
A MATTER OF CHOICE
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FOR
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PARLIAMENTARY CENTRE BLOCK

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Thank you for the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you this afternoon on a subject of deep – and mutual – concern. You have signaled by your presence at this luncheon that your mind is open to the perspective of Canada’s disability rights community on the question of euthanasia and assisted suicide, and I thank you for that. You are few among many. At this critical time in our history, too many of our legislators, it seems, have made up their minds, have dismissed our warnings as exaggerated, our positions as marginal.

To bring as much clarity as I can to the subject in 5 minutes, I’m going to focus on three straightforward questions:

1. Who are we?
2. What do we want?
3. What does this require of you?

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<http://fragileandwild.com/supplementals/end-of-life/>

WHO ARE WE?

I can assure you, knowing as I do the roster of disability rights leaders who are present at this luncheon, that you are in good hands.

What I believe bears emphasis about this group is that we are no strangers to the democratic process. In the positions that we articulate, and the strategies that we pursue, we are accountable – directly accountable – to hundreds of thousands of Canadians with disabilities and their families. Through our affiliations with, for example, the Council of Canadians with Disabilities and the Canadian Association for Community Living, we speak today with the authority of a social movement that has its roots in the most fundamental human quest – the quest for justice, fairness and decent conditions of life.

You know us. We are nation builders. We are the measure of this country's constitutional honour. We are the embodiment of human dignity and resilience. Do not take our cautions on this subject lightly. Do not allow your colleagues to relegate our concerns to the margins of this country's governance.

WHAT DO WE WANT?

We want you to understand something vitally important about human dignity. We want you to understand what dignity is, and what it is not.

Look around you. You are in the company of people like myself, whose naked bodies are handled daily by persons who love us, or persons employed by us, or perfect strangers with skills and capacities we ourselves lack. You are in the company of people who like myself, consider immobility, incontinence, impairment and dependence to be routine conditions of life. You are in the company of people who like myself, cannot bathe or breathe or swallow or feed without the aid of some device.

Yet do you not see dignity all around you? Of course you do. For here we are in the Centre Block of our national house of Parliament, being heard. No one would argue that our lives are undignified because of whatever we had to do to get here this afternoon.

We have disabilities. And we have dignity. But please note this: we are not exceptional. Dignity does not spring from some extraordinary fortress of determination encoded within us. No, dignity doesn't work like that. Dignity is fragile and ephemeral.

Look sideways at me as we pass in the corridor, then quickly avert your eyes in a gesture I know too well, a turning away from all of the perceived misfortunes of my predicament, and suddenly, my dignity will be shattered.

See me as anything but your equal in human worth, and at that moment, in that glance, with that sorrowful sigh, you have robbed me of dignity. Speak of willful death as a reasonable choice for persons afflicted with the presumed indignity of diapers and feeding tubes, and my dignity is undermined. This is not some trivial conceit. For my dignity is utterly bound up with your respect for my way of life. It is not abstract, and it is not a solitary attribute. Dignity is social.

It doesn't come from inside of me. *It comes from you, in relation to me.*

WHAT DOES THIS REQUIRE OF YOU, IN THE CONTEXT OF A DISCUSSION OF EUTHANASIA AND ASSISTED SUICIDE?

The answer – moral courage and leadership. As legislators, your decision on the issue of assisted suicide must be grounded not in fear, but in truth and principle.

As lawmakers, it is your moral duty to consider the broad public implications of social policy. In the context of assisted suicide, this means, for example, that you must have knowledge of our eugenic past and the ease with which human lives have been sacrificed under the cloak of compassion.

Even more importantly, leadership demands that you must resist the seductive rhetoric of soundbite argument. You know those soundbites. We all do. The argument that this is a simple issue of choice. **It is not.** The argument that we should do for loved ones what we do for sick animals. **We should not.** The argument that safeguards work. **They do not.** Give us more than five minutes of your time, and we will explain why. Seek us out, or sit down alone in the place where truth can find you, and apply every cell of your human intellect to a rigorous examination of the preposterous notion that death is noble but

dying is not¹. Or that our physical and cognitive powers are the source of our human dignity.

Make no mistake. There *is* an issue of choice at the heart of this debate. But it is not an issue of privileging some individuals with a greater range of choices regarding the precise time and manner of their death. Rather, it is an issue of choosing between competing visions of our social fabric. Shall we uncritically submit to the voracious demands of individual liberty no matter what the social cost? Or shall we agree that there are limits to individual freedom, limits that serve all of us when we are vulnerable and in decline? Let us seize this moment in our nation's history to affirm that all states of living are inherently dignified and worthy of our utmost respect.

Do the hard work. Speak the hard truth. Take the decision that makes us better.

That is what leaders do. We ask nothing less.

¹ I regret that my abbreviated phrasing of this point in the delivered text may have been unclear. By "dying", I am not referring to the picturesque staging of suicides idealized in *Death with Dignity* campaigns. Instead, when I speak of the ennoblement of dying, I refer to the inexorable attenuations of the body's powers at the end of life. These processes may be messy and frightening, but they must not be construed as inherently undignified. The argument that dignity is preserved by measures that pre-empt these processes of dying (to advance directly to death), robs us all of the courage, conviction and clarity that must thread together to form the fine weave of compassion at end of life.