

Nov 14,2015 St Monica's Parish

Panel Presentation on Palliative Care: Our response to Euthanasia "Mercy Killing"  
/Dying with Dignity by Jean Albert RN. BScN.

We call it "mercy killing" or "death with dignity". These are the terms people use to label the deliberate ending of someone's life. Euthanasia. Assisted suicide.  
How did we get here? To this place, which deals with the most vulnerable –the sick –the dying in our society – in this expedient way.

While I am by no means an expert, my interest in the topics of loss and grief, my experience as a nurse and my growth as a woman of faith, helped me compile a few ponderings to offer for your consideration this morning.

I think we have to start by looking at a bigger context:

The context of how our society views life and how our society views death:

LIFE:

- Our western society encourages us to think that we are the star of the show (we probably have a selfie to prove it)  
Me, myself and I are what count. I "deserve" to get what I want when I want it. This is very ego based. It means that anything that makes me feel uncomfortable, that invites me to recognize that in fact, I am a fragile human being-is not to be tolerated.
- I am also very conscious of how over time we have commodified our bodies. It has become an *object* that can be bought and sold .It can be changed to look younger with a little help from cosmetic companies or plastic surgeons.  
There is a woman in NY who paid \$3000 to have a platinum heart implanted in her-eye -as jewellery... She thought it would make her unique. In fact women have already had this procedure done in LA & in Europe.
- Sherry Turkle a psychologist and professor working at MIT, has noted an empathy gap in college students who grew up with cell phones. Our obsession with our mobile devices may be affecting our ability to really connect to the people in front of us.

Paradoxically we live in a death obsessed and yet a death denying society:

- Our TV shows and movies get more graphic and gruesome with every passing year as the god of ratings influence what is shown as entertainment on our TV screens.

After a while we are inured to the horror-to the death-its not real.  
Except it is real because many people across our world are experiencing ...what we watch for entertainment.

- In our death denying society nobody dies anymore-we pass on, pass away, push up daisies or are late. The late Johan Smith.

All of this adds up to have us believing that we should control everything-including life and death. And we should control it now-before it inconveniences me -or the significant people in my life.

We forget that our choices have consequences because...we are all connected.

Our Christian faith has a different perspective.

Our faith tradition, scriptures, theologians and mystics have grappled with the mystery of life. The mystery of death ...and the mystery of suffering ...for hundreds of years-and so they remind us that while life, death and suffering often are incomprehensible -they are not without ultimate value and meaning.

- We did not create ourselves. We were created by a loving God and our birth was a unique gift to the world. (No platinum heart implants in our eyes-necessary!)  
As such, I do not own my life but am called to engage in loving stewardship over this gift.
- “ Dignity is not determined by physical or mental health, by autonomy or by usefulness to society. Human dignity is founded on the inherent worth of each human person, which can never be taken away by external factors or circumstances. The simple fact of being human gives us a dignity which no other living beings possess.
- Palliative care provides a dignified death by giving patients the pain management and the social, emotional and spiritual support they require to live a good death with courage. Giving this support, of course, takes time and perseverance “ 1
- Loving stewardship over our lives necessitates patience and a willingness to engage with the pain and sorrows that fall into each life. Henri Nouwen, in his book -In Memoriam, says : “ In a society which is more inclined to help you hide your pain then grow through it, it is necessary to make a very conscious effort to mourn” 2
- This is one of the gifts of palliative care—the opportunity to make sense of ones life and ones death...and to do so supported by professionals willing to offer the patient *radical presence*. In palliative care we journey with our patients and their loved ones -offering physical, emotional and spiritual support. No one is a burden.

This is really what mercy is about. Philip Chircop SJ says: “Mercy doesn’t eliminate all suffering but responds to it. It is not a cure but a connection. I am here for you. It is the capacity to enter the chaos(pain) of the other. To let you know that you are safe in the dark. I will stay with you.

The Semetic or Hb word for mercy *Rahim* also means *womb*. Mercy becomes a womb space for brokenness within me and a welcoming space for those who come to us. “3

My experience of working with palliative patients has been like walking on sacred ground. Like midwifing people home to God.

Just like being with a woman in labour-I have witnessed the struggle in the transitioning process of the dying person .....but I have also seen that there is often lots of beauty, love, joy and laughter.

People often let the facades drop as they grapple with the meaning of their life. The gift of life and loving is appreciated in new and deeper ways.

I once walked into the room of a dying pt in the morning and said to him-“How are you doing this morning?” He said to me-“I’m great!” “O ya? How come you are great this morning?” His reply: “I woke up this morning”

He taught me to be grateful for waking up in the morning.

“Mercy is not pity, which is placing ourselves above others. Putting ourselves on a pedestal and looking down. Mercy is about equals. A circle of compassion. [Compassion means –to suffer with} It is about me needing You as much as you needing ME. We need one another.

“Without mercy we have little chance of becoming.” 3

I have been privileged to witness a miracle that happens with some palliative patients. They look like they are declining and death could occur at any moment-they are in a different interior space-but then there is a burst of energy and they wake up and are coherent for a little bit of time. They may exchange significant words with their loved ones. Sometimes words of love and forgiveness-which they have finally been able to come to -after years of bitterness. Maybe eat bites of a favourite food item and really enjoy it-even sit up in a chair one last time.

Often they have told me about the people they are encountering in their dreams-people they have loved and have predeceased them. One woman told me about seeing the face of God and her mother coming to get her.

This is sacred time, a final gift from the dying to families, friends and those of us privileged enough to journey with them.

Ultimately, palliative care is truly about honouring life as we journey with the one who is on their way to New Life.

References:

1. Catholic Organization for Life and the Family ([www.colf.ca](http://www.colf.ca))

*Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide: Why Not? – Quick Answers to Common Questions*

2. Nouwen, H. In Memoriam Ave Maria Press 1980 pg 58

3. Beatitudes retreat August 2015. Philip Chircop SJ