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# SEEING INSIDE THE SEA INSIDE: DEATH WITH DIGNITY OR SIMPLY THE SIN OF SUICIDE? (TEACHING ABOUT SUICIDE THROUGH THE SPANISH FILM MAR ADENTRO)

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“Among college-age youth (20–24 years) in the United States, suicide is the third leading cause of death.”<sup>1</sup> Our youth today struggle with emotional and mental issues which are sometimes manifested in self-destructive behaviors or even attempts at suicide. Thus, I believe the Spanish film “Mar Adentro” (*The Sea Inside*) is powerful and relevant to our college-aged students. It relates the true story of Ramón Sampedro who is paralyzed in a diving accident and spends the next twenty-nine years of his life fighting for the legal right to carry out an assisted suicide. He loses the legal battle, but does find someone to help him end his life. He sips potassium cyanide from a straw as this person films his death. This event, which occurs in Galicia, Spain in 1998, sparks a national debate in Spain about the legality and justification of euthanasia, assisted suicide, and suicide in general. In the aftermath of Sampedro’s death, the filming of which was exposed to the public, his suicide assistant (a close female friend) is arrested, then released, and a popular campaign erupts in Spain with many claiming to be “the one” who helped him die. Even politicians show their support for his decision by signing a document stating they helped Sampedro to die.<sup>2</sup>

I use this film in a 300-level course called “Hispanic Culture through the Media Arts”. One of my objectives in the course is to begin to develop the skill of comprehending a wide variety of topics in films. This movie certainly helps in that regard. Another goal for the class is to increase the capacity for cultural analytical skills through exploring, critiquing and thinking logically. By having my students delve into this topic of an assisted suicide, they are accomplishing these goals or at least beginning to achieve these skills. The film *Mar Adentro* gives them a window into the Spanish psyche, including the traditional Roman Catholic view as well as a contemporary anti-religious sentiment. Furthermore, it brings the subject of suicide to the forefront and allows different views to surface. Finally, we can look at the different ways Christians view assisted suicide, offering compassion to those who are in some way connected with death by suicide.<sup>3</sup> In other words, I want my students to come away with an experience of not just having watched a film based on a true story, but rather with thoughtful, biblical ideas about the topic of suicide, euthanasia and, physician-assisted suicide.

From my research on suicide in Spain, I have chosen two articles relating to the Sampedro case for my students to read for homework and then discuss in class.<sup>4</sup> I use other articles to provide supplemental information in class relevant to the topic. I also send a survey to my students in order to ascertain their preconceived ideas about suicide. After viewing and discussing the film, I send the survey again to see if their views have changed. So far, I have not seen significant change. Below is the survey I have used (which I found in English and decided to keep in English for simplicity).

### Survey

Modified version from Menno Boldt, Ph.D., "Normative Evaluations of Suicide and Death: A Cross-Generational Study." Omega, Vol. 13(2), 1982-83: 150-51.

- a) Suicide is wrong.     *yes   no   undecided*
- b) Why suicide is wrong. *social-ethical   religious-moral(unbiblical)   combination*
- c) Suicide is a function of individual failings.   *yes   no   qualified*
- d) Suicide is a function of societal failings.             *yes   no   qualified*
- e) Suicide is a function of church failings.             *yes   no   qualified*
- f) Suicide should be a crime.   *yes   no   qualified   undecided*
- g) How a suicidally bereaved family ought to react.    *anger                    shame*  
                                  *some other feeling (e.g., responsible, sorrow, guilt)           undecided*
- h) Suicide ranked according to social acceptability in relation to rape, incest, abortion, mercy killing and homosexuality.
  - 1. (Least acceptable)
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
  - 5.
  - 6. (most acceptable)
- i) Suicide ought to be a basic human right. *yesno   qualified   undecided*
- j) Suicidal individuals should be restrained from killing themselves.  
*yes   no   qualified   undecided*
- k) Sequel of suicide of a believer in Christ.             *heaven           hell*  
                                  *uncertain*
- l) Connection to suicide victim. *family member   friend   acquaintance*  
                                  *none*
- m) Please provide any other comments pertinent to the topic of suicide:

POST-VIEWING, I RE-SEND THE SAME SURVEY WITH THIS ONE QUESTION ADDED:

- n) ¿Ha cambiado su opinión del suicidio? ¿Cómo ha cambiado? ¿Por qué?  
(*Has your opinion about suicide changed? How has it changed and why?*)

In class I point out that there are varying opinions on suicide from both the Protestant and Roman Catholic sides. The following quote is taken from Catholic Doors Ministry website: "We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, I have heard a Protestant pastor say that suicide is not the unforgivable sin; yet it should NEVER be considered an option. Others say it is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

Before we watch the film, I give a brief synopsis, and point out that this film is based on the true story of a man from Galicia in Spain. After viewing the film with Spanish subtitles, their homework is to write a response essay evaluating the different aspects: themes, characters, plot, setting, cinematography, and a review/critique. I provide a list of vocabulary related to films, such as: *protagonista, argumento, cinematografía, etc.* Other vocabulary relating to the topic of suicide, such as the concept of *eutanasia*, they will be responsible for looking up on their own or bringing such questions to me in class. I ask them to write a one page typed essay in Spanish. I let them know I do not need a synopsis, but rather a review, a critique of what they have seen and understood. They may critique the film as art, treat the content matter, analyze the characters, or deal with a variety of issues. Our class discussions prior to the written assignment provide ideas and material to work with. I am looking for thoughtful essays in Spanish that exhibit comprehension of the plot and written in Spanish in such a way that is appropriately complex for the upper level, yet original and reflective.

In the following class time, I give a short lecture in order to provide a foundation for the discussion to follow. (All of the class is conducted in Spanish.) Even though the class has already watched *Mar Adentro*, I include certain clips in this presentation to focus on key points and the attitudes portrayed in the film. Here is the process:

To begin, I want my students to begin to consider the complex issues that the film deals with, so I ask for some quick responses of word associations. I ask the class, "What do you first think of when you hear the word *quadriplegic*?" I hear such answers as: "*Joni Eareckson, disability, wheelchair, incapacity to do much.*" Then I ask for the same quick response to the term *suicide*, and I hear: "*depression, death, lack of hope, sadness, desire to have control.*" The only comment I make at this point is that I want them to consider this complex issue. Later, we discuss our reactions to Ramón Sampredo's pain and challenges of living as a quadriplegic.

Then I show the first clip, which is Scene 2 "Why Choose Death?" in which Ramón expresses to the lawyer why he wants to die. This is the female lawyer who is going to help him with his case for the legal right to commit suicide. Ramón has requested help from the DMD organization (Derecho a Morir Dignamente). He wants assistance in gaining the legal right to end his life. Interestingly, those opposed to his decision are portrayed as ignorant or provincial: a) his brother who doesn't want to hear of assisted suicide (a farmer who speaks Gallego) is portrayed as a simpleton; b) the Catholic priest (also quadriplegic) that visits him cannot keep up

with Ramón's banter and ends up looking foolish and uncaring; c) Ramón's father, who doesn't understand why his son cannot go on living as he is: "There is only one thing worse than seeing your son die, and that is your son wanting to die." I try to elicit reactions from my students regarding the portrayal of these characters. Though they may not understand all the dialogue, they do notice that the neutral characters (his sister-in-law Manuela and Gené, the DMD representative) appear noble and unselfish, in that they seem to have only Ramón's best interests at heart.

Then we watch one more clip: Scene 13 "The Package" where Ramón shows his deep anguish about his condition. He realizes that his lawyer, who is also suffering from a debilitating disease, has decided not to commit suicide alongside him (as she had at first promised). This is devastating to him, and he wakes up in the middle of the night crying out to Manuela, his sister-in-law and care-giver, who is so devoted to him. This is one scene in which the audience is given some insight into the emotional challenges of being a quadriplegic and the suffering such a condition entails. We discuss the pain of being paralyzed and talk about what we know about this condition or other similar disabilities.

As the film continues, Ramón carries on the legal battle, which he ultimately loses in court. However, he tenaciously holds to the desire to die. He has recruited various people for each step of the task with the design that no one person would be held culpable. And he finally finds someone to assist him with the final fatal step: putting the poisonous potion close enough for him to drink. This person also video-tapes the final dying process, in keeping with Ramón's wishes.

Next, we look at Ramón Sampedro's will, which can be found online.<sup>6</sup> It is actually the script of the words he spoke on camera before drinking the deadly poison. He talks of his pain and suffering, and the lack of desire to continue living in his quadriplegic state. He has lost the legal battle for assisted suicide, but has chosen to carry out his plan anyway. We read certain sections out loud and I check for comprehension. In these paragraphs Ramón gives his justification for wanting the legal right to an assisted suicide.

In order to add a different perspective of life as a paraplegic, I include a chart showing some interesting parallels between Ramón's accident and that of Joni Eareckson Tada, a well-known Christian speaker. Their lives following their tragic accidents take very different paths.

	<u>Ramón</u>	<u>Joni</u>
<i>born:</i>	1943	1949
<i>injured:</i>	diving	diving
<i>paralysis:</i>	quadriplegic	quadriplegic
<i>age at time of accident:</i>	25 (1968)	17 (1967)
<i>life focus:</i>	die with dignity & assisted suicide	help others in need & profess Christ
<i>beliefs:</i>	no after-life	Christian
<i>result:</i>	publicized suicide	servicing many

According to the film, Ramón Sampedro believed that there was no afterlife (neither heaven nor hell), but he longed to be free from his limitations. He expressed that he would prefer nothingness to the pain he lived in. His beliefs shaped his life so much that he decided to end it, though he was talented, inventive, winsome and loved by family and friends. As a follower of Christ myself, I find this part of his story very disturbing.

I believe it is especially important to pray throughout the process of teaching such a challenging topic. I am open and receptive to my students continuing to process the film and the topic of suicide, as need be. I encourage them to look further into the issue and seek to understand how different societies deal with it and why. There are many avenues for further discussion, and more material could be incorporated into a class if it is related to a Spanish-speaking culture, as that is the course focus. We always begin our classes with prayer, but here, at the end of such a profound subject, it is especially helpful to pray at the end of class with the students and read the powerful and comforting passage from 1 Corinthians 15: 55-58<sup>7</sup>, in which we find a reminder of Christ's triumphant victory over death.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lloyd Potter, Morton Silverman, Ellen Connorton, and Marc Posner, "Promoting mental health and preventing suicide in college and university settings", Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2004, Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc., 8 September 2012

<sup>2</sup> Martínez, María, comp., Denise Lanzer-Lerma, Trans, *Index Ramón Sampedro*, Mar. 9, 1998, Web, 19 Jan. 2011.

<sup>3</sup> I myself know the pain and struggle involved, having lost both my brother and a teen-age cousin to suicide.

<sup>4</sup> One article is in Spanish: by del Campo Lozano, Jesús Díaz ; the other in English: by Maria Jose Guerra . See the bibliography for full citations. The other articles I have consulted are also listed in the bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions regarding the Catholic Church teaching on the matter of suicide," *Catholic Doors Ministry*, n.d. Web, 8 Sept. 2012

<sup>6</sup> Figueroa, Diana, blogger, "Right to Die with Dignity: Ramón Sampedro's Will," *Right to Die with Dignity COMM CAMPAIGN*, n.d., Web, 8 Sept. 2012

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:55-58 (Today's New International Version) 55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

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