

Resisting a Right to Kill

Snuffing out life to preserve so-called dignity is murder.

On March 18, the day on which Terri Schiavo's feeding tube was ordered removed by a Florida judge, attorney Barbara Weller spent part of the morning with the 41-year-old woman, who has been brain-damaged since 1990 after she suffered temporary heart failure. Weller stood up, leaned over Schiavo, took both her hands in hers and said, "Terri if you could only say, 'I want to live,' this whole thing could be over today."

Terri's eyes, according to Weller's account, opened very wide; and after looking Weller straight in the face, Schiavo said loudly with a look of great concentration, "Ahhhh." Then one more time she made a loud noise in response to Weller's words.

We will never know what Schiavo was saying. She died March 31.

Had she understood Weller and tried to say those words, "I want to live"? We may never know if she once told her husband before her illness, as he claims, that she would never want to be kept alive if she had lost almost all ability to function normally. We will never know, if indeed she once said that, whether she still held to that view after she suffered brain damage.

And, of course, we know for sure that Michael Schiavo, her husband, wanted her to die and Robert and Mary Schindler, her parents, wanted her to live—and that as legal guardian of his wife in her disabled condition, Michael and his wishes prevailed.

Christians have largely interpreted the case as a right-to-

life issue, which of course it is. But there is another aspect of it that Christians ought to take careful notice of.

The Schiavo case is a profound affront to those thousands of Americans who suffer from any sort of disability, whether they are bedridden and paralyzed or paraplegic.

As Diane Coleman, the founder and president of the organization Not Dead Yet said, "It's the ultimate form of discrimination to offer people with disabilities help to die without having offered real options to live." In other words, Schiavo's predicament has shown just how vulnerable thousands of Americans are if their legal guardians—whether spouses or parents—have determined that their lives don't have "dignity."

The organization Not Dead Yet considers the question of dignity of the disabled one of profound bigotry. They argue it is the equivalent of saying that because a disabled or comatose person is often messy or not very pretty he or she doesn't deserve the full protection of the law—which is to stay alive—that is granted to everyone else.

Not Dead Yet is not a Christian organization and is wary of being roped into the pro-life side in the larger culture war between Christians and zealous secularists. But it has performed many functions that Christians identified as such could never have done.

At a recent ACLU meeting, Not Dead Yet convinced a majority of the ACLU members present that their support of Right to Die legislation was profoundly mistaken. That legislation, they successfully argued, would deprive one group—the disabled—of the very rights the ACLU has claimed all along to represent.

Christians should support Not Dead Yet and other disability groups. Even though the organization does not identify itself as Christian—though many of its members undoubtedly are—it is a powerful ally in the fights we Christians are engaged in to prevent the values of barbarism from prevailing in our society.

One of the most subtle and yet powerful pro-death arguments made by euthanasia advocates is that some forms of human life are objectively less worth sustaining than others. Even before Hitler came to power, some German physicians argued that medical care should be doled out on the basis of the “contribution” a patient was deemed to be making to society.

But we affirm that all human life is made in the image of God, is God’s gift to us, and deserves our utmost effort to protect and preserve it. We also know that snuffing it out to preserve so-called dignity or any other purported human value always is, and always will be, murder.

David Aikman is a former Time magazine senior correspondent who has reported from Jerusalem, Beijing, Moscow and dozens of nations. He welcomes your comments at davidaikman@.