctioned suicide mill. Can you imagine such clinics popping up like so many medical marijuana shops? Come and get put to death, special rates for Sunday. Where's Grandma? Oh, she decided to end it all after the Thanksgiving fight around the table last night. Hmm.

My understanding of life's value has me at odds with yet another "choice" position related to killing human beings. God gives life, and God alone may take it. Premature death should be viewed by us as tragic, not opportune, especially when we excel at palliative care and do not need to violate the Hippocratic Oath. And at what point will America's patients perhaps lose their option, and healthcare and doctor recommendations simply override their desire to continue living? Call for the euthanizer, medical won't cover continued treatment.

Life is such a valuable commodity, let's not abort it.

Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

Montrose

I can certainly understand the emotional distress that a person who is in the last stages of an illness feels, and the distress felt by their family, who stand by wishing they could do something to alleviate the pain and gradual loss of physical and mental function.

The thought occurs to me that life is not ours to take. Life belongs to God, for God is life. Are we interfering with the divine plan for our lives, which includes the time of our entrance into life and the time/manner of our exit? Are we interfering with the lessons that the soul who is going through a terminal illness could learn, and with their ability to be a teacher to their family, caring health professionals and others?

I would offer the suggestion of in-home hospice care instead of assisted suicide. My mother made her peaceful transition about four years ago, at home, surrounded by loved ones, with very little distress or pain. Small doses of morphine were administered to her in her last days to manage the pain and to help her sleep.

Our family felt so grateful for the loving care that the hospice physician and nurses showed to our mother and with the follow-up grief counseling that they provided.

The Rev. Jeri Linn

Unity Church of the Valley

La Crescenta

The question of assisted suicide is surrounded by tremendous controversy and stirs strong passions on all sides. I believe that any discussion of the issue must begin with a basic understanding that life is a gift from God. From there, we should accept that some things are best left in the hands of God alone. We did not choose to be brought into this world; and in my view, we should not be allowed to choose when the journey to the afterlife will take place.

I feel that assisted suicide presents a grave danger that threatens the moral fiber of our society. If we determine that death can be decided by mortals, then who is to regulate which life should be eliminated? Some may determine that a 95-year-old with terminal cancer should be allowed to terminate his or her life. But how about a 45-year-old man with unyielding, chronic depression? He is arguably suffering more than the older individual, but would we allow him to end his life? Or how about a newborn born in a vegetative state — are we allowed to snuff out that life at birth since, it can be argued, this is not a life worth saving?

Where do we draw the line?

This entire question puts us a very slippery slope. Once we begin to descend, nobody truly knows what frightening end we may arrive at — not to mention what terrifying turns we may encounter on the way down. This is why I believe we are better off following the teachings of our Judeo-Christian tradition, which state unequivocally that all forms of life are sacred and must be preserved. Every moment of life holds infinite spiritual value, and must be cherished.

Of course, if someone is suffering, we must provide them with all the medical care necessary to ease their pain, and we are not required to undertake heroic measures to prolong life. But allowing one human to cut short the life of another is, in my opinion, immoral. Assisted suicide poses an insurmountable ethical dilemma. The moment we endorse this practice, we weaken the decency of our society.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

Glendale

I have no idea where the line is. There's a line in there somewhere, between prolonging suffering in the name of prolonging life, and cutting life short cavalierly. I just don't know where it is.

No one does, really; and that's what scares us about the whole idea of approving assisted suicide. What door would we be opening; where would it end; what grim farces would arise — and how many surviving loved ones would be traumatized by making the decision, and then have their grief multiplied after making it by a lifetime of second-guessing?

That's what scares us about it. But that doesn't mean we should dismiss the question of enabling a choice for death with dignity.

Medical technology allows us to prolong life long after a life is ready to die. That is, sometimes, absolutely a blessing — it allows time for patient and family to have closure, reconciliation, and a chance at some measure of spiritual peace.

Sometimes, though, prolonging life just because we know how to do that is neither the right nor the kind thing to do. Months and years pass, finances are drained, hearts are torn to pieces by a perpetual state of pre-grieving, and personal dignity is destroyed — all for the sake of propping up a physical body long after the person we recognized has disappeared forever, and long after that person wishes (or would have wished) to be kept alive.

Assisted suicide is different from ending life support; it's more active, more intentional. And I guess it's inevitable that opening the legal floodgates to enable it will mean that some segment of the population will lean toward offing themselves the day after a bad diagnosis. It's an especially scary slippery slope. But I think we should be brave and bring that conversation out into the light. It's time.

The Bible places a high value on human life. It also places high value on human dignity. The two must be equally valued within the same process of legislating.

The Rev. Amy Pringle

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La Cañada