

BROCK'S BANTER: On Her Own Terms

By Brock Weir

?It was a mercy killing!?

That was the exclamation of my paternal grandmother listening to her kitchen radio one afternoon in Agincourt.

By the time she finished slicing our tuna sandwiches diagonally, and once again to make dainty quarters (crusts on), she placed our two plates down on the table where my jaw fell just a minute or two before.

I was probably only eight or nine years old, but I can still hear the sound of the ?tut, tut, tut? coming out of her mouth as the radio continued its broadcast.

The newscaster was talking about Robert Latimer, the Saskatchewan farmer who, at that time, was recently arrested for killing his daughter, Tracy, through carbon monoxide poisoning, placing her in the trunk of his car.

Around this time, it had been claimed and speculated that Tracy was living in a world of constant pain, unable to adequately express herself, and her father's actions were the only merciful way out. Others, however viewed it as murder and took their claims higher and higher.

As a youngster, I didn't have an opinion formed in one way or another, but I just could not wrap my head around the actions of a parent ending the life of his or her child, nor could I wrap my head around the support coming from my grandmother.

When the shock wore off, I had lots of questions for her and she explained her views on so-called mercy killing. It was an eye-opening conversation, which diverted sharply from Saskatchewan to the work of Dr. Jack Kevorkian and the entire concept of doctor-assisted suicide. It was an enlightening conversation, to be sure, but I was not entirely on board with either concept.

As the years went on, however, my mind kept going back to this conversation as each passing year started to take away a little bit more of my grandmother. About four or five years after this conversation, it was evident she was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. It started off with the little things, as this disease often does; instances which she tossed aside with a chuckle, but as they gained frequency they became no laughing matter for anyone concerned.

Soon, these instances became more serious to the point where it became clear she was no longer aware of what the issue was, why she couldn't do certain things and, of course frustration mounted. Unbeknownst to herself, there came a point where her safety could not be ensured if status quo on her care was maintained and alternatives needed to be looked at. When that time ultimately came, however, the deterioration inevitably accelerated and she was soon gone to us in all but body.

But what was going on inside this body? Rarely did the intensity of her stare disappear from sight like a curtain wafting in the wind. They were still alert, but if the wheels were turning inside, the rest of the works were not cooperating with the gears.

What was going on behind those eyes when we came to make what was, in hindsight, idle chatter just hoping something would click? Were any of those words getting through to her, perhaps inspiring a thought or two? Were there thoughts being processed that were unable to be expressed?

Did she recognize any of us?

Of the one seemingly random word that never left her vocabulary until just the very end (which is probably best not repeated in this space) have any particular meaning or context?

We will never know.

We will also never know if she was experiencing regrets, frustration and, most importantly, pain.

As she neared the end of her life, I wheeled her out on the verandah of her nursing home into the fresh air and bright sunlight. She hadn't been out in a while and as soon as her face hit the air there was a change that came over her. By that time, the lone remaining word had since been consigned to memory, but it was clear by the faint smile on her face and the ever-deepening breaths that this was stirring something ? instinctively, or otherwise ? inside of her.

Nothing needed to be said by either of us. It was time just to enjoy the moment ? but it wasn't a moment I fully enjoyed. As we (and realistically that ?we? should be ?I?) watched people coming into the nursing home, kids in tow, laden with flowers and gifts for parents or grandparents who were spending their twilight years in the facility, my mind went back to that conversation we had what had seemed like a few short years before around the kitchen table.

If my grandmother could have looked into a crystal ball at that very moment to see what the next decade had in store for her, I wonder if that would have shaped our talk, which was simplified at best for this youngster.

Over the course of the prolonged national debate on the issue of doctor-assisted suicide, a debate which has ebbed and flowed in terms of the attention it has stirred in the masses, we heard any number of arguments for or against any proposed changes in the law.

For supporters of the measures, it was a matter of the individual choosing to die with dignity, with minimal pain on their own terms. Those determined to follow this path did not wait around for the Government of Canada, or the Supreme Court, for that matter, to render a decisive decision and took matters overseas to get the job done in what they viewed as more 'enlightened and progressive' societies.

Others, however, were of the opinion that permitting doctor-assisted suicide would lead down a 'slippery slope' of complex medical, ethical and religious issues, as well as moral fears that relatives and others could use any change in law to prey on relatives, and others over whose affairs they had control, who were in a vulnerable position.

Each side made valid points, but no matter their merit, personal experiences, in my view, were decisive.

If she indeed had a crystal ball and knew what lay ahead of her, my strong, proud grandmother, a tiny woman in stature who was able to overcome just about any towering challenge but one, knowing the effects the disease would have on our family, particularly her husband who acted as her sole caregiver for several years, would have had no hesitation in picking the right time to 'check out' and, more importantly, on her own terms.

I am heartened that Canadians facing such physical pain and struggles will soon, in many cases, have that option available to them as well.