

## What is the worth of another person's life?



On the 23rd of March, as the coronavirus pandemic was taking hold in the USA, Scott McMillan, a Californian attorney, replied to one of President Donald Trump's tweets, saying, ***“The fundamental problem is whether we are going to tank the entire economy to save 2.5% of the population which is (1) generally expensive to maintain, and (2) not productive.”***

Did you get that? He was referring to the elderly Americans most likely to die from Covid-19, and was encouraging the president to disregard their impending deaths in order to save the US economy. They're old and useless and a drain on the economy anyway, McMillan suggests.

It begs the question, how much is an older person's life worth?

This might not be so bad if it was just the cruel view of an unknown attorney, but sadly it is an opinion also echoed by newscasters, social commentators, and politicians, such as Glenn Beck, Brit Hume, Dennis Prager and Texas governor, Dan Patrick.

It is also the dilemma President Donald Trump seems strangely vexed by. He alternates between talking up the economy and telling Americans they should keep going to work (or that they will be back at work by Easter, then June) and trying to protect the most vulnerable from the virus.

I get that it's a difficult thing to lead a country in a time of national crisis. But opening the door in any way to suggesting we have to play off human life against the economy should be against all politician's core values.

Indeed, New York governor, Andrew Cuomo has earned new respect for his clear, decisive and compassionate attempts to minimize the effects of the pandemic.

Despite this, his approach was condemned by talk show host Dennis Prager, who compared Cuomo's plan to appeasing the Nazis or the Japanese during World War II:

***“If the Andrew Cuomo attitude prevailed, we wouldn't have fought the Nazis. We wouldn't have fought the Japanese fascists. ...that attitude that the only value is saving a life, that attitude leads to appeasement. No one can die? Then it's not a war.”***

*When wealthy, healthy, uninfected men start talking about who should die to save the economy you know we've crossed into some very murky waters.*

That said, I know medical staff triage patients by the allocation of resources on the basis of need. When the number of Covid-19 patients exceeds the available resources, the brutal truth is that those most likely to die are triaged out of treatment and those resources assigned to people who will be more likely to live if they receive treatment. This is the medical reality in Italy right now. No one over 80 is going to ICU.

It is an accepted reality that doctors and nurses are forced to make these decisions.

It should not be something Californian attorneys or radio talk show hosts get to casually decide.

But then in the middle of all of this, we heard the story of 72-year-old Italian priest Don Giuseppe Berardelli. A priest for 47 years, he was serving in the Diocese of Bergamo in Northern Italy, one of the areas hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic. Father Berardelli had already been suffering from a respiratory condition for some time, and his parish had generously purchased him a ventilator even before Covid-19 hit.

Some people might have seen this as fortuitous. With his own personal breathing apparatus, Father Berardelli could have possibly survived the pandemic. But as hundreds of people fell ill throughout the parish, the priest chose to give his ventilator to a much younger person who had contracted the virus.

Berardelli didn't even know the patient he helped.

Without a respirator, Father Giuseppe Berardelli succumbed to the virus on March 15.

*As with most Italian victims, no funeral could be held for him. But it is said that the people of his parish applauded him from their balconies at noon the day following his passing.*

I don't want lawyers or politicians or, God forbid, talk radio hosts deciding who should die and who shouldn't in order to keep the economy humming.

But when one man willingly chooses to die to save the lives of others, I'm inspired and moved.

Tired of a world in which bean-counters measured everything out and determined how things were to be, Walt Whitman wrote of his yearning for a "true son of God" to come and fill our hearts with truth and beauty.

"After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,) / After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd all their work, / After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist, / Finally shall come the poet worthy that name, / The true son of God shall come singing his songs." ("Passage to India," 5:1101-5 *Leaves of Grass*, Mentor Books: NY, 1954, p. 324.)

Giuseppe Berardelli was such a son of God. His sacrifice was noble and loving and true, something the designs of lawyers like Scott McMillan will never be. Their pronouncements cost them nothing.

The impact of their decrees will only be felt by those more vulnerable than themselves. Their appraisal of the value of a human life is nothing if not cruel and heartless.

*You can not measure the worth of another person's soul unless you are willing to give up your own in its place.*

by Michael Frost