

Euthanasia foes are the ones who "play God"

By Goldwin Emerson
gandjemerson@rogers.com
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Since the death of Sue Rodriguez over fourteen years ago, conversations about euthanasia have been more frequent. According to polls done at the time of her death, in February 1994, over seventy per cent of Canadians indicated they favoured euthanasia under carefully controlled conditions.

For me, conversations about euthanasia often follow a pattern beginning with guarded dialogue which is meant to convey the idea that both participants are broad-minded and open in their stance. As the discussion proceeds, each participant gently urges the other to commit to a definitive position so that both can know how the other thinks.

The next stage involves some impatience, at least on my part, as I plunge wholeheartedly into the issue and state my pro-euthanasia stance. My counterpart now responds with a polite but more adversarial tone and reveals the position she/he held all along, but has waited until now to state. Then there is a flurry of excited exchanges put forth by both of us in a desperate attempt to win the other person over. After these heightened discussions comes a moment of quiet reflection when both sides politely convey the impression that they are giving full consideration to the opponent's arguments.

Then from my adversary comes a final compelling point designed to clinch the argument and put the whole matter to rest. My opponent looks at me carefully to ensure eye to eye contact and sternly says, "We must not play God in these matters. God gives life and it's up to God to decide when life is to end." I am taken a little off guard by my adversary's confidence in this final thrust and I wonder how my opponent knows what God thinks on these matters. How does my counterpart determine the point at which God decides that a patient should die or continue life on a medical support system? If my adversary is a religious fundamentalist, he or she may support death by capital punishment or even by holy war, but not by the withdrawal of heroic medical intervention, such as in the case of the comatose, Terri Schiavo. In United States Terri Schiavo was finally taken off life support in March 2005 after fourteen appeals and five Supreme Court decisions which backed up the original court decision given in 1998 and approved by her husband... a decision which found that she was in a persistent vegetative state I have even encountered

the argument that it is a benefit to suffer pain during a prolonged terminal illness since this is one of God's ways of strengthening character and of preparing oneself for a blissful eternity.

In the above arguments, it seems to me that it is my anti-euthanasia adversary who claims expertise on how God thinks. In short, it is my opponent more than I who has assumed the role of "playing God."

Of course, there are important reasons for proceeding with caution on the issue of euthanasia. I too want to be assured that candidates considered for euthanasia are truly terminally ill patients and without medical hope according to the best and most current knowledge. I want to know that the patient is freely choosing death rather than choosing prolonged and painful illness. I recognise that built-in safe guards are required in order to assure that euthanasia is what the patient really desires over an extended period of time. But in these difficult decisions, it is the patient and her or his doctor who can best decide, and not relatives or "friends" or others who might stand to gain financially. In the end, it is of little value for organised religion, the legal system, my anti-euthanasia opponent, or myself, to "play God" in these serious decisions.

