

When It's Time to Let Go: The case of Terri Schiavo

Dr. Chuck McGowen

Regardless of which side any of us took in the controversy over discontinuing nutrition and hydration in the case of Terri Schiavo there are certain absolutes that one must consider in that kind of decision making; all emotion aside. Some day one of us may be placed in the same situation, for our own cause or that of one that we love.

From all accounts, that unfortunate person was doomed to a life of total dependance on others for her physical existence. In 1990 she had become totally disabled due to a ventricular arrhythmia (called a heart attack by the media) due to a potassium imbalance (hypokalemia) which was induced by her eating disorder (anorexia nervosa). It was the same condition that ultimately resulted in the death of the famous, popular vocalist Karen Carpenter. Terri's ventricular arrhythmia (an erratic heart beat) caused an irreversible brain damage secondary to hypoxemia. In essence the brain was deprived of a vital supply of oxygen for too long a time for it to survive and function normally. That occurred 15 years ago and Terri has been confined to a hospital, nursing home or hospice bed ever since.

Reportedly, Teri was a Christian and so are her parents. That sets certain other absolutes in motion which should have provided great comfort to those who love her. Whether she died at age 35 or lived on life support systems to age 95 she would ultimately spend eternity in heaven. That is the eternal perspective that I personally think was missing here.

The media was focused entirely on the emotions of the family, the legality of “pulling” the plug and who it was that had the legal responsibility for making that decision. Legally, the person who is going to leave this earth (In this case Terri) has the first and foremost legal right to decide when to have life sustaining procedures stopped or not instituted in the first place. Ideally one makes that decision ahead of time by having a “living will” drawn up by an attorney. The other option is having a “Do Not Resuscitate” (DNR) order placed on one’s chart when one enters the hospital for an illness that one has been told is terminal. Allegedly, according to her husband, Terri had expressed such concerns long ago; unfortunately they were never documented.

The next person that has the legal authority over these life and death issues is one’s spouse. When two are married, in the eyes of God they become one. When a bride is presented for marriage at the alter, the minister asks, “Who giveth this woman to this man?” The answer typically comes from the father who says, “Her mother and I.” Thus by giving that daughter to that man, a parent has relinquished all but an advisory capacity to the daughter’s spouse in all cases of Christian marriage. Furthermore that advice should come only upon the request of both parties in the marriage union. One may argue about Teri’s husband’s motives here, but he was still her husband.

There were many Christians and Christian organizations that took up the cause in this battle, but whose cause were they defending? Certainly not Teri’s. Every Christian knows that she is better off in Heaven with her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. She is no longer confined to a hospital bed, being turned every hour to prevent bed sores, having a rubber tube run through her nose into her stomach, having to wear a catheter to drain the urine from her bladder. She has been healed of her brain death and has been given a joyous, peaceful life eternal in the loving presence of believers from all time, angels and

out triune God. Her soul entered heaven at the very moment of her physical demise. Those persons who sought to reverse the order to discontinue life sustaining nourishment were thinking only of the parents, who themselves were not considering the eternal benefit of letting their daughter go. Christian based organizations like Focus on the Family were also looking at the larger picture of euthanasia in general. However, they forget, or may not have known, that not all euthanasia is bad euthanasia.

Active euthanasia is the act of administering a lethal substance (intravenous air, a large dose of insulin, potassium chloride, carbon monoxide, etc) to a person whose life is hanging in the balance. That is neither morally sound nor legal in the United States of America it's murder.

Physician assisted suicide (ala Jack Kavorkian), is also illegal in most states and immoral in all cases. In that situation a physician starts an IV, draws up the lethal substance to be injected, hands it to the patient and stands by while the person who wishes to die administers the fatal substance himself.

Passive euthanasia is another matter all together. It is the basis of the living will. It simply means that a person chooses to disallow any unusual means to keep one alive once all hope is lost. It may mean DNR if one quits breathing or one's heart stops. It may mean that one chooses not to have antibiotics or other drugs administered when one is near death from terminal cancer and pneumonia or other infection has developed. It may mean that one does not wish to have one's blood pressure raised if shock ensues in a terminal state. It can also mean that one does not wish to have an endotracheal tube and ventilator installed if breathing becomes labored or a feeding tube inserted if one can no longer eat in one's terminal state.

A subset of the category of passive euthanasia is also available and is called "Patient Refusal of Nutrition and Hydration." That means that the terminally ill person has decided to speed the inevitable process of dying by refusing to eat or drink and further that no intravenous or tube supplements are to be given. In such cases the person is sedated for their comfort and death comes more swiftly. The process is not painful, and in fact is less painful because of the release of endorphin by the brain when one is deprived of food and water. Those endorphins act like internal sedatives and narcotics, rendering comfort until physical death has come. In Teri's case, her father chronicled her progress right up to the end, and when interviewed he never indicated that Teri appeared to be suffering; because she wasn't.

If I as a Christian ask to have a life support system discontinued when I know that my case or that of a loved one is hopeless, I have not furthered the cause of active euthanasia nor physician assisted suicide. Those means are still illegal and immoral. I believe that the Christians seeking the intervention of Florida governor Jeb Bush, the Florida state and US legislatures, the federal and supreme courts, and other legal authorities were misinformed about the consequences of pulling the plug and had either forgotten or had never considered the eternal perspective in Teri's case and her best eternal interests.

The most relevant Scripture to be recalled in all of this debate is found in the apostle Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. Therein he wrote, *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* (II CORINTHIANS 4:16-18)