

The Meaning of Dignity: A Response to Bishop Desmond Tutu

In his article of October 9, "Revere the sanctity of life but not at all costs", Bishop Desmond Tutu emphasizes the importance of language on the sensitive issue of medically assisted dying. In the spirit of advancing a respectful dialogue, I must urge His Excellency to consider the deeper meanings of dignity, and how our experience of human dignity leads disabled Canadians to a very different conclusion about end-of-life interventions.

Last week I had the opportunity to share my thoughts with a small group of parliamentarians on the subject of medically assisted dying.

I was not alone. Several friends and colleagues from the disability rights community were each given five minutes to present an argument against amending the criminal code to sanction medically assisted dying.

One spoke about the discriminatory implication of offering state-sanctioned assistance not for everyone, but only for persons who are frail, very ill, or seriously disabled. Another presented a chilling account of the exponential 'creep' of euthanasia in permissive jurisdictions.

Another spoke from personal experience, about the time someone said to him, "I don't know how you do it, I'd rather be dead than in a wheelchair." There were nods of recognition around the room. This is a common experience.

I spoke about dignity. I spoke about dignity because the suffering that medically assisted dying is said to alleviate most often correlates with loss of dignity.

I spoke about dignity because I don't believe that anyone should take a position on medically assisted dying without first understanding what dignity is, and what it is not.

I say this as a person whose naked body is handled daily by persons who love me, or persons employed by me, or perfect strangers with skills and capacities I myself lack. I say this as a person who considers immobility,

incontinence, impairment and dependence to be routine conditions of life. I say this as a person who cannot bathe or breathe or swallow or feed without the aid of some device.

No one should argue that my life is undignified because of whatever tubes I had to be hooked up to this morning before I could settle down to write these words. The same, I submit, should be said of Craig Schonegevel.

Dignity does not spring from some extraordinary fortress of determination encoded within us. Dignity doesn't work like that. Dignity is fragile and ephemeral.

Allow yourself to be consumed by 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 physical incapacity, 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 others, always, in relation to me.

In our opposition to legislative amendments that would permit medical assistance to end one's own life, disabled citizens are seeking to advance a vital truth, and one that is imperative for our fellow citizens to embrace as well. That fundamental truth is that our physical and cognitive powers are *not* the source of human dignity. As these powers attenuate, human life does *not* lose its inherent value.

At the heart of this debate, we must choose 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.

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