LIFE MEETS DEATH IN VIENNA'S ST. RAPHAEL HOSPICE

Austria and America, an ocean apart, with different economic systems, political structures, and church traditions, wrestle with a similar set of questions: What is the meaning of death? How do we incorporate dying into our living? What is the responsibility of government with people facing that inevitability?

Some Americans are rethinking regulations that keep terminally ill people plugged into life support systems. Opponents say our public policy must never promote death. We must use every medical means possible to extend life. Otherwise, we are “playing God,” interfering with the Natural Order.

In a curious way, the same rationale is used by those who reject any medical treatment at all. Austrians watched with great empathy the case of little Olivia, whose cancer was treated only after the state overrode her parents’ belief in a disputed healing method. That same story has been played out frequently in America, where hundreds of thousands belong to religious groups that rely on faith alone to heal.

Those situations are complicated by a conflict of values between self-determination, religious freedom, parental authority, and state responsibility for the health and welfare of its citizens. Such conflicts often wind up in the court system -- a costly, time-consuming, win-lose setting. Perhaps we could do more to create a more dignified (not to mention efficient and humane) framework for the human struggle with death.

One hopeful development has been the hospice movement: individuals trained to coach families as their loved ones die at home, or if they prefer, in a clinic-type environment with round-the-clock staffing. Basic to this alternative is the conviction that people have the right to make choices about how they die: whether to be in pain, whom to have with them when (including their pets), and when to refuse medical treatment. Patients and families make those decisions -- with help from professionals who focus on the dying process, rather than on trying to add a few more hours or weeks to a life.

This week I visited the St. Raphael Hospice in the 17th district of Vienna. I spent an hour in conversations with three women, each dying of cancer, and each, because of their hospice experience, able to talk about their impending deaths as an upcoming event in their lives. There was a dignity, serenity and honesty in those conversations, as we discussed how to prepare three young children for the loss of their mother, memories of travels in the U.S., and how much “voller” I look in person than in media.
Even behind such a concrete alternative as hospice is a belief structure — including religious beliefs — that supports a person’s choice to move into the last stage of life with grace. Individuals may vary in their certainty about, or descriptions of, an after life. They may argue about if and when human freedom might be interrupted by divine intervention. But believers (publicly declared or privately acknowledged) share the sense that there is a larger, benevolent context for their lives. And in the comfort of that realization should come an ability to let go. For this life is not all there is. Each day is a gift, from a Giver we cannot comprehend, whose existence we cannot prove, but whom we may intuit.

Somehow that gift is all the dearer (teuer) shared in the loving atmosphere of a hospice.

SWANEE HUNT
Über das Sterben in Wunde und Frieden


In Wien, in der Hauptstadt Österreichs, wo die Medizin immer noch eine geringe Rolle spielt, hat der St. Raphael-Hospiz-Gesetzgeber eine wichtige Entscheidung getroffen. In der Vergangenheit war die Sterbephilosophie in Österreich von der der US-Botschafterin Swannie Hunt charakterisiert, sie hat sich mit der Frage beschäftigt, ob das Sterben in Wunde und Frieden möglich ist.

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