"THE RIGHT TO DIE"

REFLECTIONS ON THE NBC/TV FILM

aired last night

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1. God the Friend did not put in an appearance. Whitehead was right: In our culture, most people, regardless of religious affiliation, do not mature beyond God the Void & God the Enemy. Unwittingly, the film displays religious immaturity in our society: the God who loves humanity toward maturity exists for nobody except possibly the MD who, after administering the knockout injection prior to turning off the respirator, reads, from an unidentified book, a comfort passage (recognizable if you know the Psalms) not directly mentioning God. For the self-identified Jewish atheist husband & father, God, who'd been void up till his wife's fatal illness, is now enemy--in the person of God's reps, the hospital's MDs & RNs, all of whom interpose "God" between the wife's death & the husband's efforts to achieve, in obedience to his wife's "if you love me," the death. The husband says his wife is "Protestant" in background, but "faith" as the wife uses it means only faith she'll get well--so when she gives that up, "faith" is exhausted & she wants nothing else, hopes for nothing else, except oblivion.

2. What's being pictured consciously is a wasting body; unconsciously, I think, a human wasteland relieved only by a wan affirmation of horizontal love, a human support-system or network that finally achieves, after a sturm-und-drang grim romanticism, death, euthanasia. This human-human love is the film's only benevolent force; and it wins against the husband's moral-legal sense (he at first absolutely refusing to aid his wife in committing a crime, viz "committing" suicide) and her chief nurse's theological sense (she almost to the end refusing to have anything to do with interfering with "God's will"). This high, even numinous, view of interhuman love*--our secular culture's replacement & holophrase for the biblical God--is the media's ultimate criterion of both value & plausibility. Why? (*Another tragedy: It greatly overheats sex & devalues virginity.)

3. Because it's so in the American institution having most to do with the inner formation of the young, viz the public-school system. A few hours before I saw the film, I read an extensive newspaper article on an honored counselor in our local highschool. This flatlander helps our children, the children of Cape Cod, handle their problems entirely within the limits of the neoEnlightenment paradigm, which holds that the central error (not to say crime or sin) in the art of living is "dependency" --on anything (drugs et al) or anybody (of course including God, who is void when not enemy). For several generations America's children have grown up with a sense-making paradigm that is antithetic to the biblical, which teaches that when something goes wrong you should see it as (1) evidence of independence from God & (2) invitation to dependency on God. How unfair, & fatal, that tax money should be used to train the young in only one of our civilization's two major paradigms! They grow up to write films like "The Right to Die" & to experience such films not as vicious nonsense but as the only good sense that can be made.... And to live that way of seeing the world: "The Right to Die" is a true story of a wife/mother/child-psychologist, written up by TIME's Chicago bureau chief Andrew Malcolm as a book then scripted into the TV film.

4. "The right to..." is always negative, oppositional: in each case, who/what is being fought against?...The Eden apple, the Tree of Life....

5. Psychology lets its professor down. She says (al la Jung) that "the Self, capital S," should be the center of life's second half ("commentary"), to which "the first 40 years are 'text.'" But her gospel does nothing for her as she comes to do her dying....No afterlife, of course.