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Terri Schiavo-Enduring Questions, Part One

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Tuesday, March 29, 2005

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First, what does this mean for the culture? Without doubt, the case of Terri Schiavo has exposed a massive moral cleavage in American culture. The "culture war" that has divided America over the last four decades will inevitably frame how issues of life and death are settled in law, medicine, and moral habit.

The case of Terri Schiavo has revealed that Americans hold to at least two extremely divergent views of human life and human nature. Those who believe that human life is a sacred gift, granted by the Creator, believe that life must be honored, respected, and protected as a moral mandate. A sanctity of life ethic underlies the pro-life movement's immediate recognition that the case of Terri Schiavo represents a crucial challenge to the dignity of human life at every age and in every condition.

Those who believe that human life is a beneficent accident that occurred in an undesigned, naturalistic universe will see humanity as, in its crucial definitions, essentially negotiable and indeterminate.

Though some would like to argue for a middle ground between these two understandings and worldviews, these leading positions essentially encompass every other position. In the end, human life is either a gift to be defended or a reality to be negotiated.

Writing in The New York Times, David Brooks argues that the national debate over Terri Schiavo comes down to a battle between "social conservatives" and "social liberals." As Brooks sees it, "The core belief that social conservatives bring to cases like Terri Schiavo's is that the value of each individual life is intrinsic. The value of a life doesn't depend upon what a person can physically do, experience or achieve. The life of a comatose person or a fetus has the same dignity and worth as the life of a fully functioning adult."

The social liberals argue for the quality of life as the basic issue. "They don't emphasize the bright line between life and death; they describe a continuum between a fully lived life and a life that, by the sort of incapacity Terri Schiavo has suffered, is mere existence."

Brooks goes on to argue that the strength of the conservative case is the argument “that if we make distinctions about the value of different lives, if we downgrade those who are physically alive but mentally incapacitated, if we say that some people can be more easily moved toward death than others, then the strong will prey upon the helpless, and the dignity of all our lives will be diminished.” In opposition, the liberals “warn against vitalism, the elevation of physical existence over other values. They say it is up to each individual or family to draw their own line to define when life passes to mere existence.”

Brooks faults the conservatives for failing to recognize that “in these days of advanced medical technology, it is hard to ignore distinctions between different modes of living.” He goes on to warn, “In some hospital rooms, there are people living forms of existence that upon direct contact do seem even worse than death.”

As for the social liberals, Brooks argues: “The central weakness of the liberal case is that it is morally thin. Once you say that it is up to individuals or families to draw their own lines separating life from existence, and reasonable people will differ, then you are taking a fundamental issue out of the realm of morality and into the realm of relativism and mere taste. You are saying, as liberals do say, that society should be neutral and allow people to make their own choices. You are saying, as liberals do say, that we should be tolerant and nonjudgmental toward people who make different choices. What begins as an appealing notion—that life and death are joined by a continuum—becomes vapid mush, because we are all invited to punt when it comes time to do the hard job of standing up for common principles, arguing right and wrong, and judging those who make bad decisions.”

In the end, Brooks himself punts, arguing that Terri Schiavo’s case represents “the clash of two serious but flawed arguments.” Describing himself as agonized, Brooks accepts a form of moral defeat. “The socially conservative argument has tremendous force, but doesn’t accord with reality we see when we walk through a hospice. The socially liberal argument is pragmatic, but lacks moral force.”

We must do better than this. Indeed, Brooks’ own analysis points toward the greater danger of the liberal position. Taken alone, the 20th century and its moral horrors should serve as ample warning that the left’s “pragmatic” approach eventually leads to moral catastrophe—and usually sooner than later.

Howard Kurtz, staff writer for The Washington Post, argues that Terri Schiavo’s case, “which has dragged on for 15 years, is now a full-fledged chapter in the culture wars.” On the one hand, he cites Andrew Sullivan, a libertarian outraged by efforts to prolong Terri Schiavo’s life, as criticizing efforts by the Congress and President Bush to intervene in Terri’s case. Sullivan argues that those who would reinsert Terri Schiavo’s feeding tube are moral zealots who would now use state power to enforce their own conservative agenda. Sullivan criticizes conservative commentator Fred Barnes for saying that “there is an arguable federalism issue: whether taking the issue out of a state’s jurisdiction is constitutional. But it pales in comparison with the moral issue.” Sullivan responds, “You can’t have a clearer statement of the fact that the religious right morality trumps constitutional due process. Of course it does. The religious right recognizes one ultimate authority: their view of God.” Sullivan, a well-known advocate for same-sex marriage, is now a fervent defender of a states’ rights agenda. His argument that “moral” issues should not trump federalism, if taken seriously, would have meant the continuation of slavery.

On the other hand, Kurtz also cites Wall Street Journal columnist Peggy Noonan as representing the conservative argument for reinserting Terri Schiavo’s feeding tube. “I do not understand the emotionalism of the pull-the-tube people,” Noonan explains. “What is driving their engagement? Is it because they are compassionate, and their hearts bleed with the thought that Mrs. Schiavo suffers? But throughout this case no one has testified that she is in persistent pain, as those with terminal cancer are.” Noonan went on to ask, “Why are they so committed to this woman’s death?” She answers her own question: “They seem to have fallen half in love with death.”

These examples should be sufficient evidence that America is now torn between two rival views of human life and human dignity. Our future as a nation and as a civilization will depend upon which view gains the ascendancy.

Second, what does this mean for the future? Every significant moral precedent leads to the formation of new moral habits and the framing of new moral issues. By now, we should all realize that the case of Terri Schiavo is, in its essence, neither unprecedented nor uncommon. Decisions about life and death are being made in hospices, hospitals, and courtrooms all over America. Where is all this headed? The signs are ominous.

A poll released on March 27 by TIME magazine indicates that over 60 percent of Americans agree or strongly agree with the decision to remove Terri Schiavo's feeding tube. Support for ending her life was indicated by 53 percent of those who identified themselves as "evangelical Christians." An equal percentage of those who identified as Republicans also supported ending Terri's life. A week earlier, an ABC News poll found that 63 percent of those surveyed supported the ending of Terri's feeding and hydration. According to this poll, 54 percent of those who identified as "conservatives" supported the decision to remove the feeding tube.

Clearly, a majority of Americans appear to accept a "quality of life" argument. Human life and human dignity are now to be redefined and renegotiated in light of prevailing standards of what would constitute an acceptable quality of life. Increasingly, Americans express a willingness to define such an acceptable quality for themselves and their loved ones. The American quest for health, pleasure, and self-determination has now produced a generation that would define autonomy in terms of a right to define life and death in terms of personal preferences and individual choices.

Andrew Kohut, President of the Pew Research Center, argues that demography is a major factor in this cultural shift. Writing in the March 23, 2005 edition of *The New York Times*, Kohut explained, "As the electorate ages and baby boomers further dominate the political discussion, they will tend to push public opinion in the direction that reflects their own situations. Remember, *Roe v. Wade* was handed down in the 1970's, when this same generation was focused on procreation. Now it is struggling with aging, healthcare, and end-of-life questions. As a consequence, these issues are as likely to evoke intense beliefs on both sides of the issue, not just on the conservative side."

As Kohut sees it, Christian conservatives are the major force arguing for a defense of human life in contrast to quality of life arguments. He appears to warn that this is a losing strategy, because the general trend of public opinion is running in the opposite direction. As he explains, "Potentially arrayed against conservatives are elderly people, who vote heavily, as well as baby boomers, who always have numbers on their side. These voters, increasingly concerned about these issues in their own lives, may well be wary of political constraints on the tough choices they or their families may face."

Without doubt, Kohut has identified a major factor in the cultural debate over issues of life and death. Beyond this, he is probably correct in his assessment that conservatives are running against a prevailing tide of public opinion.

End of life issues are essentially connected to controversies ranging from embryonic stem-cell research to abortion, germ-line therapies, eugenics and human cloning. On issue after issue, the American public seems to be shifting into a worldview based in utilitarianism and a radical vision of individual autonomy.

In the final analysis, these developments should serve to awaken the Christian church to its responsibility to speak on behalf of those who have no voice, to defend human life at every age and in every condition, and to confront the Culture of Death with courage. We must engage these issues, armed with the full measure of Christian conviction and a framework of responsible public argument. There is no time to waste.

