

The glory of God & human dignity in relation to
THE BEGINNING & ENDING OF A HUMAN LIFE:
THE ENVIRONMENT as the "new occasion" teaching "new duties"

SUICIDE

2341 9 July 89

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THE LIVING WILL of

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Being of sound mind & body,* & in love with God & his world--especially with my dear family, & the Church of Jesus Christ my Lord & Savior--I do this day declare the following to be my will with regard to the circumstances under which I would prefer to walk into the arms of God rather than further burden the biosphere,¹ the health-care system,² other social services,³ and my dear ones⁴:

1. **Mechanical** sustaining of life. I want the human dignity⁵ of "pulling the plug" before it's plugged in. No heroic measures: palliative care only; no forced feeding.

2. Total **aphasia**, "loss of a previously held ability to speak or understand spoken or written language, due to disease or injury of the brain" (RHD²).⁶

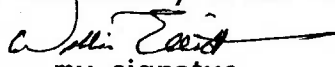
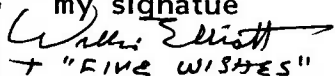
3. **Alzheimer's disease**.⁷

4. All other conditions of **severe**⁸ limitation or **terminal**⁹ prognosis.

This instrument is directly an affirmation of my right to the dignity of deciding upon my dying & upon the means thereto. I renounce any legal or other reasons that might be adduced to limit either of my decisions.

My motives appear in the preamble to this my Living Will & are further elaborated in the commentary which here follows.

9 July 89
date
18 Nov 06


my signature

+ "FIVE WISHES"



the attestation of my dear wife Loree. G. Elliott

*Written before the discovery that my eye trouble
is very serious.

-----COMMENTARY

1. For me, for more than the past quarter century the fact that the environment has been losing the unfair contest with humanity has been, & remains, the great **new factor** in the calculus of decisions regarding the beginnings & endings of human life--to use the shorthand words, abortion & euthanasia. As long as thirty years ago I favored coercive surgical limitation, decided by each society in its population/environment decisions, on the number of live births to be allowed each pregnant before sterilization. Since I came to that conviction, in some of the most fragile environments of the world the population has doubled (&, for one, Central America's has tripled since WWII)....I have developed at length my theology of abortion. This Thinksheet is my first effort to detail a theology of euthanasia, though I've given random thought to it through the years; & the most real way to go about it is the personal-existential, viz my own Living Will. I invite you to revise, adapting to yourself; and to share with me anything you think might be helpful to me--though this invitation should not be read as that the above is only a draft.

2. At a recent hospital panel on AIDS, I asked the administrator whether longrange planning for the hospital has included a decision on the % of beds allowed for AIDS patients. He said no--even though that hospital right now is very near the point of financial unviability! By an excess of AIDS patients alone, many U.S. hospitals are running into debt at the rate of more than a million dollars a year; &, because of the newness & horror of AIDS, many cancer patients are being slighted in the shift of attention to "the AIDS crisis." Add to this the mindless improvidence of keeping other terminals alive, especially the growing army of the aged, & you have a situation crying out for a **comprehensive health-care system** that is not squeamish about decision-making with **triage** as a factor but combines intelligence (which the present health-care mess has too little of) & compassion (which it has too much of)....While I'm in reasonably good health my eyes, which have always been weak & are getting weaker, I'm at the point of requiring of the health-care system dollars & hours that, I may soon conclude, would be better spent on those with prospect of many more years to come than I have, & on those life has been less fair with than it's been with me. At some point, I shall conclude that it is the divine will & my human dignity & duty to "walk into the arms of God."

3. Tangential to "the health-care system" proper are **feeder services**, as it were streams that run into the lake. The resources of these feeders are increasingly threatened as "the needs" of the system increase toward the (ugh!) pantherapeutic society with its vacuous religion of Wellness. Time may come when prayer & conscience will ask me to be no longer a burden on these feeders.

4. Almost all families, face to face with catastrophic illness are poor, or soon will be impoverished. My dear **family** would swiftly be wiped out financially if I were to find myself in the catastrophic category. How could either justice or love instruct me to let that happen? I do care about what is & isn't legal, but not as much as I care about what's fair, loving, merciful (including merciful to me).

5. I am a person-in-community, both an individual & a social reality. In community with God, my life centers in the love of God; in community with God's people, my life centers in the glory of God; & as an individual, I have from God the assignment to live & die with **dignity** (roughly, the Greek & Roman contribution). These two foci in the elliptical foundation of our civilization appear in the first line of this Thinksheet's title. To change the figure, the two concerns are stranded together in early Christianity & the subsequent development of the West almost to the present time. Almost: In the public mind the glory of God has dimmed & human dignity has brightened. A political analogy: Our American mind has gone from a two-party (cross-shaped) system to a one-party (dash-shaped) system. Peter Berger, that master of the interrelations of language & culture, speaks of dignity as taking over when the God-&-humanity-relational virtues & values are less honored than the individual & human identity is "essentially independent of institutional roles." I reject the egocentric notion of the panautonomous individual, a notion that accounts for many suicides (treating God & society as naught), as I reject society's ever treating persons as nonindividuals (as in heroic efforts to sustain life against the patient's will [see the widely used "I Cried, but Not for Irma," CONCERN FOR THE DYING, 250 W. 57th St., NY, NY 10107, from Apr/76 RD]). I believe neither in the shallow secular passive "death with dignity" nor in the ancient-modern Stoic "noble" suicide: both are centered not in the glory of God but in the dying individual.^o Roughly, the Hebrew-Jewish contribution.

6. I am a wordsmith, **words** are my tools. If they were taken away, I would want to go with them & ply elsewhere the trade God gave me in my genes, opportunities, & service.

7. See note 5 & add this: Would you want to subject your loved ones to the anguish of seeing you become more & more to them a **stranger** & less & less able to contribute to the common life?

8. In the category of **severe** limitation, I think I'd put blindness first, for it would so severely restrict what I could do with words (see note 6). I can't know: I might or might not want to live blind: my Living Will claim is that the choice should be mine.

9. In the category of other conditions of **terminal** prognosis I would put various degenerative diseases that shrink one's world & expand the care one needs.

-----**SUICIDE & MERCY-KILLING** are the traditional terms for effectuating "self-killing" (the literal meaning of the Latin word) & helping another to die (for which in these latter days the Greek for "good [or easy] dying," "eu-thanasia," has been replacing "mercy-killing"--the older term, in incorporating the motive, being superior, though inferior, some would say, in not euphemizing "killing")....Elegant verbal stylist Amos Wilder in 1953 criticized me for writing "to suicide" instead of "to *commit* suicide." He accepted my explanation: The long verb incorporates, as I did not want to in that context, the traditional sanctions that suicide is a sin against God & a crime against society. But may not the "new occasion" of the declining quality of the biosphere & consequently of human life, may not suicide/euthanasia be a "new duty" & the refusal of it a new sin & crime?....What does the Bible say? Nothing direct; "no specific biblical prohibitions of suicide, nor is the act as such condemned" (IDB). The Creator gives life; but is not responsible suicide/euthanasia life-giving, & is it not "the Love that moves the worlds" (Dante) with us when we make responsible, God-honoring, dignified decisions about death as well as life? In Jewish history, Masada instances both suicide & euthanasia; & three acceptable reasons are given for suicide, which however is condemned beyond those reasons (see EJR).... Let's sort "suicide" out on a grid:

A is thinking about suicide--which literally is thinking about killing yourself, but categorically is about people killing themselves--why & how they do it, things like that....B is self-killing (& often associated with it is euthanasia, which narrowly is helping somebody suicide but broadly covers suicide itself)....C is thinking directed against suicide (& thus also against euthanasia)....And D is action toward preventing people from killing themselves. Now let's look a little closer:

	thinking	acting
suicidal	A	B
anti-suicidal	C	D

Two instances of D are (1) the Samaritans, a wonderful helpline for those who, almost always for reasons of depression & despair, are in danger of irrationally doing away with themselves; & (2) the medical staff in a hospital right now who, despite unanimity of the chaplaincy staff to the contrary, are tube-feeding a strapped-down 93-year-old woman who in physical agony is pleading for mercy-death. Say the medics, "She's incompetent to make the decision to pull the tube." Say the chaplains, "Who's to say whether she's competent?" Well, folks, that's what a Living Will is all about. It says "I'm competent as I write & sign this, & I'll let you know whether I change my mind about any of its contents: that's my responsibility, nobody else's."....C tends to dogmatize that all contemplating suicide are irrational, despite the extensive body of worldwide & through-the-ages research on suicide. When someone highly "level," keen-thinking, deeply spiritual suicides, it rocks C's boat. A spectacular flap not many years ago was the simultaneous suicides of two terminals, president* & wife of Union Theol. Seminary, NYC. The note they left can't by any stretch of language be considered irrational; nor can any well-drawn Living Will. *Henry Pitney van Dusen

Why, then, has there been a taboo in most cohorts of the West against suicide in spite of the plain fact that most of the West's great literature, including the Bible, can't be put on the side of the taboo? No room for all that on this Living Will Thinksheet, but I'll mention just two: (1) Most suicides are irrational, their minds agale in a storm of negative emotions, & it is right to try to persuade them from this irreversible action; & (2) The West feeds, in various ways, the idea that every human life is "precious," an idea going back to a time of people scarcity within tribes. Consider the new situation: in many places, people glut & environmental resources scarcity & degradation. ... "Precious" is secularly filled with the notion that each individual is of "infinite value" in his or her self--a position biblical religion calls idolatry. So, "precious" in relation to whom? Maybe a few other human beings; maybe not, or no longer, to society. To God? Are we less precious to God when we walk into God's arms--God, in relation to whom no creature is more than relatively precious? Here I must use what, in my ministry, many have found precious, viz my adaptation from Thom. Aquinas: The road that stretches before our feet is a challenge to our hearts long before it tests the strength of our legs. Our destiny is to run to the edge of the world & beyond, off into the darkness: sure in spite of all our blindness, secure in spite of all our helplessness, strong in spite of all our weakness, joyfully in love in spite of all the pressures on our heart. In that darkness beyond the world we can begin to know the world & ourselves--& to understand that we were not made to pace out our lives behind prison walls but to walk into the arms of God.

Notice, in the perspective of the Living Will, how the meaning of the word "terminal" changes. It's nobody out there, some physician or medical staff, saying something about me; that may or may not be involved. No, "terminal" in Living Wills is something decided in here, in a human heart-mind-will, a human being who by this instrument is saying "I've decided I'm terminal in the sense that I've decided to terminate my life, & I want to do so with dignity, without the indignity of being physically restrained from carrying out my decision."

Well, will physicians ever grow up to the new situation? The first technical-journal evidence that they will appeared in the Mar/89 NEW ENG. J. OF MEDICINE, "The Physician's Responsibility Toward Hopelessly Ill Patients." Here's a calm, competent dissertation on "whether physician-assisted suicide (performed by the patient) and euthanasia (performed by the physician) should be a part of the continuum of medical care." (The quotation is from a CHRISTIAN CENTURY [21-18 June 89] article by a well-seasoned death-bedside nurse, Harriet Goetz, who says a strong yes to making an advance against the ancient taboo.)

When the roof falls in, the Good Lord asks you to live in the ruins, rebuild, or leave--the three forms of acceptance. The Living Will says, the choice is yours, yours alone.

Commentary

Signe Wilkinson PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS

