

“If You Didn’t Write It, You Didn’t Do It”

written by Holly

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By Holly Lisle

The Terry Schiavo case is simple. It isn’t about right to life, or right to die, or a possibly murderous husband who is attempting public murder now, or a criminal-accomplice-to-attempted-murder judge, or anything else.

It’s a case about documentation.

The first words that come out of a nursing instructor’s mouth on the first day of nursing school – and that pass someone’s lips at least once a day thereafter, are “If you didn’t write it, you didn’t do it.” Followed by, “CYA, people.” CYA. Cover Your Ass.

I would guess that in any profession where the practitioners know that at any time, for any reason, they could be called upon to testify in a case they haven’t thought about in seven or ten or more years, the competent instructor will drill this into every student’s head. Cops, lawyers, EMTs ..., I’m sure any of them could tell you the same thing I’m going to tell you.

IF YOU DIDN’T WRITE IT, YOU DIDN’T DO IT.

Documentation – clear, written, legally binding documentation – is the sole unquestionable link between the unknowable past and the unforeseeable future. If you know now that you do not want to be kept on life support under certain (or any) circumstances, by all means tell your family, your significant other, your friends, your cat or dog, and God. If you want to be kept on life support until your entire body shuts down, make sure everybody and the hamster knows about that, too.

But before you do that, get thee to a lawyer, and in black and white legal paper with your signature, the signatures of a couple of witnesses who would not gain from your death, and with a fine notary seal, put down exactly what you want, exactly the way you want it, in writing.

Because, my friend, if you didn't write it, you didn't say it, and any attempts by your family and friends to say later, "This is what she WOULD HAVE wanted," or even "This is what she SAID she wanted," are nothing but heresay, and worthless. They heard you say it. But did you change your mind later? Did you mean it when you said it then? Does the fact that they stand to inherit a significant amount of money from you if you're dead, or conversely, stand to be hugely inconvenienced by your care if you survive, play into what they're saying in any way?

Your family does not have personal knowledge of what you want, because they are not you.

Schiavo's case should never have been a case. Lacking any sort of documentation stating that she wanted to be permitted to die, every effort should have been made to save her life and return her to her highest level of function. Everything – EVERYTHING – has been done wrong because of her husband's talent for publicizing the aspects of the case that he wanted publicized. In the end, however, this is, in fact, a no-brainer. No documentation = presumption that she wanted to live, and follow-on treatment to make that possible.

Because if you don't write it, it didn't happen. If you don't document it, you didn't say it. So CYA, people.

CYA.

Do I think she told her husband she wanted to be allowed to die? No way in hell. But that doesn't matter, either.

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