

Boy whose love of life shames those celebrity cheerleaders for euthanasia

DURING his brief life, Stephen Sutton achieved something very beautiful. Not in the amount of money he raised for the Teenage Cancer Trust (although the £3.5million plus is the largest donation they've received), but in reminding all of us of the meaning of life, and of the importance of celebrating each waking hour.

His sheer determination, and his courage in enduring painful treatment for cancer, were inspiring beyond words. When Rebecca Hardy in this newspaper asked him how he put up with the pain, he replied: 'At the end of the day, it's going to give you so much extra life — and the extra life is definitely worth it. Life is brilliant.'

Although it is so sad that Stephen has died at just 19, and particularly devastating for his family, his legacy should be to make us all happy and grateful to be alive. It is a wonderful gift to exist — in my view, God given — and paradoxically, because of the way he attacked each day as though it were his last, there was something life-affirming even in his death.

Morbid

Last week, while Stephen was fighting to stay alive, husband-and-wife TV duo Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan said they had agreed to an assisted death pact if one of them falls seriously ill.

A few days ago, meanwhile, Cilla Black said that she wouldn't want to live past 75 — which will give her another four years.

I wonder if her three sons appreciate this morbid agenda.

In the same vein, in the past two months, two elderly British women decided they'd had enough of the modern world, and went to die at the Swiss euthanasia clinic Dignitas.

One, known as Anne, was a retired art teacher of 89. Contemplating the inevitable decline in her health, and feeling alienated by the modern world, she decided to take matters into her own



by Rosa Monckton

hands. Yet she was neither ill, nor disabled.

It is certainly true that extreme old age and infirmity can be a burden both for the individual and for the family. However, when people like Richard and Judy, who are presumably very comfortably off and blessed with family and friends, start talking about embracing death in that way, it is as depressing as Stephen Sutton's example is exhilarating.

If people like them, and Cilla, with all they have at their disposal, are already thinking of doing away with themselves, it doesn't say much for the human condition in the Britain of 2014.

There is increasing agitation in society for us to adopt laws similar to those in Holland, where euthanasia is legal even for children as young as 13 if there is parental consent. In February, the parliament in Belgium passed a bill allowing euthanasia for terminally ill children without any age limit.

As Archbishop Andre-Joseph Leonard, head of the Roman Catholic church in Belgium, pointed out: 'The law says adolescents cannot make important decisions on economic or emotional issues, but suddenly they've become able to decide that someone should make them die.'

This issue of assisted dying is increasingly a matter for concern in this country. The controversial Liverpool Care Pathway, which set out the protocols for looking after dying patients, was scrapped by the Government earlier this year because of widespread abuse, amid stories of patients being over-sedated, and denied food and drink.

There is an insidious pressure *not* to keep people alive if they are elderly or very ill, and

people like Cilla Black are simply adding to that atmosphere, encouraging people towards annihilation.

I am a patron of Together for Short Lives, which is the umbrella organisation for all children's palliative care in this country. Whenever I visit a hospice, I am struck by the atmosphere of hope and peace that pervades. Life is being lived, second by second in some cases, yet I never get a sense of it ebbing away.

Speaking to teenage boys with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, I came across the same absolute determination to enjoy each minute that was so publicly demonstrated by Stephen Sutton. They were going to college, taking exams, knowing that the average life expectancy for their condition was 27, but learning for the sake of learning, and living life to the absolute limit.

It is humbling to witness, and a salutary reminder that each life is important, no matter how different or troubled it appears to be.

Humbling

It makes it all the more shocking to see people actively wanting to bring an end to their lives when you see others fighting to survive, fighting to live another day, because they recognise that our life on Earth is precious beyond measure; that it is a gift beyond price.

The author Christy Nolan, who had cerebral palsy, and could not walk, talk or use his hands, wrote an autobiographical novel at the age of 21, *Under The Eye Of The Clock*.

John Carey, a professor of English Literature at Oxford University, wrote in the 1987 introduction that Christy's sense of language was 'expanding beyond our boundaries,

and beyond our reach'. In an interview later on in life, Christy was asked what he would do if he could get out of his wheelchair. His reply: 'Get right back in it.' His point was that his happiness did not depend on being 'cured'.

Why is it that we need inspirational people, like Stephen, and like Christy Nolan, to make us recognise how extraordinary it is to be alive? We all waste so much time complaining about trivial things going wrong in our lives. Yet we are in better health, and longer lived, than at any time in human history.

Celebration

This should be a cause for celebration, not mutually assured destruction like that which Richard and Judy are talking about.

Given the extraordinary advances in drugs, what we should be planning for is not how we will put ourselves down, but how we can use the time well in more years ahead than our parents and grandparents would ever have imagined. If 70 is the new 50, Cilla, then 90 should be the new 70.

I know two people in their 90s whom I see every month. The first is the author PD James who, at the age of 93, is still focused on learning new things, and is still writing. The other is my godfather, William de Gelsey, who at 92 is working as a businessman. Last week he went on a trip to China.

They are both a source of inspiration to me, and — because of their long and well-lived lives — founts of wisdom, and an example of what I can only describe as aspirational old age.

I have my own life lessons closer to home, taught to me by my daughter, Domenica, who has Down's syndrome.

Domenica will never be fully independent, and will always require the assistance of others. She will never be able to live on her own. But she has an infectious enthusiasm for the joy of being alive.

Being with her is a constant reminder that the sanctity of life is not some abstract principle.

Life is to be lived, in whatever guise it is offered to us, because, as the remarkable young man who was taken from us this week said: 'Life is brilliant.'

TOM UTLEY IS AWAY