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Compassion To The Very End

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The Rev. Jesse Jackson's declaration that it was an "injustice" to deny Terri Schiavo "a feeding tube, water, not even ice to be used for her parched lips" made me wonder whether he and other Americans knew that as Schiavo died, she was receiving hospice care.

As a former hospice professional, I have had the privilege of seeing dying patients live the end of their days with loved ones and comfort rather than alone and suffering. Jackson's declaration was disheartening because it implicitly ignored this fact.

Hospice is end-of-life care that provides compassion and preserves dignity. It uses a team approach to expert medical care, pain management, and emotional and spiritual support tailored to a patient's needs and wishes. Since 1983, it has been covered by Medicare and today is also covered by most Medicaid programs and private insurance. Yet, despite the availability of this care, far too few Americans access it. And those least likely to access hospice care are ethnic minorities.

For those who share Jesse Jackson's concerns, I suggest they talk to a hospice nurse. She will explain that not eating is a normal part of the dying process and that for a person like Terri Schiavo, a feeding tube will prolong life but certainly not cure brain damage. Moreover, the hospice nurse will assure the listener that although Terri Schiavo was dying, her hospice nurses were working around the clock to ensure that she died peacefully and without pain.

Jackson's declaration regarding Schiavo's care frightens me because, given his stature, people will believe that what he says is true. He contributed to the myth that feeding tubes are beneficial to the dying and that hospice care is inferior to traditional medical care. Moreover, his declaration may mean that fewer Americans will die with hospice care - in comfort and surrounded by loved ones - and more will die in emergency rooms.

Although dying is not easy, it is as natural a part of life as birth. Maybe that's why hospice nurses are often referred to as midwives to the soul. As Terri Schiavo died, her parched lips were surely quenched.

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