

Disabled people deserve all the rights of able people

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Note

The Supreme Court ruling on the Robert Latimer case has not ended the deep divisions in Canada in relation to the rights of citizens with disabilities.

On the one side are those who believe that people with disabilities, no matter how severe their impairments, have the same rights as all other citizens to live lives of dignity. On the other side are those who believe that human rights depend on competence, and thus mercy killing and other so-called acts of compassion should be tolerated and perhaps only lightly punished.

Latimer himself continues to state that he has no regrets for killing his daughter Tracy.

Grand River Hospital ethicist Gary Dann, quoted in a Jan. 19 article, said Latimer made his "best decision, his only decision, a decision we can empathize with." Why can we empathize with a father killing his child?

Often, our society assumes subconsciously that people with disabilities have less value. This assumption has led to a widespread lack of community support services for families who have children with disabilities. If we truly believed in the rights, worth and dignity of all children, we would create effective policy and adequate community services to enable children like Tracy Latimer to remain at home with the personalized support they require.

Another assumption is that ending someone else's suffering is considered compassionate.

On hearing the Supreme Court ruling, Allan Borovoy of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association expressed outrage that Latimer, "a compassionate father," was treated unfairly by the courts. Compassion was Latimer's main defence but not the reality that jurors saw.

Compassion by those who support Latimer's action means to fix or eliminate the problem. The history of disability is fraught with fix-it approaches: institutionalization as a way to remove disability from community, drugs made to mask genuine issues, and segregating people away from families, in theory, are supposed to help.

So-called mercy-killing is the extreme of the fix-it mentality, where deficits, pain and severity of disability take precedence over family, community, pain management and personalized support.

Compassion is not about eliminating suffering or discomfort; it is about supporting the other person in the process of his or her life.

Why do we honour the work of Mother Teresa and Jean Vanier? Surely it is because they gave unconditional love to the people they supported. None of the world's great religions condone killing as a act of compassion.

Although compassion means understanding and acting in ways that are supportive of human struggle, the paradox is that helping others often triggers unresolved issues in us. For this reason, genuine compassion is hard to achieve, but we should not mistake a false alternative for the real thing. The death of Tracy Latimer was about her father's issues, not hers.

It is curious in the Latimer case that most of the commentary in the media has been from lawyers, ethicists and parents of children with disabilities.

Where are the voices of religious leaders and parliamentarians, who might remind us that every citizen matters, that life is of the utmost value, and that compassion is about being together in strong families and caring communities.

Personalized support systems provide the safety net that enables citizenship to be experienced by all. The Latimer case, and the commentary on it, has taught us that we have a long way to go to achieve this end.

John Lord of Kitchener is a social research consultant and founder of the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services in Kitchener.

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Caption: Photo: John Lord

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