

ABSTRACT – DIGNICIDE

Presentation at the Euthanasia-2016 Conference

World Federation of Right-to-Die Societies

Amsterdam, May 12, 2016

In the English language suicide is a very negative word. Most understand it to be a violent and lonely act. But by definition it also includes a peaceful act, even with family in support. The Right-to-Die Movement (the Movement) deserves a more positive, single word that is not burdened with negative connotation.

We¹ propose “Dignicide²,” a new word.

To most people, the word suicide means a violent, selfish act, by someone who is depressed.

Let us examine the elements of a typical suicide. It is:

- 1) A violent act, such as shooting oneself, inhaling car exhaust, jumping from a tall building.
- 2) A lonely act. Typically suicides are carried out alone – not in front of others. And of course others are never told in advance because that could lead to interference.
- 3) Done hastily. While a suicidal person may have been thinking of the act for some time, usually there is an event, a tipping point, that causes the person to rush into action.
- 4) Done by depressed people, most of whom can be helped with professional treatment.

In the Right-to-Die Movement our dignified self-taking of life is **different in all respects**:

- 1) Our death is not violent. It is quiet, peaceful.
- 2) Our death is typically not lonely. It is accomplished with the family aware, often in support, and even present.
- 3) Our death is thoughtfully planned out, usually with the help of others — it is a **process** that takes weeks, months, even years; and
- 4) Our death is not caused by depression but is the result of a rational, logical plan. The decision is based on suffering caused by pain, helplessness, loss of dignity, or just plain being worn out after a long and fruitful life.

So the word suicide does not describe the Movement’s self-taking of life. Dignicide does. Its two roots are dignity and death.³ Nothing could be more clear and direct.

¹ “We” are Leonard Bernstein, who gave us the word, Dan Carrigan, who strongly opposed it then supported it, Hugh Wynne, and the presenter, Bill Simmons. In this abstract, “we” always means the four of us; however “our,” where the context implies it, means those of us in the Right-to-Die Movement.

² Mr. Bernstein created the word. However, others have conceived it too, independently. The first may have been Canadian Trevor Wicks (www.innovationbc.com). Another was Richard Stainton (UK). There are a few French uses, too.

³ This is the background to this presentation: Near the end of the 2014 Chicago WFRtD Conference, Bill Simmons asked if others wanted to work with him to find a substitute for the word suicide. Others agreed that there was a need and formed the “Alt-Suicide Group.” There were 17 members from around the world, doctors and other professionals some of whom were and

In addition to this compelling reason (our deaths **are different**), there are four additional reasons that support adopting and using the new word, Dignicide.

- The single word, Dignicide, allows us to communicate much better in the digital age, the age of soundbites, instagrams and twitter. Phrases used in the Right-to-Die Movement, such as death with dignity, self-deliverance, self-chosen death, right to die, etc., do not work in this age of brevity.⁴ They simply don't fit the digital communication system that engulfs us.
- In the four U.S. states that have statutory physician-assisted death, the laws specifically state that deaths undertaken with the prescribed procedure are **not** suicide. So, how should we describe such deaths? The laws are silent. One can resort to the name of the law, such as the Death with Dignity (Oregon, Washington), or the End of Life Option Act (California), or to the Right-to-Die Movement's phrase, "physician-assisted death," or to others' phrases, such as Compassion and Choices' "medical aid in dying." These don't work in a broad context, and they are not short enough for the digital age. Hence Dignicide. The word fills the void in these states, and it also works in all Right-to-Die contexts.
- A few languages, especially German, have gradations of suicide, from gentle meanings to harsh ones. Why don't we in the English-speaking world have such gradations? Let us have two⁵, suicide and Dignicide.
- Replace an undesirable single word with a desirable single word. So simple.

Whatever we or the Movement comes up with, it is going to be disparaged by the opponents of the Right-to-Die Movement. They have already pointed out that Dignicide literally means death to dignity. This is true, looking at it etymologically. Whether or not they address the basic issue – **is a peaceful, carefully chosen, family oriented death different than suicide?** -- we believe Dignicide will come forward in the English world of public opinion.⁶

We, the proponents of Dignicide, understand that this word is not the perfect solution. It has a "yuk" factor that can't be avoided. We suggest getting over it. We did. You can too. There is no better word.⁷

Our motto is: "Dignicide. You Decide."

are still leaders in the Right-to-Die Movement. The group worked for six months, via email, starting with a list of 31 words and terms as possible replacements. It concluded that no good single word was available; the best term was "Dying with Dignity" or "Death with Dignity." However it agreed that Dignicide should continue to be considered. Those mentioned in footnote 1 are from the Group and have chosen to carry the concept forward. The full report of the Group can be found at the World Federation's website, www.wrtd.net.

The Alt-Suicide Group recognized that there had been prior efforts by others in the World Federation, spanning many years. These efforts did not recommend any word or phrase. In short they failed. A few said "let's call a spade a spade." That is, we should accept and use the word suicide. However the Alt-Suicide Group, seeing the great need, wanted to give it another go.

⁴ As one blogger said in 2009, "Brevity is the soul of social media."

⁵ German has two, some say three, words for suicide. "Freitod" means death freely chosen. No need for the word Dignicide there!

⁶ But we in the Movement must start using it ourselves.

⁷ Should someone come up with a better word we will be first to endorse it. Frankly, we think, given all of the work of the Alt-Suicide Group and prior efforts, no better word will be found.