

## **Questions of Right and Left or Right and Wrong: A Disability-Ethics Analysis of the Right-Wing and Left-Wing Media Portrayals of the Latimer Case**

Heidi L. Janz, PhD,  
University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB  
Sally Hayward, PhD,  
University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, AB

*This paper examines the right and left wing media coverage of the Robert Latimer case, arguing that, in particular, the left-wing progressive portrayal of this case not only creates a “preferred version and vision of social order” (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991, p. 4), but also affirms a utilitarian ethics and a normative framework of reference that can be used in the courts of law to argue for the voluntary and, more importantly, the nonvoluntary euthanasia of “defective” and “deformed” individuals. We further argue that publications of the religious right, most notably Alberta Report, have countered this normative framework of utilitarian ethics by consistently providing space for Tracy Latimer’s story to be told. We conclude this paper with consideration of an alternative ethics that develops Paul Woodruff’s call for a politics and practice of reverence, a secular, as opposed to a religious, praxis that is inclusive and appreciative of all human difference.*

### **Introduction**

The media coverage of the Robert Latimer case has made the events—beginning with the shocking murder of Latimer’s daughter, Tracy, through to its just end, Latimer’s incarceration for ten years in a federal penitentiary—into a culturally-shared, and thus culturally-relevant, narrative. An examination of this narrative reveals not only the media’s attempt to manipulate knowledge to “establish the normal, reduce equivocality, and increase predictability,” but also an attempt to assert

its authority as an active agency of social control, stability, and change," providing the public with "preferred versions and visions of social order, on the basis of which [individuals can] take action" (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991, p. 4). As a culturally-shared narrative, Latimer's story, as it is told by both right and left wing<sup>1</sup> media representations, creates a "preferred [version] and [vision] of social order," shaped by a normative understanding of practical ethics. Understood in Peter Singer's terms as a utilitarian ethics with a difference—one "most likely to maximize the interests of those [rational persons]affected" (p. 12) and one that is prefaced on the use of reason to "guide practice" and influence action (p. 2)<sup>2</sup>—this version of utilitarianism supports the voluntary and involuntary euthanasia of the "defective" or "deformed infant or the older human being who has been severely mentally retarded since birth" (p. 130) precisely because they, in Singer's terms, lack the characteristics of *homo sapiens*: "rationality, autonomy, and self consciousness" (p. 131).

This type of ethical commitment, precisely because it is encouraged in practice, has specific implications for people with disabilities, who may or may not be considered reasonable "persons," who may or may not fit into the rational "order of things" (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, p. 4), and whose interests should be, but are often not, included in considerations of the universal, inclusive "all." When practical ethics becomes, as it did in the media coverage of the Latimer case, the main lens through which we see people with disabilities, and Tracy Latimer in particular, the touting of normative values and notions of order and hierarchy becomes dangerous, precisely because it suggests that people with disabilities lead lives that are without quality, and therefore are not worth living. Within this media framework, people with disabilities are in danger of being seen as inhuman and, because the media influences how persons are seen in the law, they are excluded imaginatively and literally from the spirit and letter of the Canadian Constitution, a document that insists upon individual rights, equality and the belief, necessarily translated into practice and upheld by the law, that all life is sacred.

While the law purports to support, ethically, legally and morally, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and its historical contextualization in religious, political and intellectual traditions that

have normative, clearly defined boundaries concerning what it means to be and to be treated as a human being, the Latimer case, as an example of legal ethics in practice, indicates that the evaluative legal framework, driven by Canadian Constitutional demands and beliefs, is breaking down, and "rival possibilities of interpretation," driven by the media, medicine, and public opinion, are ordering the way we see and relate to ourselves and those considered Other. When, as in the Latimer case, these interpretations speak to and comment on current ethical issues about the role of medical technology in preserving life, quality of life issues, and constitutional questions concerning equality and individual rights, invoking both present concerns and historically situated and traditionally (re)conceived narratives about who should live and who should die, we are in the realm of what MacIntyre calls an "epistemological crisis:" a crisis of meaning experienced by the culture. More specifically, this crisis in meaning, is, for MacIntyre (1984), "always a crisis in human relations" (p. 5). Such a crisis occurs when the rational, timeless, well-founded beliefs and "schemas on interpretation" (p. 8) of one historical tradition break down and necessarily precipitate an attempt to "reconstitute, to rewrite [the] narrative revising [an] understanding of past events in the want of the present" information (p. 5).

While the media representation of the Latimer case clearly attempts to revise past events, lacking as it does any "present" or real information about Tracy Latimer and her condition, it also very clearly demands a consideration of culturally-relevant issues of euthanasia, justice, and equality, as they are interpreted in the Canadian Constitution and law. This reconsideration demands, concomitantly, a rethinking of what it means to be human within the boundaries of a liberal, democratic, and capitalist society.

A central aspect of the "epistemological crisis" precipitated by the dominant left-leaning media's construction of the narrative of the Latimer case is that it privileges a practical, bioethical perspective, a practical ethics, that legitimizes Latimer's mercy killing without considering the larger context within which this privileging occurs. In other words, much of the media coverage privileges only one ethical

perspective, only one meaning, without providing the reader with a context for understanding how this perspective establishes an “order [that] entails consideration of the conditions necessary for the reproduction of morality, procedural form, and hierarchical relations” (p. 6). The problematic nature of this representation is compounded by the way in which, as Ericson, Baranek, and Chan argue, “journalists authorize themselves to represent the people, to stand in for citizens in making representations to powerful officials and bureaucracies” (p. 8). For example, in constructing a narrative which features Robert Latimer as a caring and devoted father who acted courageously on behalf of his daughter in order to end her suffering, the media encourages the general public and, indirectly, the judge and the trial jury, to identify with Latimer’s predicament, making his action of killing his daughter heroic. Readers are not asked to consider traditional religious beliefs, such as “thou shalt not kill,” or the constitutional mandate that all life is sacred, but rather to consider, instead, “the conditions necessary for the reproduction of [this moral act]” (p. 10). In other words, instead of encouraging the public to question Latimer’s actions, much of the left-leaning media provide the public with a specific context—a form and an understanding of the hierarchy of relationships—under which these actions might be not only condoned but repeated. Within this media narrative, Robert Latimer’s choice to kill his daughter is privileged, while Tracy Latimer, who has no choice, is silenced: her story remains untold.

In part, the public does not read about Tracy’s story because the left-leaning media coverage is not framed by the clear guiding principles, outlined in the Canadian Constitution, concerning the sacredness of all human life, the core principles of medical ethics—beneficence (the requirement that all treatment should benefit the sick) and nonmaleficence (the “do no harm” principle)—and religious morals and ethics (thou shalt not kill). Instead, it is framed by a bioethical or “practical ethics” perspective that has, in the light of the ability of medical technology to extend life sometimes beyond the resources available to pay for it, come not only to privilege a rational human being, however that is defined, but also to understand pain and suffering as unacceptable, even constitutive of a life not worth living. In choosing to represent this case in this way, the media, discounting any religious,

political or legal precepts that might indicate how the public *should* relate to a father who murders his child, immediately makes coherent a form of understanding the event that is consistent with a new “practical (bio)ethics paradigm.” one that presupposes that a non-rational person, a person who is a burden, either emotionally, physically or financially, or a person who is “incurably ill and in great pain or distress” should be euthanized to “spare them further suffering” (Singer, p. 127). Within this framework, it is, paradoxically, Latimer’s suffering, and his emotional and financial pain that the public is encouraged to identify with and want to cure.

In his book, *The Difference that Disability Makes*, Rod Michalko (2000) speaks directly to the subtleties and paradoxes of this kind of practical, ethical reasoning, as it is raised by the Latimer case and its representation in the, predominantly liberal, mainstream media:

Contrary to all opinion about the Latimer case—that of the media, of the courts, and of Latimer himself—his problem is not born of suffering. Latimer “knows” suffering all too well and he can recognize it when he “sees it.” For him, no mistake, Tracy was suffering. Latimer was equally firm in his knowledge of what to do about suffering—eliminate it. For him, “do the right thing” [is to] eliminate Tracy’s suffering through the only available means—eliminate Tracy. Latimer had resolved the question of suffering and what to do about it, long before Tracy’s birth. The only dilemma Latimer faced for years before the murder was whether to do it now or put it off. He was not vexed by Tolstoy’s question about how to live or by the question of what counts as life presupposed by this question. Latimer’s resolution of such questions was both expressed and affirmed in his “practical ethics,” which called for nothing other than the elimination of suffering. (Michalko, 2002, p. 107)

Even though, as Michalko states, Latimer has received much support for his desire to “eliminate his daughter’s suffering, and his own suffering of her suffering,” a practical ethics that attempts, as Michalko argues, to regulate who should live and who should die must take into account “how” we should live and “what counts as life.” (p. 107). These questions cannot be answered by a short media article, designed to provide twenty-second information bites; they must be answered by a full analysis of the paradigms, assumptions and historical precedents that are embedded in the Charter, Canadian Law, and the historical continuity which makes intelligible and possible a medical practice grounded in benefit for the patient. More importantly, these questions cannot be answered without the participation of people with disabilities. As Michalko writes, this refusal to account for a disability perspective leads to some fundamental concerns about the role of the law, medicine, and the media and the implications for the treatment of people with disabilities. “[H]ow are disabled people to interpret these “practical ethics?” Ruth Enns (1999, p. 26) wonders. “If the facts could clearly establish the guilt of a murderer but the victim’s disabilities could cloud the judgement of the media, the public and those representing the law, where could disabled people turn for protection and justice?” Unfortunately, it is precisely this kind of exclusionary “practical ethics,” one that inverts the criminal and the victim if that victim is disabled and/or judged not to have a sufficient quality of life, that forms the basis of much of the mainstream media’s coverage of the Latimer case. Just as Robert Latimer’s sense of “practical ethics” dictates that Tracy’s suffering, as he perceives it, must be eliminated at all costs—even if it means eliminating Tracy herself—the center-left mainstream media affirms Tracy’s “suffering,” which is seen as inseparable from her disability, as a just cause for her father’s decision to take her life. Such a conflation of disability and suffering within the framework of “practical ethics” leaves no room for the acknowledgment of suffering as a universal—and, perhaps, thus a necessary—part of the human experience. Instead, this conflation of Tracy’s disability with the constant suffering that she is perceived as having to endure implies an ethical imperative to eliminate the disability itself along with its resultant suffering, and thus to eliminate Tracy herself.

Within this “practical ethics” framework, Tracy Latimer’s disability—and, with it, her entire lived experience—becomes highly medicalized and pathologized. She becomes her disability, which, because it is abnormal, can and should be eliminated. This tendency to medicalize or ignore Tracy’s narrative figures Tracy as a Cross-Crip, a person with a severe disability, whose life is only an archetypal cross of suffering for herself as well as for her over-burdened father (Janz, 1998). Consequently, she is seen, if she is seen at all, as a helpless, severely brain-damaged cripple, while Latimer is seen as a productive, rational member of the community and a caring father. This representation does not ameliorate with time.

### Media Coverage

Two prominent Canadian publications—*Macleans* magazine and the *Alberta Report*—handle the media coverage of the Latimer case from two different perspectives. While the centre-left *Macleans* magazine is typical of a practical ethics’ perspective, one that medicalizes and pathologizes Tracy as a Cross-Crip (Janz, 1998), the right-wing *Alberta Report* presents a perspective that values and supports the life of people with disabilities, acknowledging their inclusion in the “everyone” outlined in the Canadian Constitution. Specifically, we consider

how articles from *Macleans* magazine use “spin” to establish fixed able-bodied and (dis)abled stereotypes. We contend that the establishment of these stereotypes helps to transmit a “shared reality” that is supportive of euthanasia, and the mercy killing of those who our liberal, democratic, capitalist, Canadian society consider less valuable. We conclude that, while a right wing perspective might be ultra conservative in some respects, it does suggest that we need to rethink our liberal agenda in terms of who we want to be as Canadians. Ultimately, we consider a new liberal ethics that respects all persons, regardless of their autonomy or rationality, and is in keeping with the Canadian Constitution. We call it an ethics of reverence.

*Macleans* magazine: a practical-ethics perspective

Spin, defined by William Wray Carney (2002) as the “blatant art of bending the truth” (p. 24), involves arguing for one side, while denigrating or ignoring the other. It uses dramatic, emotional testimony to influence public opinion, and attempts subtly to persuade the public to agree with a certain political orientation. An example of spin can be seen in an article written in 1994 for *Macleans* by Corelli. In this article, “Mercy on Trial: A Child’s Death Revives the Euthanasia Debate,” the title purports to speak to an objective analysis that situates the Latimer case in relation to the debate on euthanasia. The article begins, though, with a lead that subjectively describes Tracy in terms of her disability and in terms of her extreme suffering: “In her short and tormented 12-year old life, Tracy Latimer never learned how to walk or talk or even feed herself” (p. 48). What follows is a dramatic pseudoscientific and emotional description of the medical “facts” of Tracy’s condition. Illogically, Corelli conflates the pseudoscientific “fact” that Tracy’s “brain was so severely damaged” with her lack of “muscular control” and her inability “to sit without help” (p. 48). Similarly, Corelli uses pseudo-medical terms to describe how Dr. Anne Dzus had placed “steel rods near [Tracy’s] spine in hopes of strengthening her back” and that she “was in great pain from a dislocated hip” (p. 48). These medical “facts,” while alluding to the medical diagnosis and procedures that Tracy experienced, use emotional images to persuade the reader that Tracy’s life was a life that was not worth living. These “facts,” however, tell only one side of the story: the side that supports Latimer’s decision to kill his daughter because she was disabled, suffering, irrational and in great pain. Significantly, we do not hear, in this paper, as *Alberta Report* reporter Shafer Parker (2001) and Tracy’s school communication book inform us, that “in the last months of her life, Tracy was doing better than ever” or that she “was all smiles” and involved in her friends’ “hijinks” (p. 26).

Involved, as it is, in (re)creating and perpetuating the stereotype of the long-suffering, pain-filled, and unresponsive cripple, unable to move even her own body, this Corelli article denigrates Tracy’s experience, while affirming Latimer’s experience. Figured in this article as a tearful, caring, anguished, and long-suffering father, whose “priority in murdering his daughter was to put her out of pain,” Latimer becomes a

stereotype for a caring man: a father “driven to emotional extremes” (p. 48). Moreover, because he is represented as a parent who must care “for family members with severe disabilities,” he becomes part of a minority group of oppressed parents, who must receive “special consideration.” It becomes evident, at this point, that the title, “Mercy on Trial” is not concerned with arguing for the objective analysis of mercy killing, for, given Tracy’s “condition,” mercy killing is an acceptable practice but, rather, it pleads mercy for Latimer, a minority of a peculiar and privileged kind.

It becomes clear, when examining the centre-left media coverage of the case, that even the articles that might appear to question Latimer’s mercy killing, ultimately use spin to twist the argument in Latimer’s favour. For example, “A Blunt Instrument,” an article written in 1994 for *Maclean’s* by Patricia Chisholm, begins with the lead, “There are few crimes more heinous than murdering one’s own child” (p. 24). We might expect from the title and from this initial leading sentence that the “blunt” instrument might be Latimer, the “good father” who committed the heinous crime of murdering his own child. The article, however, focuses almost exclusively on justice for Latimer, arguing that the case raises “painful questions about the fairness of Canadian Law” (p. 24). Situating Latimer in a valued Canadian farm community, identifying him as a valued Canadian “Saskatchewan grain farmer,” and situating him in a valued familial setting, as a good “father of three other children,” Chisholm stresses that it is not Latimer, but the law, that “is a blunt instrument” (p. 24). The victim, we discover, is not Tracy, but Latimer, her father. Blatantly bending the truth to a version of the story that works on Latimer’s behalf, the article, similar to the other articles in *Maclean’s*, utilizes a liberal-left bias, focussing on community and social fairness, to make a case for “[overhauling] Canada’s outmoded murder laws” (p. 24) so that Latimer, not Tracy, can receive justice.

This biased coverage does not change over time. While the article, “Everyone Knows it Happens: Taking Sides on the Right to End Life,” written in 1998 for *Maclean’s* magazine, appears to make the same mistake as many left-orientated progressives in that it conflates cases of “passive” euthanasia with Latimer’s less savoury “active” form of

euthanasia, Sharon Doyle Driedger's (1997) use of spin to consider this "great debate" from the perspective of "right-to-die advocates" who "[campaign] for the decriminalisation of euthanasia" reveals a blatant and illogical bending of the truth that is consistent with the early media coverage. Here, though, we get an illogical and biased emphasis on the larger euthanasia debate or, more specifically, the pro "right-to-die" perspective. While Driedger is clear about her political orientation and intention to support Latimer's mercy killing by using a "right-to-die" perspective that assumes that if Tracy could have, she would have chosen death rather than life, her refusal to acknowledge Tracy's actual experience, and her blatant use of emotional testimony from women in unrelated situations, only works to negate her argument. In the article, Driedger, for example, quotes one suffering woman who prays, "Dear God, allow me, allow me please [to die]," and another suffering woman who "insists she wants to make her own decisions about how to die" (p. 14); however, she does not take into consideration that these women who choose, even fight for their right to die, are different from Tracy, who was not given a choice. In this narrative, Tracy is invisible; her particular experiences are equated with those of dying adult women who choose to end their lives.

As usual, however, Tracy's father is privileged in this narrative. As a parent, and as an authoritative male figure, it is assumed that he has the rational right to free choice (both in his home and under the larger auspice of the law) when he chooses to murder his daughter. Latimer is thus given considerable agency, his narrative becoming central. Conflated with physicians, bio-ethicists, and with God, himself, Latimer becomes one of those elevated beings "who help, out of compassion, to end a life" (p. 14). This example of the conscious creation of public opinion is disturbing, precisely because public opinion is taken into account in legal cases. It was, after all, after Latimer had blatantly lied and then confessed to murdering his daughter, public opinion that had swayed the courts to drop his first-degree murder charge to second-degree murder, and it was more than likely public opinion that persuaded Justice Ted Noble in the 1997 trial to grant Latimer a constitutional exemption, which effectively transmuted the second-degree murder conviction, with its mandatory ten-year sentence, into a

two-year imprisonment, with one of the years to be served on his farm. Although this decision was overturned in 1998 and this overturning was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2001, primarily as a result of the disability-rights Coalition's exposure of the way in which Noble diminished Tracy Latimer's life in the eyes of the jury, this sentence stands as a reminder of how the courts and the general public privilege an inherently violent, normative and able-bodied reality, while, at the same time, discounting the lives and real lived experience of people with disabilities. Given that the law and the media ultimately mediate and dictate public opinion, it is important to be critical about how, in the name of a liberal, democratic Canada, these discourses, policies, reports and practices reveal that equality is consistently compromised by its binary opposite, inequality. In respect to the Latimer case, equality and liberty, understood in terms of an individual's freedom from state interference, is found in the law and in the media coverage of the case, only, paradoxically, through an acknowledgement of Latimer's liberty and Tracy's inequality and complete lack of subjectivity: in the legal and public endorsement of her death. Consequently, it is imperative that we question the constructed representation of cases such as the Latimer case precisely because they expose a hypocrisy that needs to be accounted for if the theoretical and constitutionally inscribed notion of Canada as a liberal, tolerant and pluralistic country is going to align itself with actual practices and experiences. Ultimately, we must ask ourselves what kind of country we want to imagine and actualize: one that supports our most vulnerable members or one that would eliminate them?

*Alberta Report: the conservative religious right perspective*

We would argue that publications of the religious right, most notably *Alberta Report*, have considered some of the above questions, providing, specifically, a rare exception among Canadian media publications in consistently providing space for Tracy Latimer's story to be told.

One of the hallmarks of the reporting of the Latimer case, as it has appeared in *Alberta Report*, has been a sustained focus on presenting both the facts of the case and its broader social ramifications from a disability-rights perspective. It seems that the vast majority of *Alberta Report's* stories on the Latimer case contain three common elements which,

together, create a space in which the case can be read as Tracy's narrative, and thus a narrative about the right of Canadians with disabilities to have their lives valued and protected within society. These three elements are:

- (1) An emphasis on Tracy Latimer's personhood as opposed to her disability.
- (2) A clearly-maintained distinction between the *facts* of Tracy Latimer's day-to-day life as they were documented in trial testimony, and the selective and sensationalised descriptions of Tracy's "severe disability" and "constant pain" that were the mainstay of most mainstream-media stories about the case.
- (3) The prominent inclusion of quotations by disability-rights advocates about the larger social implications of the Latimer case for the lives of people with disabilities.

Journalists writing for *Alberta Report* use each of these three elements to challenge mainstream media coverage by providing a disability-rights focus. As is exemplified in the articles from *Macleans*, analysis of media coverage of the Latimer case has revealed that the mainstream media has been overwhelmingly ableist (that is pro-Robert and anti- Tracy) in its normative coverage of the case. One study of 80 Latimer-related newspaper headlines, for instance, showed that only 25 mentioned or alluded to Tracy at all, and only three referred to her without some negative qualifier (Enns, p. 55). Most typically, such mainstream newspaper headlines featured references to Robert Latimer as being on trial in relation to the death of his "severely disabled daughter." In stunning contrast to these mainstream newspaper headlines are the headlines of Latimer-related stories appearing in *Alberta Report*.

For example, Joe Woodard headlines his December 5, 1994, article, "Compassion for the Calculating," and refers to Robert Latimer in the lead sentence of this article as a "daughter-killer." Woodard privileges Tracy's position as daughter while simultaneously destabilizing the popularized identity of Robert Latimer as long-suffering father. Indeed,

*Alberta Report's* coverage of the Latimer case is generally characterized by scepticism about Robert Latimer's truthfulness in representing his daughter's physical and mental condition and a consequent focus on exposing and exploring the discrepancies between the *facts* of Tracy Latimer's day-to-day life as they were documented in trial testimony, and the selective and sensationalized 30-second sound bytes describing Tracy's "severe disability" and "constant pain" that were the mainstay of most mainstream media stories about the case.

The February 19, 2001 article, "Ten Years Minimum," by Shafer Parker typifies *Alberta Report's* focus on separating little-known fact from popularized fiction regarding the exact nature and effects of Tracy Latimer's disabilities. The lead sentence of this article reads, "Knowing that everything Robert Latimer said about the child he murdered was false, the Supreme Court sent him to jail" (p. 26). Parker goes on to document numerous discrepancies between the *facts* of Tracy's life as they were revealed in court testimony, and the (re)constructions of Tracy's life promoted by her parents, often with the full cooperation of the mainstream media. For example, Parker describes Tracy's mother, Laura's, representation of Tracy by stating that

In court Tracy's mother deliberately misrepresented her daughter's condition during her last year of life. During Latimer's second trial she stated under oath that Tracy's back surgery (in which steel rods were inserted to straighten her spine) had left her in a lot of pain. She used to be a happy little girl, and she'd turned into someone who just sat slumped, just waiting to be moved. She was—she was very unhappy... Once in a while she would kind of sort of bat at a toy, but... she was miserable, and it was getting... harder and harder to even have her comfortable. (p. 26)

While Laura Latimer's own defection from being a witness for the prosecution of her husband to being a witness for the defense might point to the reconstruction of her own account of Tracy's life, Shafer Parker points out how the court exposed the contradictions in and obvious reconstruction of Laura's testimony:

Contrary to the Latimers' declarations that in Tracy's last year she was little more than a pain-wracked vegetable, crown prosecutor Eric Neufeld demonstrated that assessments by therapists showed the little girl obviously enjoyed music; she had a pull-switch on the canopy of her chair that would activate toys, and if a caregiver got too close, she would grab his or her glasses with her one useful hand and smile broadly. She also smiled while playing a clapping game with her peers and would try to start again after others had grown tired. (p. 26)

According to Parker, however, the greatest contradiction to the parents' propaganda came from the caregivers' communications book that was permanently attached to Tracy's wheelchair. The entries made by Mrs. Latimer, which she reluctantly read out in court (she had to be prompted repeatedly to speak up), reveal that in the last months of her life, Tracy was doing better than ever. Numerous entries record Tracy eating and sleeping well, and there are frequent descriptions of her as a happy girl.

She was all smiles when her cousins came for a visit. And when her younger sister Lindsay invited friends for a sleepover, she was fully involved in their hijinks. Tracy was the worst girl, her mother wrote, up at 10 to seven, laughing and vocalizing. She was really good the rest of the day. (p. 26)

What we see happening in this excerpt is the juxtaposition of two competing narratives: the narrative carefully (re)constructed by Tracy's mother, describing her as a pain-wracked bundle of flesh versus the narrative fragments of Tracy's lived experience, related by therapists, caregivers and, ironically, Tracy's own mother, which showed Tracy as someone who visibly enjoyed her life.

In her mother's narrative, related after Latimer went to trial, Tracy "just sat slumped, just waiting to be moved. She was very unhappy" (Parker, 2001, p. 26). In the narrative of Tracy's own lived experience, related in the school communication book before Tracy was murdered and before Latimer went to trial, however, she is a "happy girl" who loves music and interacting with family and peers. By thus presenting the narrative

of Tracy's own lived experience as an entirely legitimate countercontext for her parents' narrative of her life, Parker, in a manner that typifies *Alberta Report's* coverage of the Latimer case, directly and systematically undermines the dominant, media-endorsed, cultural privileging of Robert and Laura Latimer's narrative of Tracy's life as being merely a pain-wracked existence. Here, for once, it is Tracy's narrative that is privileged, not silenced.

Another crucial aspect of *Alberta Report's* characteristic privileging of Tracy Latimer's narrative over the constructed narrative of her parents, is the prominent inclusion of quotations by disability-rights advocates about the large social implications of the Latimer case for the lives of people with disabilities. By explicitly placing Tracy Latimer's narrative within a larger disability-rights narrative, journalists writing for *Alberta Report* identify Tracy as being a member of a larger community of persons with disabilities, rather than identifying her—the way the mainstream media so often does—as simply an archetypal cross of suffering that her parents had to bear in stoic solitude. For example, Joe Woodard quotes Mark Pickup, a disability-rights activist, who has multiple sclerosis: "'Civilized societies don't kill off their weakest members, like the Latimer girl,' Mr. Pickup asserts. 'It's a scary time to be disabled'" (Woodard, 1994, p. 29). By thus connecting the fate of Tracy Latimer with the potential fate of all Canadians with disabilities, Woodard effectively removes Tracy from her isolation as Robert Latimer's "severely disabled daughter" and identifies her as being part of a larger—albeit equally vulnerable—community of Canadians with disabilities. In doing so, Woodard creates a space in which Tracy's narrative can not only be read, but can also be politicized and read as a disability-rights narrative. We would argue that this kind of empowering presentation of Tracy Latimer's own narrative is at the heart of what the right-wing *Alberta Report* is doing right in its coverage of the Latimer case.

Interestingly, a close analysis of mainstream representations of Robert and Tracy Latimer reveals that a liberal-left bias is often used by classically conservative, right-wing mainstream media not, as might be expected, to support Tracy, and the minority rights of disabled people,

but to support Robert Latimer, and his right to kill his daughter. The potential danger for harm here is self-evident. The Latimer case, being a narrative shaped by history and tradition, is a story that is not fixed, but emerges within a future determined by certain, in this case, horrific possibilities. One of the greatest dangers may be, as Ravi Malhotra (2001) writes, "that most activists on the Left, whether they are feminists, Greens or anti-poverty activists, show little interest in the topic" (on-line publication). While this lack of interest seriously "calls into question their commitment to equality rights for people with disabilities," it also points to an acceptance of a certain re-visioning that is occurring in Canadian society at this time around what it means to be a "valued" and "worthwhile" human being. Ironically, while the religious right, as exemplified by *Alberta Report* coverage, is aware that this kind of subtle, "systemic discrimination" could have severe consequences for people with disabilities and all Canadians whose quality of life may, at one point or another, be called into question, the mainstream left-oriented coverage seems tragically unaware and unconcerned.

*Reverence: a possible alternative*

Contemporary resistance to the right-wing perspective, as embodied by publications such as *Alberta Report*, is based on a popularized belief that it embodies a fundamentalist, religious right, sanctity of life perspective that is non-progressive and traditional, refusing the implications inherent in the ability of science to keep people alive beyond what is considered reasonable, and beyond what the state and the family can afford. As Canadians, however, it is important to become aware that the left-wing, progressive argument, which judges the value of human life based on a perceived lack of quality and use, privileges those who are able and healthy, at the same time as it discriminates against and devalues those who do not or cannot adhere to this norm. While it is possible to argue that this discrimination is inherent to all democratic societies, beginning with the Ancient Greeks and Aristotle's non-democratic dictum, "[L]et there be a law that no deformed child shall be reared" (*Politics*, p. 7, Section 1335b), that supported the euthanasia of disabled children, it is important, given our technological ability to enhance the life of people with disabilities, that we redefine what we

mean by democratic citizenship and that we redefine what we mean by equality.

In a very simple sense, living in a postmodern, postcolonial and pluralist Canada, a nation that purports to value difference in all its many democratic forms, demands that, at the very least, we listen to the other side of the story, to Tracy Latimer's narrative, and to the value that was an unmistakable "fact" of her life, and, by extension, the lives of all people with disabilities. In acknowledging that her life did have "quality," even if that life might exist outside of normative notions of what quality might mean, and in recognizing her constitutional "right" to life, liberty, and equality, regardless of her disability, it is possible to argue that our modern understanding and appreciation of difference is managed by a liberal, democratic, and capitalist concept of Canada and Canadians, that is essentially ableist. One possible way of countering or resisting this ableist and discriminating rhetoric and, therefore, developing a secular, as opposed to a religious, praxis that is inclusive and appreciative of difference, is, as Paul Woodruff (2001) argues in *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, to develop a politics and practice of reverence.

As Woodruff argues, reverence has little to do with religion and the civil observance of "ceremony or good manners" (p. 5).<sup>3</sup> It has more to do with politics, community and the right use of power. As Woodruff stresses, it is possible to imagine a "religion without reverence; we see it, for example, wherever religion leads people into aggressive war or violence" (p. 4), but power without reverence . . . is a catastrophe for all concerned. Power without reverence is aflame with arrogance, while service without reverence is smoldering toward rebellion. Politics without reverence is blind to the general good and deaf to advice from people who are powerless. And life without reverence? . . . That would be brutish and selfish, and it had best be lived alone. (p. 5)

Reverence, then, "is a kind of virtue," encapsulating "a capacity to do what is right and what is right in a given case" (p. 6). These virtues are established by the common values of a community, by the established ways in which "its members live together" (p. 7). In a society, and

particularly in the media, that has become increasingly irreverent, it is important to develop reverence, defined by Woodruff, as the capacity “to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have” (p. 8). By embracing these feelings, it is possible to develop a personal sense of strength and character based, not on the example set by Latimer, which involved doing what is “right,” according to his own “reasonable” beliefs about the qualitative value of human life, but on the example set by those who are able to get in touch with reverence, as a cardinal virtue: “the source of feelings that prompt us to behave well” (p. 6) in the face of injustice and “human limitations,” encouraging us to “[respect] fellow human beings, flaws and all” (p. 1).

Drawing on virtue ethics and ancient Greek philosophy here, Woodruff argues that an awareness of reverence fosters the idea that “a human life is too uncertain to be judged on the basis of any part of it: no one can safely claim to be living a totally successful [or happy] life” (p. 82), and it is wrong to assume, as Latimer did, that “some people are better than others” (p. 6). Once this assumption is made, reverence is lost; as soon as reverence is lost, “humanity is at issue” (p. 83). The sense of common humanity is forgotten, along with the democratic institutional values and expectations that ask us to remember our shared sense of what it means to be human and vulnerable (p. 83). According to Woodruff, traditionally, those who “forget [their] humanity” either “[take] on the airs of a god” or “[act] like a beast of prey” (p. 83). It is possible to argue that Latimer, unashamedly, acted in an irreverent way when he took the life of his daughter. For the Ancient Greeks, “an irreverent soul is arrogant and shameless, . . . and unable to feel respect for people it sees as lower than itself—ordinary people, prisoners, children” (p. 4). While it is clear that Latimer did not respect the life of his daughter, unable to see the value and quality of her life that was evident in her school communication journal, it is also clear that his inability to respect the life of his child indicated a deficiency in his “ability to feel that anyone or anything is higher” than himself (p. 4). He had no respect or reverence for the laws and constitutional guarantees, which ensure that Canada as a nation and Canadians, as people, adhere to common virtues, such as equality and justice. Moreover, it is because Latimer had reverence only for his own feelings and beliefs that he turned to violence, taking his

daughter's life, and discounting the psychological effects that his actions might have on his family: the survivors of his unbridled and unsolicited abuse.

It is possible to argue, then, that while in Ancient Greek times, reverence was used in ceremonies to celebrate democratic citizenship,<sup>1</sup> it is sorely needed today if we, as Canadians are going to be able to uphold the democratic rights and responsibilities accorded to all people in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In keeping with these rights, accorded to every citizen, reverence, as a virtue and practice, is able to transcend physical, mental, class and "cultural boundaries," acting in universal ways, so that a sense of shared humanity is recovered. If the general public and the media would model this sense of reverence by listening, not only to the voice of the abuser, but to the stifled and silenced voice of his/her victim, it might be possible to recover not only a sense of our shared humanity, but also a sense of responsibility that we have to others, who are less able, but equally as worthy. As Woodruff points out, it is in remembering and recovering and listening to the Other that a relationship can develop where "differences of culture, social class, age . . . gender" and disability are overlooked (p. 84). While "reverence calls us to be conscious of bare humanity, the humanity of our species" regardless of our differences, it also calls us to be conscious of our customary ways of relating to the Other, and ultimately, calls us to remember that we are human, together, with them (p. 83). Interestingly, all is not lost. While Tracy Latimer's life was sacrificed on the altar of Robert Latimer's hubris and general disrespect for his daughter's life, in the silence that follows her death, there is a call, put out by people with disabilities, disability scholars, right-wing news reporters and concerned, conscious parents and individuals, to recover and reclaim the awe and respect that we hold reverently for her life.

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to acknowledge here that, even among the Ancients, reverence, as we've framed it here, was not universally practiced.

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### Author Notes

Heidi Janz , PhD, is Post-Doctoral Fellow and Co-investigator of the Defining Disability Ethics Project, John Dossetor Health Ethics Centre, University of Alberta. [hjanz@ualberta.ca](mailto:hjanz@ualberta.ca)

Sally Hayward, PhD, is an instructor in the Academic Writing Programme at the University of Lethbridge, teaching rhetoric and composition. [haywards1@shaw.ca](mailto:haywards1@shaw.ca)

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>While left- and right-wing politics are often presented as two opposite ends of the political spectrum, the distinction, as it appears in practice in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is not always clear. In modern political rhetoric, left-wing ideology is most often associated with a liberal politics that promotes a commitment to secularism, equal rights and civil liberties. In reality, though, left-wing practice privileges Rawlsian notions of rational subjectivity, which severely limits the scope of its egalitarian ideals. It should be noted that most of the support for Latimer's right to kill his disabled daughter, Tracy, came from civil libertarians, who privileged Latimer's rational right to choose for his daughter. Contrarily, while right-wing ideology is most often associated with traditional, conservative Christian family values—beliefs that are seen to restrict the civil liberties of many underprivileged or non-traditional groups—its conservative attitudes toward right-to-life issues support an egalitarianism that is in keeping with the constitutional belief that all human life is sacred. Although this fundamental right to life does not currently apply to many underprivileged groups, it does impact on those considered physically or cognitively disabled. Consequently, while disability-rights activists might support left-wing policies that support the elimination of class, sexuality and colour inequities, they are compelled to support a right-wing politics that, at a basic, fundamental level, upholds the belief that people with disabilities have a right to life. The distinction between left and right politics over this fundamental question is evident in the media coverage of the Latimer case, with left-wing media supporting Latimer and right-wing media supporting disability-rights activists who were concerned to articulate Tracy's perspective.

<sup>2</sup>Singer's "practical" utilitarian ethics differs from traditional utilitarian ethics in that the utilitarian mantra, "the greatest good for the greatest number" as an equalizing measure for the ethical behaviour and treatment of all human beings, is amended and applied only to those human beings whose concrete properties and rational capacity to experience pain and pleasure are deemed sufficient. Ironically, while Singer claims that an individual's right to life is tied intrinsically to his or her concrete properties, he also argues that this criterion can be applied to other animals.

<sup>3</sup>While it is possible to argue that this conceptualization of reverence is essentially akin to the "sanctity of life argument," minus any reference to religion or the "Creator," we strive here to avoid this connection. In our thinking, as in Woodruff's, reverence is more essentially tied to a politics and practice that pertains to being in communication and communion with the Other, respecting the common humanity that each being shares, one with the other, despite or in spite of their differences.