

Reclaiming dignity in life

by BROCK WEIR

As a life-long news junkie, I don't remember precisely the first major news story that captured my attention, but a few contenders come to mind.

One of the first might be the fall of the Berlin Wall and the evocative images of men and women with hammers, screwdrivers and other tools laying waste to slabs of concrete that became synonymous with oppression and hardship.

Another might have been the series of murders that were ultimately attributed to Paul Bernardo, the wave of fear felt by so many, particularly young women and girls, leaving an impression on me that remains as strong now as ever before.

On the lighter side of news stories, I vividly recall being allowed to stay up far past my normal bedtime to watch Johnny Carson sign off on The Tonight Show for the very last time, a cultural touchstone I wasn't quite old enough to fully appreciate at the time, but now cherish as a self-professed scholar of television history.

All of these instances, for better or worse, are seared into my brain ? but one news story in particular stands out as one that, in my view, helped make me a critical thinker: the story of Robert Latimer, the Saskatchewan farmer convicted of second-degree murder in the death of his daughter, Tracy, who was born with severe physical and intellectual disabilities.

At the age of eight, I was initially horrified by the case, that a parent could have the capacity to end the life of their child, but that all changed when the verdict came in.

Sitting with my paternal grandmother in her Agincourt kitchen, helping myself to a generous plate of crustless, quartered tuna and salmon sandwiches, the news trickled in over their white kitchen radio.

The deep sigh from my grandmother was a none-too-subtle sign she disagreed with the courts ? and, curious, I essentially asked her more.

?It was a mercy killing,? she said with a secondary sigh.

?Mercy killing,? was a term I had never heard before and she generously unpacked what it meant and the conversation, in turn, naturally evolved to the adjacent philosophy surrounding death with dignity.

It was clear she was a supporter of death with dignity in principle and, even at that young age, it was clear that these views were firm and unwavering and something she supported in her own life as well.

It wasn't too much later, however, when the views she held dear began to waver with the onset of her long battle against dementia.

As she lost the ability to do just about everything in the balance of her life, I often thought about that day in her kitchen. Watching her become ever more trapped in her own body, I delved deeper into the issue of death with dignity and what we now term ?medically assisted dying,? and the decision she might have made for herself if given the opportunity to do so.

Sadly, in my view, the legislation which has provided dignity to so many living with terminal illness came too late for my grandmother but, by the time everything was in place, I was heartened beyond belief that individuals who were tragically forced to follow a path similar to hers would have the option to live life ? or not ? on their own terms.

My grandmother was released from her mental prison just three days into 2009. It would be another seven years before medical

assistance in dying (MAID) and assisted suicide became the law of this land. It would be further six years before our family was once again asked to travel down this road.

An aunt on the maternal side of my family had been in declining health for some time following a physical trauma about a decade ago. Her quality of life had ebbed and flowed for many years, but 2022 brought unimaginable difficulties.

A series of aneurisms earlier this year began a seemingly endless cycle of hospital visits, homecomings, further aneurisms and seizures, and readmissions, with each go-round bringing a diminished quality of life.

Left unable to physically care for herself, it was left to her husband, her son and her mother to take on the herculean tasks that are so familiar to caregivers the world-over. It was, in turn, agonizing and, truth be told, humiliating, for a once-vital woman who had, just a few weeks after beginning her 58th trip around the sun, entered her final month of life.

As hard as it was for her, it was just as hard for different reasons for her close family. They too were struggling under the weight of what life threw at them, no matter how well they were rising to the challenge.

It was heartening, however, that she was still left with the presence of mind and will to be very clear that these were not the circumstances in which she wanted to fade out. She knew what she wanted, she took control of her own life, and, with some calls to the medical community, decided that she wanted to go out on her own terms.

And that's just what she did at the end of August, quietly, surrounded by her immediate family, after one last trip to the beach to release a butterfly balloon, a symbol she had always loved, but one which took on extra resonance as she planned ahead for her final exit. Perhaps another metamorphosis.

Having received the medical go-ahead for assisted dying on Wednesday afternoon, she was given a departure date for that Friday at 4 p.m.

While I personally am not sure how I would feel if given such a firm deadline, not to mention how those closest to her would feel under the circumstances, it gave her a sense of what she wanted to accomplish with the time she had left ? and, by all accounts, made the most of it, including that one final outing the morning of the doctor's last visit to create lasting happy memories for those she was set to leave behind.

I don't envy her, my uncle, my cousin, or her mother for all they had to go through that very, very emotional week, but I am glad the powers-that-be sat up in 2016 and did the right thing by making this path open to so many Canadians who want to die with dignity.

It may not have been a path open to my grandmother, no matter how much she may have wanted it, but I am grateful it was an option available to my aunt ? and I am grateful she had the strength and ability to make this decision and plan her exit on her own terms in the same dignity in which she led her life.

And I'm grateful that all Canadians have the ability to do so.