**An end to it all; The issues …complicated as life itself (edited)**

[David Greising, Tribune chief business correspondent; Chicago Tribune; 27 March 2005](https://www.proquest.com/docview/420168801/D8A8CA03773A4BAFPQ/1?accountid=14525)

Cancer was killing my mother, Lynore Greising Peick. It was sucking the life from her body and had stolen the power from her brain.

The right to life. The right to die. The right to privacy. The right to dignity. What's right? What's wrong? No one knows for certain. And the more certain people are, the more certain it is that they're wrong.

I know, because I've been there.

Five years ago, Mom had granted me her medical power of attorney back when she was still cogent. I was responsible for deciding (when to stop life support).

She hoped to die in peace, in comfort, in her own home.

But just how (long) ….would she have wanted us to continue (life support)?

For my family, it came down to the question of **humanity**.

Ultimately, it comes down to what we define life to be, and what value we place on the quality of life. Is life the beating of a heart? Or must the brain function, too?

I consulted her doctor, my Lutheran pastor, and a medical ethicist.

I came to believe that her **spirit** was with God, regardless of whether her earthly body lived or died. The **essence** of Mom's being was gone. I came to feel no moral obligation to keep the broken vessel of her body alive.

Even so, the decision to withdraw food tore against every human feeling.

But the mystery of life and death would not allow itself to be solved. For months I had come to feel that Mom was gone, that only her body remained.

If she really was gone, then why the compelling need to keep vigil as her body shut down? Why sing hymns and read the Bible to a person who was no longer there? Out of belief that she might, somehow, hear?

I don't think that was the reason. We were compelled by a sense of respect. In a sense, I felt, we were escorting her **spirit** into the new life to come.

1. Do you believe Greising’s description of his mom’s “humanity”, “spirit” & “essence” are her “tamashi”?

2. Can you think of a Buddhist holiday that is related to “escorting her spirit into the new life”?

(full text starts on following page)

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**An end to it all ; The issues raised by the Terri Schiavo case linger and are as complicated as life itself; A brief miracle, then darkness: [Chicago Final Edition]**

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THE SCHIAVO CASE: The issues raised by the Terri Schiavo case linger and are as complicated as life itself.

My mother came back from the dead.

This wasn't a hold-the-presses miracle. It didn't make news outside our immediate family. But it was miraculous, nonetheless.

Cancer was killing my mother, Lynore Greising Peick. It was sucking the life from her body and had stolen the power from her brain. For nearly two years she had not left the hospital bed encamped in her living room. Mom had not talked or responded for almost a year.

Then, on New Year's Eve 1999, it happened.

She spoke.

At a boisterous, rollicking party, with most of her eight children and their families packed into her house, with her only sister and her mother there, too, she suddenly joined in. Her words were slurred, like a stroke victim's, but they were words, nonetheless.

It startled us in the way a great gift shocks--something we had wished for, but never dared to hope for.

Mom was with us again.

She had to be reminded who her children were. She met grandchildren she had never hugged. She heard about life changes: a son moving back to town, a granddaughter going to college, a nephew sailing around the world.

For three weeks she awoke. Then the shade came down again.

Mom's eyes stared blankly. The smile that once had filled our lives with warmth now mocked us. It took on a Cheshire cat quality, lingering in its hollow-cheeked, long-toothed emptiness long after the intelligence that once ignited it was gone.

That haunting, senseless smile came back to me last week in the image of Terri Schiavo. As Terri Schiavo's grueling end-of-life saga encamped itself in our nation's consciousness, I saw my dying mother again.

She appeared every time I saw that video of Terri with her mother, blinking and "smiling." There and not there, both at once.

Terri Schiavo has become a political pawn. Tom DeLay and President Bush have made their moves with her. Dr. Bill Frist, the Senate majority leader, committed political malpractice by "diagnosing" Terry Schiavo from the floor of the Senate.

Rally to a symbol

The people at her hospice in Florida, or at the Supreme Court in Washington, have rallied--not to her side, but to her symbolism. They wanted her kept alive even though the court-appointed doctor who actually examined her declared--perhaps too vividly--that her brain is "liquid" by now.

The right to life. The right to die. The right to privacy. The right to dignity. What's right? What's wrong? No one knows for certain. And the more certain people are, the more certain it is that they're wrong.

I know, because I've been there.

Five years ago, as my mom lay dying, I was responsible for deciding just how gently--or not--she would go into her own good night. Mom had granted me her medical power of attorney back when she was still cogent.

Back then, breast cancer had taken residence in her brain but not yet taken control. Mom was clear about what she wanted and what she did not want. She did not want to die in a nursing home. She wanted no heroic measures. She hoped to die in peace, in comfort, in her own home.

It has become a truism, thanks to Terri Schiavo, that people should have living wills. That by writing down their wishes, they will ease the burden of decisions for the people they love.

But words are never so inadequate as when life or death hangs on every syllable. The directives of a living will sound simple and straightforward on paper. But when the moment comes, the notions become incredibly complex.

Ultimately, it comes down to what we define life to be, and what value we place on the quality of life. Is life the beating of a heart? Or must the brain function, too?

If one lives, as Schiavo did for years, in a "persistent vegetative state," is that really a human life worth living?

Schiavo's parents think so. They wanted their daughter to live as long as her heart could beat and her lungs could breathe. They testified that they would amputate body parts in order to keep her head and trunk alive.

My mother clearly would not have wanted that. But just how far short of such extremes would she have wanted us to stop? Her living will did not answer that question with precision. I suspect few do. The body breaks down in its own way, without reference to legal codicils.

For my family, it came down to the question of humanity.

Ultimately, it seems, it is our brain that separates us from all other beings. Once the brain no longer reasons, are we really human anymore? I thought not. More important, given my obligation to carry out my Mom's wishes, I thought she wouldn't, either.

In the months after her New Year's Eve rally, my mother's body told us the time was coming to let go. Her legs began drawing up toward her chest. Her weakened heart left her fingertips to turn blue and her extremities grow clammy. The fortified drinks that sustained her would pool in her mouth and just slowly seep down her throat.

This was no longer a quality of life that my mother would have wanted. But that presented us with the hardest question of all: How to bring that life to an end?

Was it moral to stop feeding her? To do so would mean abandoning all hope. It would mean admitting that there would be no more New Year's miracles--no more Mom. Letting go of that last hope for a miracle may be the hardest part of letting go. As Schiavo wasted away last week, there were still those who argued, in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence, that a miracle just might happen. It didn't for my mother, and it didn't for Schiavo.

As my mom wore down, day after day, as her breathing shallowed and her body grayed, it became apparent that the question of sustenance might be looked at another way. Perhaps it was immoral to keep feeding her if that meant prolonging a struggle she had already lost.

I consulted her doctor, my Lutheran pastor, and a medical ethicist. The consensus was surprisingly clear. Medically, my mother was beyond experiencing pain. The only part of her brain still working was the part that ran her heart and lungs and body systems. She would not feel an absence of food and could not experience a sense of abandonment.

Spiritually, she was ready for her God. My pastor counseled that God grants life not only in quantity, but in quality. "I came that they may have life, and life abundant," Jesus tells his disciples. We live in relationship to God, and when we can't reciprocate in that relationship, perhaps our life on this earth has come to an end.

Christian doctrine holds that nothing separates us from God. I came to believe that her spirit was with God, regardless of whether her earthly body lived or died. The essence of Mom's being was gone. I came to feel no moral obligation to keep the broken vessel of her body alive.

Even so, the decision to withdraw food tore against every human feeling. We are raised to love life and to nurse hope. We are suckled by our mothers and expect to offer succor to them in return.

Mom shared decision

In the end, the decision to end Mom's life became mutual. My siblings and I had decided to stop feeding her, but to continue offering water. But by the time we took that step, Mom stopped accepting even water. Her body was ready to expire.

But the mystery of life and death would not allow itself to be solved. For months I had come to feel that Mom was gone, that only her body remained. But as she went through those final days and hours, that feeling could not hold.

If she really was gone, then why the compelling need to keep vigil as her body shut down? Why sing hymns and read the Bible to a person who was no longer there? Out of belief that she might, somehow, hear?

I don't think that was the reason. We were compelled by a sense of respect. In a sense, I felt, we were escorting her spirit into the new life to come.

It happened without a midnight act of Congress. It didn't take a court's decree. There were no protesters or television cameras. She died quietly, in her bed, with her children by her side.

Terri Schiavo's suffering has spurred much talk about a right to life. The right to a dignified death should be just as strong.

**Illustration**

PHOTO GRAPHIC; Caption: PHOTO: Tribune reporter David Greising had to decide when to withdraw food from his mother, who was dying from complications of breast cancer in 2000. On the eve of her death, he put together photo collages of his mother's life. GRAPHIC (color): O Death, rock me asleep, Bring me to quiet rest, Let pass my weary guiltless ghost Out of my careful breast. -- GEORGE AND ANNE BOLEYN Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. -- DYLAN THOMAS Tribune illustration.