

Making Sense of Bioethics

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Leaving Our Values at the Door of the Strip Club

"Good parents never drive their children to strip clubs, and neither should any institution entrusted with a protective parental role; on the contrary, such institutions should erect appropriate boundaries and limits on harmful behaviors, so their residents can grow and flourish..."



I was recently talking to a Massachusetts family with a 21-year-old son on the autism spectrum. Because of the Asperger syndrome and obsessive-compulsive disorder that have affected him since childhood, he is only about 13 or 14 in his understanding and behaviors. Jimmy (not his real name) has been in and out of mental institutions and recently had to be placed into a group home because his single Mom could no longer manage him at home. Jimmy came from a good family, conscientious and Catholic, raised in a clean environment by his mother and grandmother, who hoped to see him cared for in a protected and secure setting at the group home. Soon they saw, however, that there were issues: the residents had unlimited TV access in their private rooms; there seemed to be high worker turnover; and some of the tattooed staff were not only heavy smokers but used foul language.

Things took an unexpected turn as Jimmy prepared to celebrate his 21st birthday. Others at the group home started pushing him to visit the strip club in a nearby town now that he was "going to be an adult." Always guileless, and never hesitant to talk openly about whatever was going on around him, Jimmy blurted out to his grand-

mother that the group home staff were going to drive him the next weekend to the Foxy Lady Club. A series of phone calls ensued. When the grandmother spoke with a staff member at the home, she was informed there was nothing she could do to prevent it, that the group home routinely offered transportation to the strip club not only for their residents, but for residents of the other group homes run by the same company in nearby towns. The staff member said that Jimmy was now 21 and the group home had to let him do what he wanted. A second phone call to the staff supervisor resulted in the same song and dance: the group home had no choice but to cater to his wishes; he was within his legal rights now that he was 21; they would drive others at the home to the strip club, etc. Finally, the grandmother called the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services, which had contracted with the company running the group home, and spoke to the woman in charge of Jimmy's case. She noted that Jimmy was not only within his legal rights, but it was, she asserted, a matter of *basic human rights* to allow him go to the strip club. His grandmother replied it

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would be a failure to care for persons with mental disabilities if caretakers facilitated sexually-addictive practices, which such persons were prone to engage in anyway, often struggling with self-control and masturbatory behaviors, and this might set them up for a trip back to the mental hospital. When she continued to protest that visiting such a club was not a good or moral activity, the official replied, "Well, if you're concerned about 'values,' I leave my values at the door every time I go to work in order to get my job done."

Cases like Jimmy's serve as a disappointing reminder of how low the bar has come to be set in certain segments of our society. The misappropriation of public tax money by state agencies to subsidize damaging behaviors in a vulnerable patient population is also regrettable and fundamentally unjust. The family's struggles further highlight an astonishing cultural misunderstanding around the idea of "human rights." To suggest that the activity of leering lecherously at the bodies of naked women is a "basic human right" is itself a profound perversion, and represents a lamentable instance of outright moral bankruptcy.

Probably the most striking element of a case like Jimmy's is the

remarkably well-honed ability of some who serve in positions of authority and leadership — while professing to be "good" or even "religious" people — to jettison their values and beliefs the moment they are called upon to stand up and defend what is right.

Because individuals like Jimmy are consistently unable to make good decisions on their own behalf, it goes without saying that they require a guardian to attend to their interests and protect them. Yet legal guardians, like Jimmy's grandmother, are finding themselves in the unenviable position of being ignored on certain issues by those entrusted with the care of institutionalized residents, apparently determined to bypass the guardian's will whenever specific sexual agendas or views about "rights" need to be duly imposed. Good parents never drive their children to strip clubs, and neither should any institution entrusted with a protective parental role; on the contrary, such institutions should erect appropriate boundaries and limits on harmful behaviors, so their residents can grow and flourish, contribute positively to society, and perhaps one day become good and mature moral agents themselves.

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