

Despair errs because of one thought: Life is worth living

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Q. Is assisted suicide OK? Why should people needlessly suffer?

A. The only thing that makes a story worth telling is the underlying and fundamental certainty that life is worth living.

Think of any great story. Every one of them is built upon this premise. If they weren't, there is no real conflict; instead of fighting courageously when one encounters overwhelming odds or faces an impossible situation, the characters would simply die. The reasonable thing would actually be to take matters into one's own hands and end one's life. If they're going to die eventually, why not simply face death on one's own terms?

Because life is worth living.

As I wrote this, a 29-year-old woman named Brittany Maynard was preparing to die on Nov. 1. She planned to end her own life by self-administering a lethal dose of medication. Brittany has terminal cancer and experiences pain and suffering on a moment-to-moment basis. Because of this, she has moved from her home state of California to Oregon so that she will be legally allowed to kill herself.

The public response is initially one of sympathy.

We see this beautiful young woman and hear about her wedding and learn of her pain, and we feel compassion. We feel so sorry for this woman whose life has been entirely disrupted. In doing this, we are being human. It is human for us to feel such compassion for Brittany (and anyone else in pain). And it is natural that we don't want her to suffer any more. If there is a way that her pain can be taken away, wouldn't that be better than for her to needlessly endure?

But to agree that ending her life is the solution is decidedly un-human.

There is something in us that recognizes that human suffering, while evil, is worth it. We intrinsically know that life is worth living. When we see someone endure suffering heroically, even if it costs them everything, we see human dignity in action. It is the reason why we cheer for those who are willing to face overwhelming odds. It is the reason we love heroes: They remind us that life is worth fighting for. They remind us that there is more to this life.

As Christians, we know that suffering is not the worst thing. Yes, if all there is in this universe is the material world (no soul, no spirit, no God), then the worst possible evil is suffering. But we know that there is more to this life than what we can immediately see.

Dignity is not found in taking one's own life, but in facing the challenge well. Compassion is not helping another person to end their own life but in caring for them in their weakness and pain.

Years ago, I came upon the story of an Italian teenager named Chiara Badano; she was declared "Blessed" in 2010. Like Brittany, she had been diagnosed with terminal cancer.

In 1988, when she was only 17, the advancement of her bone cancer left her paralyzed and in bed. She had been an athlete and loved to dance, but for two years, she could hardly move. Her cancer left her in

almost constant agony, but she refused to take any painkillers. She said that they made it more difficult for her to focus, and “there’s only one thing I can do now: to offer my suffering to Jesus because I want to share as much as possible in his sufferings on the cross.”

Blessed Chiara faced the last years and months and moments of her life with the confidence that her suffering was not meaningless. She was confident that her life was not meaningless. Chiara had encountered the person of Jesus Christ, and in discovering the love of God, her life was transformed.

Her life was not pointless, and her illness was not merely evil. It had the ability to draw her even more deeply into life and into the mission of God himself. She had met the God who entered deeply into human suffering and had redeemed it. Jesus has given human suffering a power and a purpose. Jesus reveals that all life, even the most painful and broken life, has the ability to make a difference in this world.

When Blessed Chiara had given away everything that she had and was unable to hardly speak, much less move, she stated, “I have nothing left, but I still have my heart, and with that I can always love.”

The only difference between Brittany and Chiara is the knowledge that life is worth living. In the end, Jesus died. And in the end, Chiara died. But the truth is, that wasn’t the end. There is more to this life than many of us realize.

Our culture has exchanged a Sanctity of Life ethic for a Quality of Life ethic. In doing so, we have positioned ourselves to rate a person’s worth based on our perceived quality of life. We think, “I wouldn’t want to have to live like that,” and in our fear, we forget the truth: Life is worth living.

Brittany is not a villain. She is our sister who is in incredible pain. I do not condemn her even though I believe her actions are wrong. I can relate to her struggle more than anything. I think that we hear about Brittany and we are afraid. “What if it was me? What would I do? Would I be strong enough to die well?”

But this is where a heroic life could be made. “Death with dignity” does not mean dying like an animal; it means dying like a human being, with untold worth and courage.

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