

What Can We Learn from the Schiavo Case?

Unless you have been on silent retreat in another world this past month, you have experienced the media overload surrounding the tragic case of Terri Schiavo.

As a pastor, I feel grief for a family whose internal conflict over the decision of when to say good-bye to a loved one accelerated into a national death watch.

As a pastor and counselor, who has been in thousands of hospital rooms and spent hundreds of hours as a chaplain intern with a Roman Catholic-supported hospice, I know that, in itself, the decision to discontinue use of a feeding tube is not an unusual act.

While working with hospice, I learned that families, physicians, counselors and clergy were guided in decision-making by a straightforward, yet profound, instruction from the bishops who oversaw the ministry: Is the use of a feeding tube (or other extraordinary intervention) prolonging life or prolonging dying?

That guideline embraced the firm reality that I find many people in our youth-and-beauty obsessed culture would rather deny. Death is real, a part of life and, from the perspective of faith, theologically understood as part of God's plan for life in this world. When the body can no longer sustain life as intended by God and is trying to die, saying a loving goodbye and releasing the one we love into the presence of the One who offers ultimate healing is an affirmation of love and caring.

As persons of faith, or not, what can we learn from this case? I find at least four points worthy of reflection. You may think of others.

1. Write a living will. Prepare for the end of your life with the same thoughtfulness and care with which you have planned for your children's

education, your career and retirement. Think through these important issues now. Take the opportunity to have a serious, intimate conversation with your family about this natural part of life. You will give them a gift more important than either of you may realize.

2. Get the facts about important and controversial issues before making pronouncements or expressing opinions. One truth in the Schiavo case is that, outside the family and medical professionals personally involved, no one in the media, the crowds on vigil or in politics really knew her condition or could make an informed decision in the case.

For me, as a pastor, the choice to discontinue a life-prolonging procedure should be made by all the family members working together and not forced on one part of the family by another actor within the extended family, whatever legal right that person may have.

Out of this family's conflict, words like "murder" and "starvation" have been used to describe what was going on. That is not a fair, accurate or truthful description of what happens to a person whose body is trying to die, nor does it promote understanding.

I have noticed in working with families and churches that once the shouting and name-calling start, thinking shuts down and options for the best possible solution to the conflict are quickly limited and nearly impossible to achieve.

3. Beware politicians who come wrapped in the language of religion. In the gospels, Jesus criticizes religious leaders who like to stand before crowds saying impressive prayers that they might be noticed.

The same could be said of politicians who, rather than promoting reconciliation within a family or encouraging non-simplistic thinking about a serious moral and ethical issue with immediate human consequence, co-opt events for their own advantage.

4. Question the validity and worthiness of media who showcase psychic mediums (FOX) and once famous Hollywood actors (CNN) as consultants on serious ethical-theological-medical-legal issues. As citizens and persons, we deserve better than this.

[Robert W. Guffey Jr.](#) is pastor of Wilton Baptist Church in Wilton, Conn. His "Faith Matters" column appeared Thursday in the Wilton Bulletin. It is used with the author's permission.