

The cultural failing of assisted suicide



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Contemporary Canadian society is a paradox of bright and dark. We bill it as the best place on earth but we share a dark secret—the shameful truth that we’re unhappy.

There’s a superficial glamour here, especially in wealthy enclaves where the beautiful people live. Sleek and perfect homes for sleek and perfect people with slim physiques and unlined brows. We worship perfection: in body, in mind and in health.

Having abandoned the erstwhile institutions of family, faith and community, we search for elusive meaning by indulging in material and sensual pleasures. We search in all the wrong places, and our journeys end in despair.

We fear aging, ugliness and disability. We’ve created a make-believe world of make-believe people who are flawless. We elevate cosmetic practitioners, personal trainers and brain masters into new gods.

Meanwhile, the imperfect and the weak are relegated to the sidelines of society from which we carefully avert our gaze. Now we’ve found a permanent solution to the blot that they cast on our immaculate landscape.

Liberal democracies extol the virtue of individual rights which are preferable to the tyrannies of the right or the left. And rugged individualists that we are, we gleefully seize those rights while escaping any responsibility to the collective good.

Unfettered individualism demands autonomy over life and now death too. Since Bill C-14 received royal assent in 2016, we’re finally entitled to a state-sanctioned execution by doctors who administer not last rites, but a lethal injection that will speed us painlessly

on our way.

This may seem like a victory. It's not. It's a blow—perhaps the death blow—to the inherent dignity of the human being. Our contemporary collective delusion insists that suffering confers no good. But across the ages, poets, priests and physicians have witnessed the peace and even joy that is wrought from the crucible of earthly tribulation. Relationships can be transformed and brittle connections remade. Those brave enough to voice this truth are denounced as sadists.

Accepting pain as a reality doesn't mean that we fetishize suffering. But it does mean that we allow ourselves the blessed relief of yielding to the strength of others when we are weak. The Japanese concept of *amae* refers to the deeply rooted human desire to surrender to the beneficence of loved ones. It is the opposite of abandonment.

For the self-actualized among us, it means extending a hand to the hopeless. For physicians, it means being there.

Just following orders

After the Second World War, Adolph Eichmann was indicted on 15 counts, including crimes against humanity; he was sentenced to death in 1962.

But he remained unrepentant, invoking the infamous Nuremberg defense: that he was simply following orders. "I am guilty of having been obedient," he famously proclaimed. "I did not slay Jews. That is what the government did.... At that time obedience was demanded, just as in the future it will also be demanded of the subordinate."

Prescient musings, indeed, while awaiting hanging.

Doctors have sworn to do no harm. But following such orders is exactly what testy intellectuals like Amir Attaran, professor of law and medicine at the University of Ottawa, would have us do.

In a column for iPolitics, he warns us that if we “balk” at following orders from the “more thoughtful, wise Supreme Court,” we must face the legal consequences. Quite a lecture, that.

He graciously goes on to offer practical advice to the unconvinced, suggesting that those who object can “always migrate into a specialty where the subject would never come up . . . obstetrics, surgery . . . for example.” His tirade is typical of those with the luxury to pontificate high above the fray while we minions bloody our hands.

Laws come and go. They are drafted by fallible people who are influenced by the cultural mores of the day, public pressure and self-interest, but not always by universal principles which uphold the common good. If laws were irrefutably and permanently sound we wouldn't need the socio-political revolutions which have regularly punctuated the scrolls of history.

But even this revolutionary ruling is judged too restrictive by right-to-death advocates. They cite the problematic clause stipulating that death must be “reasonably foreseeable.” They decry the discrimination against the mentally ill, children and those with dementia. Couched in the noble lexicon of human rights, this law may lead to a dystopia where only the strong can live, until they too are weakened by time and fate.

Corrosive moral effect

The political decision to enshrine this individual right at the expense of the common good did not cause a cataclysmic collapse of society. Moral cowardice doesn't work that way. Instead, it is the steady erosion of the sanctity of human life which may see us sometime in the hazy future turning desperately to each other wondering how we got it so wrong. Much like those who were sickened enough to finally repeal the Sexual Sterilization Act in 1972, ending the eugenics experiment in Canada.

That's when we'll remember that no one—not doctors, not ordinary people and not learned Supreme Court jurists—has power over life and death.

It's been two years since the passage of this law. So why bother to pen this now? The sky hasn't fallen and God—for those who believe in him—hasn't struck us dead.

But it's time to reflect. It's the height of hubris to believe that this law is the final word on such a profound theme.

We haven't even begun to gauge the fall-out from physician-assisted suicide. We haven't heard from families and physicians whose struggles with this run contrary to the official party line. We haven't heeded the troubling lessons from jurisdictions like Belgium with its more liberal practice of euthanasia.

A recent case involving a patient's involuntary death at the family's request has worried Belgian bioethicist Willem Lemmens of the University of Antwerp. He warns that doctors are:

“Testifying to the moral pressure they are experiencing. Since euthanasia is increasingly perceived by the general public as a right over the death of an individual and family members, the practitioners' therapeutic freedom and conscience are actually being put to the test.”

Written by Dr. Ferrukh Faruqui on June 18, 2018 for [The Medical Post](#)
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Sandra Martin, the author of *A Good Death: Making the Most of Our Final Choices*, offered her own perspective in the *Globe and Mail* in January 2018. She writes that “sidestepping the intimacy of death has not been so easy” since the law was passed, but she continues to lament a cruelly restrictive legislation which overlooks the needs of mature minors and the mentally ill. Tellingly, she fails to consider potential pitfalls or abuses of the law. I'm not sure if this is wilful blindness or an authentic, but misguided, conviction that physician-assisted death is a milestone on our way to a brave new world.

While I would quibble with her claim that it is our human right to choose “the manner and timing of our death,” she does make the irrefutable case that we

physicians cannot abandon our patients. The physician was traditionally there from birth to death but we've shirked these responsibilities. Modern medicine has morphed into an unwieldy beast. Family doctors must return to the beating heart of medicine by embracing all that is messy from the joy of the birthing floor to the grief of the deathbed.

Being there is the greatest gift of all.

While we chase never-ending personal rights, our societies have become bitter places devoid of human connection. The proud individualist perched atop his entitlements is the loneliest person in the loneliest place on earth. And in a world where others are merely hurdles in our race to independence the only logical outcome is despair.

The ultimate human right, as defined by Martin et al, is a power that once was held only by a deity or nature. And this taking of heaven by storm, the supernal act that banished Lucifer to earth, is an exercise in the folly of supposing ourselves gods.

In our troubled times, the last remaining unmentionable is our own vulnerability. Now that we've anatomized sex, politics and race, we're left with the shame of our innate fragility.

Afraid to seek help, we cede our human need for comfort. Wrapped in a shroud of false dignity, we shut our eyes to the dark and jump, to hurtle alone into the abyss.

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