

FACE OFF:

Did courts, husband make right decision for Terri Schiavo?

Terri's husband not qualified to make death decision

Opposition to Terri's death: ignorance

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On March 18 when a judge ruled Terri Schiavo's nutrition taken from her, she was denied the most basic right given any person, the only thing that a person actually possesses, life.

First of all, in the case of Terri, let's understand that she was not "brain dead;" she was in a vegetative state that people can recover from. Advances in biotech and nanotech promise new therapies currently beyond our reach, but they may have one day been available to Terri. Yet the courts gave Michael Schiavo, the late Terri's husband, the right to decide whether or not she would continue to be given the chance to improve. Michael claimed that starvation would have been her "wish" in her situation.

He spoke on "Larry King Live" while his wife was undergoing starvation and said, "Terri is my life." Yet Michael has been living in a common-law relationship with another woman, by whom he has fathered children, and has not only withheld various therapeutic and other treatments from Terri, he decided that he wanted his wife, who was his "life," to die.

Later in the show, Michael gave himself away as a man with a different agenda, when he said, "We don't know what Terri would have wanted, but this is what we want." Michael was not to be trusted with Terri's life. He made a vow to be faithful to his wife in sickness and in health, forsaking all others till death did they part. He forsook his wife and has been unfaithful to her. He has taken a new wife in all but name; Terri was, in principle, his ex-wife, yet he was given the right to order her execution.

While Michael was determined to end Terri's life, she had parents and many supporters who loved her and would have cared for her. Michael claimed that Terri had "no consciousness;" those on her parents' side claimed that she recognized her family, smiled, and made other "basic, childlike reactions," regardless of the fact that she had a feeding tube for mealtimes. If her parents were correct, ending Terri's life was murder. If her husband was right, and she was already in essence "dead," there was no misery to put her out of since she was experiencing no misery. Life is the sensible default to the irreversible effects of death, thus the president's statement to "err on the side of life."

Because Terri was not living as she once was did not mean that what life she did have was worthless. It was possible that in the future there could have been new treatments for her, but those who agreed that she should die believed that life in her state was intolerable because she did not lead a life that any functioning person would choose. These people are in essence saying that in their opinion, her life was not worth living. Yet this attitude leads to a slippery slope premise of *lebensunwerten Lebens*—"lives unworthy of life"—used by Germany's National Socialists, and we all know where that lead. Terri should have been given the dignified treatment of basic sustenance, which we all need, and allowed the obvious default of life, rather than having her life assigned as 'unworthy.'



Photo illustration by Jeff Sorensen Clackamas Print

Terri Schiavo is finally dead, and so is the media circus, with all the protests and litigation and endless commentary articles (actually that one is still pending).

There is much passion involved in the Terry Schiavo case and the right-to-die controversy. Passion is very hard to ignore. The problem with passion in cases like this is that it is often driven by ignorance. People are more interested in pushing their own point of views than doing what is right.

There is no uniform solution that should be produced to deal with all right-to-die situations, because not all situations are the same.

The oft-ignored fact about Terry Schiavo is that before she died, she was already dead. Yes, her heart was still beating, but in the 15 years since she had cardiac arrest, her cranium was not filled with living brain matter. Her cranium was filled with spinal fluid.

There have been doctors who have disputed this diagnosis, hired by Schiavo's parents. However, this evidence was not substantial enough to be taken seriously by our legal system, or the doctors hired by Schiavo's husband. Every single doctor hired by the different courts that have seen the lengthy litigation of this case has agreed that Schiavo is in a persistent vegetative state. The only thing alive in Schiavo's brain are a few automatic functions, the rest of it is gone. Calling Schiavo "brain-damaged" is akin to calling a quadruple-amputee "limb-damaged."

This is a tough issue. It would be certainly tougher if somebody reading this had a loved one in this situation, or even worse, were in it themselves. It is easy to see only one side, black or white, and run to that side, refusing to admit shades of gray. The truth about the right-to-die controversy, like many issues fundamentalist thinkers are fond of making out to be black and white, is that each case must be treated individually.

Those opposed to pulling the plug are most often of the opinion that it is not only torture, but murder, and therefore a sin. This is simply ignorance. God-driven and passionate, yes, but ignorance is ignorance, whether you invoke the Lord or not. Schiavo was brain-damaged to the point that she was not capable of feeling hunger, so she died a painless death. Furthermore, according to her spouse, who for the last 200 years has rightly been considered the foremost authority on medical decisions in this country, she did not want to be kept alive in the first place. The courts concurred.

It is not up to us to decide what God would want for us to do here on Earth in these situations, it is up to us to figure out what humans would want for themselves. God did not create us so we could try and make every decision with his blessing in mind. If he had, he wouldn't have given us the power to think for ourselves.

Student Poll:

What do you think about the Terri Schiavo case?



"I think it was an outrage. they should have taken her off life support a long time ago."
Matt Baker



"I think her family should have complete say in what happens to her."
Oliver Dale



"Tragic, and I hope that it does not affect Oregon's Death with Dignity Act."
Bob Misley



"We don't know enough about the motives of either party to make an informed decision."
Elizabeth Hitz



"I think it's about what she wants, but we don't know what she would want; then, from a biblical standpoint, it should be decided by the husband."
Caleb Butler

This week's pole compiled by Laura Cameron and CJ Ciamarello

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