

CI – Disconnecting the State's Feeding Tubes

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By Butler Shaffer

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A 1951 film, The Big Carnival, was the story of a once-famous journalist trying to reestablish his career at a small town newspaper. The reporter, played by Kirk Douglas, learned of a man trapped in an underground cave-in. Seizing the opportunity, the journalist took control of the news story, sending out reports to the big-city papers and, in the process, delaying rescue efforts in order to extend the drama as long as he could. In short order, the incident acquired national significance, while local rescue efforts literally became a carnival. The trapped man died, largely because of the reporter's interference with rescue attempts.

My mind keeps racing back to this film as I watch the circus atmosphere created by the sad case of Terri Schiavo. While I sympathize with the positions of Terri's husband, her parents, and other relatives, I find the intrusions of politicians, the media, and self-appointed "interest" groups akin to Kirk Douglas' self-indulgent reporter. The conclusions to be reached by such people will, given the public relations nature of their behavior, always be grounded in superficiality. If human society is to be conducted with a sense of decency, resort must be had to deeper spiritual insights and rational thinking than has been displayed thus far in this sad affair.

Technological changes inevitably produce the need to revisit long-held principles not so much for the purpose of changing our standards of propriety, but to see how they find expression in a constantly changing world. The invention of the airplane, radio, and television, has forced us to reexamine ancient legal doctrines that spoke of real property interests reaching indefinitely into the universe. Medical technologies that now permit life to be extended — and even engineered — far beyond capacities available fifty years ago, have resurrected questions heretofore confined to the works of fiction writers such as Mary Shelley and Aldous Huxley.

What is "life," and what is it not? Those who prattle about the "sanctity of life" in the Schiavo matter overlook the fact that life is self-directed activity, and that all of politics is premised upon forcing life to go in directions it does not choose. Politics, by its very nature, is a renunciation of the sanctity of life.

Who is and who is not a "person" to be respected in our world? As the practice of slavery and the treatment of American Indians make clear, this latter question has been with us for a number of centuries. The Schiavo case — along with the continuing debate on abortion —

inform us that this question is not only far from being resolved, it is far from even being properly formulated as a question.

It is difficult to engage in any thoughtful and far-reaching examination of these questions without confronting legions of the politically entrenched, men and women less desirous of advancing human understanding than in defending dogma from honest inquiry. Even the president of Harvard University has discovered how dangerous it is to raise even empirical questions — which, at the very least, is what any decent university should be about — that challenge politically correct articles of faith. Politics — based as it is on divisiveness and shallowness of thought — has taken over and depressed the quality of discourse regarding matters to which responsible people need to focus their minds. It is difficult to imagine any social topic that is not directed by the heavy hand of competing political ideologies.

While I have long regarded debates as a waste of time, it would be an undeserved compliment to regard the Schiavo political/media debacle as an intellectually-grounded analysis of competing viewpoints. What could be more ludicrous than the spectacle of conservatives prattling their "pro-life" party line on behalf of Terri Schiavo, as they continue to conduct their war upon Iraqi civilians abroad, and defend capital punishment at home? Not to be outdone in absurdity are the liberals, who wrap themselves in the mantle of "pro-choice," even as they espouse the imposition of political mandates upon people who do not choose to be burdened. The modern political "debate" is not unlike visiting the primate building at a zoo and listening to the cacophonous shrieking coming from both sides of the house! Nothing but mischief, therefore, should have been expected from allowing the state to define "life."

I have long been of the view that one becomes a "person" at the moment of conception, when one's DNA comes into being. (I once had a feminist colleague who insisted that a baby did not acquire DNA until after it was born, a process she was unable to explain.) But when one ceases to be a person cannot be so readily determined. Even a dead body retains DNA. Should one who has submitted to cryonic suspension still be considered a "person?" Should the presence of an active consciousness be the test of personhood and, if so, why?

You can see at once that neither the state nor the media are equipped to address such questions. Matters of life and death are simply too important to be entrusted to politicians, judges, bureaucrats, and radio and television gasbags. The bloody and dehumanizing record of political systems in their treatment of life, disqualifies them. In a world that is becoming increasingly decentralized, such inquiries are best left in the hands of individuals faced with the making of decisions in their own lives. Thus, while I consider "personhood" to begin at conception, I am unwilling to have the state intervene to direct the mother regarding how to deal with her pregnancy.

In life and death issues as in other areas of human endeavor, it is time for us to move on to alternative ways of making decisions. In a world of interconnected complexities — when decisions are made and communicated throughout the world in a matter of seconds — the plodding nature of the conflict-ridden state has become irrelevant to the realities of human action. The state has no creative role to play, but operates only as a hindrance. As its emphasis on "deregulation" and "tax cuts" demonstrates, the state's only claim to facilitating human well-being is to get out of the way of self-directed people!

The state, in other words, is brain-dead. Its power derives largely from inertia (i.e., the unwillingness of a well-conditioned populace to consider alternative systems) rather than from conviction. There is nothing coming from within it that would engage the mind of any thoughtful human being. It has become as meaningless to the modern world as a slide-rule in an age of pocket calculators; as out of place as an ice-truck on a residential street. While it has been reduced to little more than reflexive action, it is — like a mortally-wounded rabid animal — still capable of transmitting its deadly virus to those who come into contact with it.

The state is a non-productive parasite that feeds — in increasing quantities — on the energies of the productive. It is time to disconnect its feeding tubes!

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