

For many, beliefs provide little comfort

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Gray, it would seem, is the most difficult color — the color of the middle, the color between black and white, the color of both sides of the story. The color of "but," the most difficult word.

In the case of Terri Schiavo, where everyone's talking and rumors are flying and the news is breathless and sad, a great mass of people fall squarely in the gray, with opinions tempered by an addendum of "but..."

"I don't want her to die, but I wonder about her quality of life. I support her husband, but I hate worrying that she's being starved. I feel for her parents, but I don't think the federal government should be involved."

Beyond the hyperbole and fervor from both sides, the polar extremes, there lies the difficult, ambiguous middle.

"Ambiguity is almost more difficult to deal with than certainty, psychologically," said John Murray, a West Palm Beach licensed clinical psychologist. "People go around feeling more comfortable when they're confident in a particular stance."

But finding, or holding steady, in that stance is the trick, he said. Like a lot of people, he admitted he's not sure how he feels about the situation. Side with the husband or the parents? Favor or oppose government intervention?

Yet he thinks about it, about a woman he has never met, a woman most people have never met or seen in person. Still, though, they're compelled to consider what's happening to Terri Schiavo.

"This really touches the core," said the Rev. Robert Sirico, director of the Michigan-based Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty. "It's this natural solidarity we have with other human beings. What we're experiencing culturally right now is what we see on a freeway when people slow down to look at an accident. Why do people do that? They're looking and recognizing another human being is having a dilemma, thinking there but for the grace of God go I."

"We're human beings and we empathize with other human beings. I think people are putting themselves in this situation, wondering what they'd do."

Feelings shift with context, said Richard Shusterman, a professor of philosophy at Florida Atlantic University, and perhaps therein lies the ambiguity. One person may look at the situation as a mother, as a spouse, as a citizen, as someone who hopes never to be in that position — and from each vantage point formulate a different opinion about what should happen to Schiavo.

"You can make a decision and realize that the decision is not a very happy one but a necessary one... but it's not an entirely satisfactory one," Shusterman said.

But for many, settling on an opinion gets harder every day. A Gallup poll last weekend found 56 percent of respondents favored not reinserting Schiavo's feeding tube, but that number has wobbled up and down in the last month.

Murray said he has thought about both sides. He has thought about the family and about the government's role. And ultimately, he said, until he has been in the room with Schiavo, until he has met her and seen her condition with his own eyes, certainty will remain elusive.

"People are always revising their beliefs based on what they know at the time," Shusterman said.

So black and white melt to gray.