

Sunday March 17, 2013

We treat dogs better than people

By Jim Taylor

Our daughter's 12-year-old German Shepherd, a dog named Chance, died last Sunday.

In his final weeks, he had lost his will to live. When he could walk at all, he looked for dark corners, suitable for dying in peace.

Last Sunday, his hindquarters would no longer lift him off the floor. Our daughter, in tears, drove him to the local veterinary clinic. He died peacefully, without pain, having his magnificent head gently caressed by the person he loved most.

If I were a dog, I couldn't imagine a better way to die.

But tomorrow, lawyers for the federal government go to court to prevent people from having the same option.

They're appealing the decision of Justice Lynn Smith of the B.C. Supreme Court. She ruled on April 12 last year that the current law making assisted suicide a criminal offence was unconstitutional because it discriminated against disabled people.

Discrimination against disabled people

The case was brought to court originally by Gloria Taylor of Westbank, B.C., and two others. Taylor – no relation – had ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

Justice Smith gave the federal government a year to revise the law prohibiting assisted suicide. In the meantime, she granted Gloria Taylor an exemption – which, in the end, Taylor did not need. She died last October from infections caused by a perforated colon.

Justice Smith's 395-page ruling seems to me to boil down to this reasoning:

Suicide is not illegal in Canada. Nor is attempted suicide. Both were removed from the list of criminal offences in 1972. At the same time, the legal right of mentally competent people to refuse treatment was established.

From that, it follows that anyone may choose to end their life. But some are physically incapable of doing so – such as those in the final stages of ALS, or a number of other terminal disabilities -- unless they ask for help.

But giving help is still illegal.

Therefore, the law as it stands denies them an option open to every other Canadians.

For whose benefit?

Permission does not equal approval – that's an important distinction.

I remember a friend, a pastor, whose son developed inoperable and untreatable brain cancer. Their son asked his parents to help him commit suicide. They refused – on both legal and moral grounds -- but said they would not stop him from doing it himself.

In many jurisdictions, even that would be a crime. Failure to prevent someone from committing suicide becomes complicity, aiding and abetting the perpetrator.

Their son waited too long.

For his final months, he suffered. His parents suffered. His friends suffered.

No one benefited from keeping him alive a few months longer.

Opponents of assisted suicide claim it could open the door to abuse. I agree; it could. Vast numbers of elderly people already suffer neglect and abuse. To rid themselves of an inconvenience, greedy children could well pressure ailing parents to choose suicide.

But prohibiting suicide – with or without assistance – condemns those same people to continued abuse. I'm not convinced that preventing some unscrupulous people from exploiting an opportunity justifies forcing other people to suffer unnecessarily.

The slippery slope argument

The primary argument against permitting assisted suicide is that it could lead to much worse – euthanasia, ethnic cleansing....

It's the "slippery slope" argument – start down it, and you inevitably end up at the bottom with Nazi death camps.

But why should the slippery slope metaphor apply only to negative outcomes? Could we not equally well argue that by granting disabled people the right to determine their own destiny, we will inevitably evolve towards a more compassionate, more equitable, society?

I particularly reject the argument that only God has the right to determine one's time to die. That was, in essence, the church's rationale for centuries for refusing to bury suicides inside its cemeteries. They had offended against God's will by taking their lives into their own hands.

But we meddle in divine prerogatives constantly. We shorten lives by waging wars and poisoning the environment; we extend lives by medicine, hygiene, and nutrition.

Did the surgeons who repaired my cardiac arteries commit a sin by letting me live longer?

If we truly believed people should not be permitted to shorten their lives, we should make suicide itself a criminal offence. A mandatory death penalty might be counter-productive. But survivors could be charged with attempted murder. They did, after all, try to kill someone.

Obviously, I don't endorse any such proposal. But that, it seems to me, is the logical extension of treating suicide itself as rebellion against the divine order.

The important factor is not when people die, but how they die. Palliative care can make those final days, or months, more tolerable. But when even palliative care becomes intolerable, we need to grant humans the same opportunity to exit peacefully, calmly, surrounded by love, that we give our dogs.

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YOUR TURN

First, a word about spam. I've been getting a lot of e-mail recently, purportedly coming from me to myself. If that means that someone has burgled the mailing lists for my columns, I'm sorry. We're trying to track the origin of these spurious e-mails, so far without success.

So let me just say this – if you get any e-mail from me, or from anything labeled "softedges" or "sharpedges", that isn't either a regular column or a direct response from me to a note you've previously sent me, don't open it! Trash it!

If I choose to write to you, collectively or individually, I will try to make sure that the subject line clearly identifies my reason for writing.

Last week's column on the ways technology changes our lives, not always for the better, drew a range of responses.

Jean Hamilton's thoughts were triggered by my comments about our Volvo: "Three years ago we said goodbye to our 1977 Mercedes, which was already 'pre-owned' (God forgive the word) when we bought it, and got ourselves a 'new' 1998 Volvo, which belonged to a little old man who only drove it to church on Sundays. It is already starting to cost money. They don't make them like they used to! I wonder where the new ones with all the bells and whistles will be in 15 years?"

Jim McKean felt that my column lent itself to the faulty conviction that the government was distinct from the people: "I find it interesting that you, of all people, would fall into the common understanding that government is an entity onto itself. Perhaps you really don't think that, but your article sure conveyed that message. Then again, maybe it's just me! In today's society I am constantly reminded that people think government is like a separate corporation only out for itself. When I hear some politicians speaking I get the feeling that they too don't get who they are there for. Government is supposed to be the representatives of the people. I believe that how we as a people will find ways of doing the things that society requires will depend on turning our understanding of government around. Didn't Jesus suggest this some 2000 years ago?"

Cliff Boldt sent a comment about projected hymns – he didn't like them – and about the pervasiveness of technology: "I met a friend of mine at a local coffee shop. As I approached the door I noticed through a window that one table all had their heads bowed. Oh, I thought, they are having a bit of a prayer before eating something. Walked in and all four of them were looking down at their smart phones. Sigh."

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to: <http://www.hymnsight.ca>

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for using projected visuals in church.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look at this service. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,
Ralph Milton

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

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

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

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, www.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.
