

What happens when life is no longer worth living?

By Jim Taylor

As a general statement, I would not encourage my grandchildren to watch Question Period in the federal parliament in Ottawa. The kind they would observe – shouting, heckling, hurling insults, or simply falling asleep – is not what I want them to emulate.

But there are occasional exceptions. The Parliamentary Committee on Palliative and Compassionate Care is one of them.

This committee has not had much publicity. That's too bad. Because both the report and the committee deserve some attention.

The committee came together as a shared concern among MPs of all three parties, to discuss end-of-life issues such as those raised by Sue Rodriguez and Gloria Taylor (not a relative) who suffered from what they considered intolerable terminal illnesses.

Faith-based reasoning

My colleague and long-time friend Lloyd Mackey believes it's significant that all three co-chairs have strong faith commitments. Harold Albrecht, the Conservative, is a dentist in the Brethren in Christ denomination. Joe Comartin of the NDP, a lawyer and a Catholic, used to provide marital counselling but ceased at the time of the same-sex marriage debate to avoid any apparent religious-political conflict with his work as an MP. Liberal Frank Valeriote attends a Plymouth Brethren-rooted megachurch.

"The point," Lloyd wrote in his OttawaWatch column, "is that these three can talk and work together across party lines... because of the collaborative and conciliatory concepts integral to their commonly-held, if slightly divergent, faith."

So they formed an ad-hoc parliamentary committee. Because it was not a standing committee, they had no budget. They could not cover the expenses of those persons and organizations who wished to make presentations. Nevertheless, over 300 made formal submissions, at their own expense, in 26 public meetings, all across the country. At least 55 other MPs participated; the committee also received several hundred e-mails and letters.

And the result – a 192-page report – is remarkably fair and comprehensive. It grinds no partisan axes. It even acknowledges the spiritual issues involved.

Avoiding an issue

The report deals with three end-of-life themes: palliative care, suicide prevention, and elder abuse. I can find fault with none of its recommendations.

Perhaps that's because the committee stick-handled very carefully around the issue of physician-assisted suicide for the terminally ill. Rather, they chose to focus on suicides in general, not just end-of-life suicides.

Canada, they noted, has some 4000 suicides a year, slightly over ten every day. Among young people, suicide is the second leading cause of death. The report explores the impact of suicide on families and communities. It recommends strategies for reducing the suicide rate, particularly among aboriginal youth.

The report emphasizes suicide prevention. The writers stress that "suicide is preventable."

To their credit, the co-chairs did not impose their own mainly evangelical leanings on Canada as a whole. At no point did they refer to human life as "sacred" – although I'm sure they would hold that conviction personally.

But given the authors' preconceptions, they probably could not have dealt with suicide as a possible last resort. Rather, they treat palliative care as an alternative to suicide.

Indeed, palliative care makes up the largest section of the report. It notes that palliative care must focus on the person, not on the treatment. That pain relief is essential, but often not adequately provided. That rural and remote areas lack the palliative care services available in urban settings.

A last resort

The report seems to assume that with adequate palliative care, terminally ill persons can continue to have an acceptable quality of life right to the end. I would agree, in most cases.

But what happens when that quality of life is not acceptable any more? When every bodily function has failed, when the person can no longer give or receive love, can no longer communicate by word or touch, but heart and lungs have not yet admitted defeat? Is living without pain still sufficient?

I've heard medical doctors say that if they were in that hopeless situation, they would rather trust a veterinarian than their own colleagues.

In the last 20 years, my wife and I have taken two dogs and four cats to a vet for euthanasia. Those animals could probably have been kept alive, if heavily sedated, for several more weeks, perhaps even months.

But would that have been an acceptable quality of life for them?

I think – although of course I cannot know – that they would rather simply fall asleep in our arms and not wake again.

We've also lost a son. Although we will never stop grieving that loss, we're grateful that his life was not artificially prolonged.

I'm not in favour of suicide. Or of euthanasia. And I sincerely hope I never reach a state where I long for either of those options. But I'm reluctant to argue that they should never, never, be considered.

If there's a weakness in this parliamentary committee's conclusions, it's their unwillingness to admit that sometimes, even with the best of palliative care, life is not worth extending any further.

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YOUR TURN

Quite a few of you thanked me for reprinting the letter to Dr Laura. I won't quote those letters. But here's some substantive input.

Freda Stewart wrote, "This phrase 'The Bible Says' makes me quickly find somewhere else to be. In a study I was part of a few years ago, Lev. 18:22 was the beginning of the passage of scripture referred to as 'a clobber passage'. We had quite a long list of these, used to clobber people over the ears [on] gender issues..."

"It all boils down, it seems to me, to translation problems. It was explained to us that one problem is the word 'te' bah' - generally translated as 'abomination'. Some current interpretations define this as referring to male Jews who are engaged in same-gender sex behavior in PAGAN temples. Apparently a more accurate translation would be 'ritually improper' or involving some form of foreign cult practice. Elsewhere in scripture, the same word is used to ban wearing of clothing made up from two materials, i.e. cotton/polyester in today's world, or having a tattoo, eating shrimp or pork, or seeding your lawn with a grass seed mix. None of the passages invoking 'te'bah' are

valid for non-Jews today. One presenter commented that this passage is grounded in the old Jewish understanding that women were less worthy than men, therefore for a man to have sex with another man 'as a woman' would insult the other man because women were property."

Steve Roney made a similar point: "There is a reason why this letter is addressed to Dr. Laura, a Jew [I understand she has since left Judaism. JT] . While it might work as an objection to Jews opposing homosexual unions, it does not apply to Christians. For Christians, the Mosaic laws of Leviticus are part of the old covenant; Jesus introduces a new covenant in which any given Mosaic law may not apply. This is notably true of the kosher dietary restrictions, for example...

"To make the writer's point in the case of Christianity, he would have to find laws that we do not follow and would not want to follow in the *New Testament*. There is indeed an express condemnation of homosexuality in the New Testament. The Christian objection to it does not rely on Mosaic law."

Isbel Gibson noted that "This morning, Richard Holloway (former Bishop of Edinburgh) was on CBC Radio's Sunday Morning, promoting his new book, 'Leaving Alexandria: a Memoir of Faith and Doubt.' At one point he said (and I paraphrase) that in religions where the pivotal events occurred thousands of years ago, believers are faced with the problem of distinguishing between the 'eternal truths' and 'time-limited beliefs' -- wrong understandings of the natural world and outdated social conventions about women, children, gays, people of colour... Insecure people freeze their religious beliefs and the social mores and scientific knowledge of the time into a big lump -- and to dispense with any part of it is catastrophic."

John Willems had a radical suggestion: "What if Jesus actually intended for us to grapple with his instructions for life, like:

Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Luke 12.33

Love your enemies and do good to them. Luke 6.35

Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Matt. 5.39

Do not worry about your life, whatever you eat or drink... Seek first the kingdom of God. Matt. 6.25, 33

Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you -- he is the greatest. Luke 9.48

"Once we have these mastered, maybe we need not grapple with [lesser instructions] because we will know the answer."

"Speaking of the double entendre [in my opening paragraph]," Lloyd Lovat asked, "is your introduction/explanation to be remembered as the time you were so irritated that you could not see straight?"

John Hatchard offered some further explorations of Leviticus 21: "[Another quaint prohibition translated into contemporary English becomes:](#)

'... if he is a hunchback or a dwarf, if an eye or his skin is diseased, or if his testicles have been damaged.' Eunuchs and the impotent are to be denied the full consolations of their faith!

"In fact, the whole chapter contains rules which, if rigorously applied, would find many of those who use the Bible so fervently in support of their views never allowed inside any church, chapel, or synagogue."

[Robert Smith commented on the same chapter of Leviticus:](#) "I, too, find myself on the verge of anger every time I write on this topic. I especially liked the bit about men not being able to approach the altar with crushed testicles. I suppose we could do as the Iranians do with virginity checks; as men enter the church we could perform an inspection to double check. You never know, they might be lying about it."

[Margaret Gilchrist shared an experience of her own:](#) "A farmer friend of mine was twitting me about the United Church of Canada accepting gays. 'When we have an animal like that I send it straight to the slaughter house,' he said to me.

"'Oh,' I replied, 'so you agree that they are born that way?'"

“He turned his back on me and never mentioned it again.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

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I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
