

OUR YEAR OF LIVING IN DENIAL by **Herbert M Lefcourt**

It is close to a year now that Robert Latimer began serving his sentence for the murder of his daughter Tracy. Given this "anniversary" and the very recent murder and suicide by the parents of another very disabled "adult-child," the CBC's Cross Country Checkup radio show felt it an appropriate time to raise the question whether Canadians were in favor of the release of Robert Latimer. Rex Murphy fielded the calls which proved to be largely in favor of continued incarceration.

Though it shouldn't be too surprising, the majority of callers were parents and guardians of handicapped individuals and several of them spent a considerable time describing their own difficulties seemingly to support the argument that Latimer should be punished and remain imprisoned.

A minority of the callers expressed sympathy for him. However, only one of the sympathizers addressed the major issue, that the motivation for euthanasia in this case was to end the suffering of pain and not the physical disability that Tracy Latimer had endured.

Why should this point have been overlooked when in the website that supporters of Robert Latimer have constructed, this point is made so clearly. The medical records, the prognoses for Tracy's condition and the judgments of all who had access to them during Robert Latimer's trial are plain for all to see. The jury members who had access to this information did not release him only because they were not aware that they had that option, and they expressed shock and remorse when he was incarcerated. Given the readily available information, we need to ask why it is that so many callers who took the time and made the effort to call in to Cross Country Checkup lacked the motivation to avail themselves of the information necessary to make an informed judgment.

Psychological research has revealed that people do not like to entertain alternative positions about subject matter that arouses anxiety. Tunnel vision is the common response to anxiety, the better to ready ourselves to be able to confront anxiety arousing situations. Consideration of alternative perceptions and interpretation more often occurs when we are relaxed and unburdened. Parents of handicapped individuals easily qualify as anxious and threatened. Unpredictability is a core experience of persons who feel responsible for the handicapped. One just doesn't know how a day is apt to progress. It can begin well and comfortably and terminate in the emergency room of a hospital or in urgent calls to overworked social agencies. To expect patient, relaxed study of the circumstances of the Robert Latimer case is to expect too much of the driven, burdened caretakers of the handicapped.

But what of others who do not share responsibilities for the handicapped? Most surveys have indicated a prevailing sympathy for Robert Latimer, with majorities favoring release from prison being as high as 70%. Given such support we can only ponder why it is that

the government has not yet come to terms with the issue of Latimer's continued incarceration. Another issue in psychology is quite revealing. Whenever, we humans are forced to contemplate ours' or our loved ones' mortality, we become distressed, and increasingly cling to group icons, making harsh judgments of violators of group norms, and elevating the importance of our group memberships. This was only too evident following the events of Sept. 11th and continues to this day, Americans draping themselves in flags and resisting criticisms of their government and president.

Is it possible that our dread of death is partly responsible for our failure to examine the facts in the Latimer case? I would suggest that this is highly likely. It is in the record that Tracy was in continuous pain. Mrs. Latimer has noted that the photograph of Tracy smiling while sitting in Robert Latimer's lap is an image from long ago, that Tracy had actually been capable of rolling around the floor in her earlier years. With the passage of time, however, she had become less able, and given her propensity to severe and persistent convulsions was not able to take strong enough analgesics to relieve the agonizing pain that she experienced with the growth of her contorted and spastic limbs. In her last months she was most often slumped over in her wheel chair, and moaning in pain.

It was this condition of relentless pain that triggered the euthanasia committed by Robert Latimer. As Mrs. Latimer stated emphatically, "If it were only the disability we would have kept her for her lifetime." That this case involved continuous pain and misery was attested to by all who had been familiar with the case. Even the medical newspaper columnist, Gifford Jones, felt impelled to defend Robert Latimer's response to his daughter's agony.

That the guardians of disabled children can't see this issue clearly is understandable given what we know about anxiety and the perception of issues. That others who called in to the CBC condemning Robert Latimer may have been responding to their own dread on contemplating mortality is also a strong possibility. Those who did respond with greater sympathy were the most impressive of the callers in that they resisted the temptation to be judgmental and could comprehend and sympathize with the position that Tracy Latimer's parents were in. If these sympathizers do comprise 70% of our population, it may help us to understand why Canada is often described as a more caring, less dogmatic, and more kindly country. Given this majority it would seem a ripe time for our government to demonstrate their less driven and anxious state and offer pardon to Robert Latimer.