

Grave dangers associated with Bill C-7

My 15 year old daughter has just been studying Harper Lee's classic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It has been 40 years since I read this as a school girl and it gave me a great deal of joy to be able to read some of the chapters to her and discuss some of the many teachable moments with which the novel is steeped. I am sure many of you can relate as you are familiar with this iconic book, which has become even more relevant as of late with the rise in awareness of issues pertaining to inequalities.

For those of you that are familiar with the book, I would ask you to recollect the part of the book that tells the story of Mrs. Dubose, the aging woman who gives the children, Scout and Jem, as well as their father, Atticus, a very hard time indeed. When Jem decapitates her flowers in a fit of rage, Mrs. Dubose and Atticus decide on an act of reparation for Jem that entails him reading to her for 20-45 minutes each day, a task which Jem detests. However, it is not until Mrs. Dubose dies, that Jem learns that his reading to her was a distraction from her agony of trying to break her addiction to morphine, an addiction from which she wished to be free before she died. She succeeded. Atticus taught his kids that this was real courage, even more so because she was going to die anyway, and no one in the town they lived in knew the battles that she had to endure.

Now, while most of us may never live up to being a Mrs. Dubose, it seems sad and confusing that we are, on the one hand, teaching our children the value of courage through books in the Ontario school system, but on the other hand, are (potentially) submerging our children into a swampy soup of 'go with your feelings' because this is the model that the adult world is succumbing to. This is becoming more and more prevalent in today's culture and it flies in the face of science and human anthropology. What is it that separates us from animals? Is part of it not our ability to reason, think things through, judge an action to be right or wrong, timely or untimely? We have become so accustomed to having access to whatever, whenever, without delayed gratification, and without a chance to build up resilience.

This is not to undermine the terrible suffering that many people endure but as humans, are we not called to a higher standing to protect and care for those who are suffering and vulnerable? This too separates us from animals. To enable and encourage them in a fleeting moment of despair to take a step that cannot be reversed is less than human. They deserve to have an adequate period of reflection. Their family members deserve this too.

It is essential that the committee examining Bill C-7 look honestly and truthfully at the scientific and peer reviewed research that has been done in this field, and not bend their sails to the winds of political correctness. One only has to look at countries like the Netherlands to see what abuses have been taking place regarding euthanasia and the 'slippery slope' syndrome. It is essential that doctors who are opposed on the grounds of conscience, be protected not only from being penalised in refusing to administer any end of life procedures, but also, that their rights based on conscience be protected in order that they can advocate healthy, life-giving alternatives to their patients. This would include information and access to all necessary services and medical care that may help alleviate the patient's suffering, including access to counselling, psychotherapy.

Although many may consider the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross somewhat dated and even simplistic, the 5 emotional stages of dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and

acceptance, would appear to be a useful framework for understanding the complexities of the journey of a dying and suffering individual. A counsellor would be able to help a suffering person understand and read the complexities of these stages and assist in bringing some peace to the disorder and fear going on in their life. According to this model, many seeking premature end of life by lethal injection may only be at the anger stage or depression stage and will not have a chance to reach the acceptance stage. Counsellors and other health professionals can patiently walk beside the patient during this journey and help them reach this final and natural stage. The work of Ira Byock cannot be overlooked too for his contributions to the understanding of what it means to die in peace, not just the suffering individual, but for his/her loved ones, who cannot be overlooked in all of these discussions. From his experience working as a physician in emergency medicine and palliative care he posited four things that mattered most before saying goodbye: "Please forgive me", "I forgive you", "Thank you" and "I love you". How many individuals will be denied this peace at the moment of death if it is brought about unnaturally and prematurely, and how many family members and friends will be denied the opportunity to be part of those end of life discussions, and what will the consequences of that be for their own peace and mental health?

Finally, not too distant from the points made above about how a dying/suffering person may emotionally view their own death, it is worrying to think that healthcare workers and indeed policy makers may be extenuating their own attitudes and perhaps fears about death onto individuals who are vulnerable and weak. What is called for is empathy, which requires an emotional level of intelligence that our society is fast becoming deficient in. Which brings us back to *To Kill a Mockingbird* and a teachable moment when Atticus teaches his kids empathy, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb in his skin and walk around in it." Indeed, we must be sure that our own lens is polished and clean so we can see clearly enough what it is that another human being truly needs.

Vicki Rosedale