

# Solidarity, death and other acts of courage – shifting the "aid in dying" conversation\*

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With Québec's Bill 52 in legislative limbo, as the tumult of debate recedes into a momentary quiet, perhaps there is time for us to hear ourselves think. As advocates on both sides of this debate, we should listen for the overtones that linger from so much talk of "aid in dying".

Resonating darkly from the fading cacophony is one story about dying – not the only story, but one that has gripped us firmly. It is a story of indignity and relentless decline, a ruthless assault upon the selves we once were. In the shadow of this story, greater fear is provoked by dying than by death itself. Little wonder that "aid in dying" offers to forgo the dying process, advancing directly to death.

Perhaps we have chosen this particular story about dying because of certain "habits of heart" – certain reflexive assumptions about dignity and autonomy. And perhaps those convictions warrant an honest reconsideration.

Is human dignity truly bound up with the mechanics of personal hygiene? Or rather is dignity more about the intricate chemistry of how we are held in care and regard by those who stand near. Is autonomy really the blunt 'carte blanche' of individual will? Or is it rather the pulsing engine of our flourishing, the warrior's heart, hell-bent on its defence of a vital, expressive, even if diminishing, self.

That is what people with long-standing disabilities can be heard saying, when courts and media pause to listen.

The debilitations of disability shame and stigma are layered like paint upon the canvas of our lives. Unlike the chorus of esteem that elevates certain embodied states, however frightful – birthing comes to mind – a drone of pity and repugnance compels retreat from disability. Yet Canadians with disabilities hold

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fast to an account of our lives as utterly dignified and richly interdependent. From the largest and most representative organizations giving political voice to disabled citizens and our families, have come a persistent and dire warning that *when we permit the killing of some persons, in some circumstances, by other persons, we set in motion an irreversible unraveling of our delicate social fabric.*

This caution – all but muffled by the trumpeting of an age of assisted death – must be accorded a fairer and more fulsome hearing. For as long as our moral impulses equate incapacity with indignity there is no opening for a true embrace of disability. And if we cannot embrace disability, we will flee the disablements of dying by any means, invoking the language of rights to justify the termination of life.

Heaven help us if the most critical moral issue of our generation is to be decided on the footings of a thin logic of fear.

It is natural to fear dying, just as it is natural to fear birthing. Fear is not the problem. But when fear goes public, when the fear of one is taken up by the many, the result is a righteous denouncement of that which threatens us. We have seen the cycle played out to horrific end far too often.

We who inhabit bodies that cannot move, swallow, bathe or speak at will may or may not be endangered by formulations of "aid in dying" such as those encoded in Bill 52. But regardless of our place in hierarchies of privilege, we will all, without fail, feel the blunt trauma of further denouncement.

Denouncement's polar opposite is solidarity. When we choose to respond to dying with steady, compassionate attention, when we embrace the fearful but not the fear, we overcome our primal instincts of fight or flight. In this embrace of the frailties and the possibilities in ourselves and in others, we rise to solidarity.

That is what we learned to do in relation to childbirth. Somehow, by the power of how we value and understand birthing, women find within themselves a conviction that trounces fear. Perhaps, just as we join with midwives in our embrace of birthing, we can join with palliative medicine to embrace dying in ways that engender courage, respect, even awe.

Along the way, we may find ourselves ready for a radical reimagining of equality that better accords with the fragility of embodied human life.