

## **How Much Can We Humans Endure?**

by Herbert M. Lefcourt

I believe I can understand the positions of those who have rushed to judgment in their condemnation of Robert Latimer. I understand the "slippery slope" arguments against euthanasia; I can comprehend the fear and anger of disabled persons who so often feel denigrated and threatened in societies where their disabilities are stigmatized; and I can understand the horror with which the killing of children is regarded in our society. However, I believe that there is good reason for pause before rushing to judgment.

As a parent I don't think I could have watched passively if my children had to endure the incomprehensible pain that Tracy Latimer suffered. Back wards in institutions for the severely handicapped shock the visitor not just because the poor twisted victims of crippling diseases are in pain. Rather, it is because these victims have no understanding of their pain. It is because they have little expectation that their pain will ever end, because they are completely helpless to avoid their agony, and because there is no way that preverbal individuals can be assured that life will ever improve, which in reality it can't. This is what makes their pain that much more unbearable to observe, the very hopelessness of it.

This is not simple conjecture but is the conclusion drawn from more than thirty years of psychological research into the consequences of helplessness and stress. If I had to draw one conclusion from this area of research in which I have specialized, it is that the worst agony to be suffered by any creature is not in its exposure to pain per se, but to pain that is unpredictable and uncontrollable. To Tracy Latimer who had been subject to continuous painful experience without even the slight relief that human communication might have afforded, life would have had to have been perceived as unpredictable, uncontrollable and painful. Growth itself merely compounded the agonies in her spastic limbs. For Tracy herself, this had to have been an agonizing life. In the same vein, what were the experiences of her parents? What worse hell can be imagined than to be parents who are bonded to their child, who must watch in helplessness as she cries through the night and suffers unremitting pain? Her pain had to be suffered with helplessness by both the child and her parents. Is it any wonder that perpetrators of torture often threaten to torment the children of their intended victim to have their way with him or her. Would a parent not choose to murder their child with gentleness and mercy rather than allowing their child to be tortured by a malevolent sadist? There was much wisdom in Dante's Inferno where hell was said to consist of suffering agonies passively and infinitely. Helplessness and hopelessness in the face of pain comprise Dante's version of hell.

It is common knowledge that many persons are helped to die in hospitals when their conditions deteriorate beyond repair. Sue Rodriguez showed us her courage in not wishing to remain alive when she was to become so disabled that she couldn't fend for herself. Ms. Rodriguez, even if severely disabled, could have looked forward to limited pleasures such as being read to, to being able to communicate by blinking her eyes, to

watching videos, and so on. As small a solace as these activities were to her, they would have been momentous in comparison to the bleak, pain ridden life of Tracy Latimer. How Tracy's responsiveness to the sounds of radio music can be said to have constituted an enjoyment of life reduces what we mean by joy especially when measured against her daily agony. If Tracy had at least developed to a degree that she could communicate in more than the most primitive fashion, her parents might not have had the stamina to even consider euthanasia. To watch the endless thrashing of a suffering, non-comprehending being with whom we are so bonded, must be among the most harrowing experiences to which we humans can be subjected.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer chose to die rather than to comply with Nazi demands, we regarded him as heroic. Why? Because he demonstrated that how we live is more important than simple existence. There is more to life than only living. What Right to Life sympathizers fail to understand, is that a life of unremitting horror is not necessarily worth living. Other cultures that are less phobic about death realize this. To judge the Latimer's harshly is to turn our backs on what many of us know about life: that there are times when death is preferable to life. Robert Latimer is not a criminal. He is a father who had the courage to face this truth, to not just look at the present but to foresee future agonies, the dismemberment of his child in the physician's hope of alleviating future complications deriving from growth, and the time when neither he or his wife would be there to comfort and protect their unfortunate daughter. It has been stated in some columns that Robert Latimer should show remorse for what he did. But why, if one acts from compassion and innocence, should we expect this to be the case? Wouldn't remorse simply be an admission that others' judgments are more legitimate than his own ?

If it were the state that were to judge that this child's life had to be terminated, we might all justifiably rise in protest at what could truly be a "slippery slope" into barbarism. But, when a loving parent, responsible for that child's life, believes that death is preferable to life, who can see the days ahead when he will not be there to support her through her agony, it seems more wise to listen to him and become less judgmental.