

Pro-Life Apologetics

by

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“Choice,” Hope, and Secretly Mutinous Thoughts

I have been asked to speak on “pro-life apologetics,” and everything I know about that has grown out of my own experience as a one-time advocate of abortion. I say “advocate of abortion” rather than “choice” because, at the time, the idea of framing the matter as a “choice” had not yet occurred to anyone.

In fact, I can tell you something about where that idea came from. In 1989, pro-lifers snuck into the annual conference of NARAL, the National Abortion Rights Action League. They came back recommending that pro-life leaders purchase the recording of a particular session during the conference, in which their pollster, Harrison Hickman, had made a presentation recommending “choice” language. I did buy one of those recordings (in those days, a cassette tape).

On it, the pollster said that the idea arose when he and the president of NARAL, Kate Michelman, were watching a focus group through a one-way mirror. At one point in the discussion, a southern lady began insisting she should have the right not to serve black people at her restaurant. She said that she owned the restaurant, so it should be her choice. The pollster said that he and the president of NARAL looked at each other—simultaneously appalled

at the context of what she was saying, and inspired by this brilliant new angle.

Another sign of the time: later in the tape he said that the spread of the new technology of ultrasound, which allowed people to see their unborn child, was problematic. He said that it changed how they thought of the fetus: “They think of it as a baby, which is not something I have an easy idea how to cure.”

That’s what gives me hope for the pro-life cause, actually. It *is* a baby, and thanks to this technology, everyone knows it. When I was pro-abortion, I believed the unborn was just “a glob of tissue.” It seemed absurd to get sentimental over mucus. But nobody can make that error any more. Everyone has seen a sonogram of an unborn baby, and it is indisputably and obviously a baby. No one can un-see what they have seen. This really does give me hope. People who say that it isn’t a baby cannot possibly believe that, deep inside. They are having to say aloud something they don’t actually believe—and that is a very unstable place to be. It’s promising for our side. The reason people say what they don’t believe is peer pressure, and that’s something that I’ll get back to later.

Beto O’Rourke was recently asked whether a person’s life had any value the day before he was born, and he responded, “That’s a decision for the woman to make.”¹ I was delighted to hear it, because he *cannot possibly believe that*. When he pictures a baby the day before it is born, a very accurate image forms in his mind. But he is under pressure to say something out loud that he cannot believe inside.

Where there is a sizable gap between spoken assertions and inner conviction, the situation is unstable, and there is a potential for things to change very fast. I can imagine the whole abortion regime falling suddenly, like the Iron Curtain. Time will tell, but when your enemies are forcing each other to say extreme things that they don’t believe, there is reason for hope.

¹ “Beto O’Rourke Again Endorses Unlimited Abortion until Birth,” *National Review*, August 27, 2019.

How I got here

In my college days, those days before “choice,” I was in favor of abortion. I was a typical 1970s “women’s libber” type of hippie, anti-war, anti-death penalty, and vegetarian. I thought abortion was a positive good, in that it was empowering women to break free of constraining roles and become independent. When a friend wanted to have an abortion, the closest place to get one was New York City, and I accompanied her on the trip.

Then I read an essay in *Esquire* magazine that described an abortion—“What I Saw at the Abortion,” by a surgeon named Richard Selzer.² He said that he was in favor of abortion, but had never seen one, so he asked a fellow doctor if he could observe the next time he performed one.

Selzer says that he saw the patient lying on the procedure table, 24 weeks pregnant (most abortions are done much earlier). He watched as the doctor thrust a long needle into her belly, to deliver the prostaglandin solution that would bring on contractions and expel the premature fetus. (This method is not used anymore, because too many babies were being born alive. Today late abortions are done by using forceps to tear the child to pieces inside the womb. That’s the alternative to “partial birth abortion.”)

When the doctor released his hold on the needle, Selzer says:

“I see something! ...It is the hub of the needle in the woman’s belly that has jerked. First to one side. Then to the other side. Once more it wobbles, is tugged, like a fishing line nibbled by a sunfish.”

He realized that he was seeing the fetus’s fight for life; and that, whatever else a fetus doesn’t have, it did have a will to live. Selzer concluded his essay:

“Whatever else is said in abortion's defense, the vision of that other defense [the child defending its life] will not vanish from my eyes. And

² “What I Saw at the Abortion,” Richard Selzer, *Esquire*, January, 1976.

it has happened that you cannot reason with me now. For what can language do against the truth of what I saw?”

Reading that was a shock. I could not deny that the being in the womb was alive, and that abortion was an act of violence. There I was, anti-death penalty, anti-war, sure that violence is not necessary to solve social problems. And somehow I had adopted the idea that women couldn't achieve equality without sacrificing their own children. How could I think it was wrong to execute homicidal criminals, or to shoot enemies in wartime, and yet think it was right to kill our own sons and daughters? Instead of working to change society, we had somehow agreed to resolve all the problems by changing women's bodies.

Worse, we were claiming that somehow this was liberation, that it was something women should fight for and demand. But when do men ever have to make a choice between children and their careers? We had unthinkingly adopted the sexist viewpoint that men represented the standard for all human beings; and since men never get pregnant, women have to adapt themselves to that model, regardless of the cost.

Why did we ever accept the idea that a woman must choose between her life and her child's life? How had women come to see our own children as our mortal enemies?

After this, none of the feminist arguments made sense. Some argue the fetus cannot be a human person, because it is so small, but that's a dubious argument for feminists to make. Women are, in general, smaller than men. Does being small make you less of a person? Babies are smaller than children, children smaller than teenagers. Are big people always allowed to kill small people?

Why is it all right to kill a child if it is not “wanted”? Do we really want to say that your life has value only if others want you? What if a woman is

not young and sexy, so men don't "want" her? Does that make it OK to kill her?

The assumption that no one wants these babies is false, anyway. Thousands of couples long to adopt a child, and would welcome one of any race, any health condition, even babies born with a fatal disease. But few babies are available for adoption, because they get aborted instead.

It was absurd to speak of women "wanting" abortions. Why would a woman "want" to go through this awful, painful, humiliating experience? She wants it only out of desperation, because all the other choices look worse. Many years ago I wrote this line in an article: "No woman wants an abortion like she wants an ice cream cone or a Porsche. She wants an abortion like an animal in a trap wants to gnaw off its own leg. Abortion is a tragic attempt to escape a desperate situation by an act of violence and self-loss."³

To my surprise, this line was frequently quoted not only by pro-life sources, but by pro-choice publications as well. Of the many things pro-life and pro-choice disagree about, this appears to be one thing both sides know well: abortion is a miserable choice.

And if nobody really *wants* to have an abortion, then why are women doing it 2700 times a day? If women are doing something 2700 times a day that they don't want to do, it's not liberation that we've won. We are colluding, rather, in a bizarre new form of oppression.

It took me a while to sort all this out, but I ended up completely turning around on the abortion issue. You can take that as another point of hope: if I can change, anyone can change. Even the most hardened defenders of abortion can have a complete change of mind.

³ "Unplanned Parenthood," Frederica Mathewes-Green, *Policy Review*, Summer, 1991.

But I still thought of myself as a cool liberal. I wasn't about to identify with pro-lifers; they seemed so hokey to me. Then I heard about an organization called Feminists for Life. It was a secular organization, made up of consistent-nonviolence people like me, which presented a feminist case *against* abortion. It took the view of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, that abortion damaged women physically and emotionally. It said that something is wrong if we think it's normal for women to kill their own children. Abortion hurts them both.

That sure sounded like the perfect organization for me, so I signed up. Once a quarter I received their rather dinky newsletter, *Sisterlife*, mimeographed and addressed by the FFL president at her kitchen table in Kansas.

In the Spring of 1989 a note appeared in *Sisterlife* that they needed a new volunteer editor. I'd never done anything like that, but I offered to give it a try. Most of my hesitation was because I didn't like to argue with people. I could stamp and mail the newsletter, but I didn't want to have to actually talk in public about my pro-life beliefs.

I was in for a surprise, because it turned out that becoming editor made me a vice-president of the organization. What's more, it was the first time they'd had a member of the board living in a major media area (we lived just south of Washington, DC). So when the Supreme Court Webster decision came down, in July of 1989, the FFL president phoned and told me to drive to the Supreme Court and try to get on television.

That was about the last thing I'd ever want to do, but I went down wearing my "Feminists for Life" sweatshirt in the 90-degree heat. (My husband said, "Your sweatshirt is working.") I was far too shy to try to get on TV, but I circulated around the pro-choice leaders and handed them a list of anti-abortion quotes from 19th and 20th century feminists.

I also met a number of pro-life leaders that day, and that's what really changed my life. Most of them had never heard of Feminists for Life, but

they liked the idea right away. Before long they were telling media people about me, and I began getting phone calls from newspapers, magazines, TV and radio shows. The first time I was interviewed, it was with the *New York Times*. The first time I was on TV, it was C-SPAN. (I was such a newbie I thought C-SPAN was a radio program, and asked if I could do the show from home.) Within months I'd been on Prime Time Live and spoken at the University of Virginia. Invitations kept pouring in—and I hadn't even brought out my first issue of *Sisterlife* yet.

That first step launched me into a public life that I'd never imagined. At this point, I've been interviewed by news media some 750 times; I've given speeches about 600 times, and published about 800 essays, as well as 10 books. But it was the very first essay I wrote that distilled what I believed could be most effective in pro-life apologetics. It's an essay called "The Bitter Price of Choice," and it's reprinted at the conclusion of this essay.

Apologetic Strategies

I was aware that this was a new approach. The abortion debate, in America, really had two simple points: Pro-choicers say that women need abortion, and pro-lifers say abortion kills a baby.

You'll notice that these two arguments don't *engage* each other. They are like trains on parallel tracks. The national conversation can't get anywhere because we're ignoring each other's best argument.

So I decided to try a different angle, to break through the deadlock. I would address pro-choice arguments squarely, instead of avoiding them. That's not what I was taught to do; when I went through "media training" I was instructed to ignore whatever my opponent said and keep sticking to my talking points. I decided *not* to do that. I would present the opposition's claims without distortion or mockery, and then show why abortion did not solve these problems.

It sounds good in theory, but looking back, I think it didn't work. I'll explore that further in the following paragraphs. In brief, I learned what many

like me have learned over the years: that when people assemble their opinions, facts and logic are among the pieces left over.

In pursuing this strategy, I used all the arguments in “The Bitter Price of Choice,” and others as they came to me over the years. But I could see that the argument I was making, that abortion hurts women, was not sufficient to make someone change their pro-choice position. It’s the fact that abortion kills a baby that is energizing. That’s the thing that makes a person come face to face with the real, horrifying cost.

The fact that abortion is also painful, heartbreaking, invasive, and demeaning to women is not, I found, sufficient to cause people to oppose it. I came to see that many people are just fine with women suffering, as long as they keep it to themselves. All the cultural noise about honoring and supporting women was window dressing, as long as women were still expected to make themselves sexually available for the price of dinner.

Worse, porn teaches that sex includes the beating and abuse of women, and it’s often the way that boys learn about sex. Well, in comparison, the miserable toll of abortion seemed slight. After all, women were bearing it in silence, alone. (Yes, I am bitter about this.)

Though I usually focused on the damage abortion does to women, when I talked about the humanity of the unborn I aimed at the confusion over “No one knows when human life begins.” That’s absurd; everyone knows when life, a new human life, begins. It’s when the sperm merges with the egg. At that moment a single cell is created that is alive, human, and unique. So I tried to make this point in a direct and simple way, without emotion or flights of rhetoric.

I told my audiences that three things are true about the unborn:

1. It’s alive. It’s moving and growing, like all living things. In fact, no one claims that it’s not alive.
2. It’s human. It’s composed entirely of human cells, not watermelon or groundhog. No one denies that it’s entirely made of human cells, either.

3. It's an individual. When the sperm dissolves in the ovum, it results in a single cell that has different DNA from that of its mother or father. It is unique; a new individual life has begun. If you examined that single cell alongside a cell from the mother and one from the father, you would see that they have three different DNAs. Three different people are present. No one denies that the DNA of the unborn is different from its mother's and from its father's.

When people say "No one knows when life begins" what they mean is "People don't agree on when *personhood* begins." They're actually talking about personhood, not biological life. Personhood is a legal concept, a status that brings with it certain privileges. Corporations are "persons," legally, and at present an unborn child is not. Pro-choice people are foggy about when personhood actually sets in.

But, logically, this is a stupid argument. A human being is the same entity from the moment that first cell appears, to the age of a hundred or more. It's the same *person*. A human being exists along a continuum of time, and yet it's the *same* human being every day, every minute, every second. There's no magic ta-da moment when personhood suddenly erupts.

Some people don't agree that personhood begins at conception—but that's a belief without any scientific basis. It's a philosophical or religious belief, an assertion unsupported by scientific evidence. People are free to embrace this belief warmly, for spiritual reasons they alone understand, but we can't write laws on that basis. You might sincerely believe that you must sacrifice a goat before starting your car, but you can't expect our nation's laws to support you in that belief. Maybe you believe your god requires you to throw a virgin into a volcano every year, but US law will not agree with you about that. No matter how deeply heartfelt your religious beliefs, if it involves killing a living human being, the law is bound to stop you.

Some people scold pro-lifers for trying to change laws, and see it as the government meddling in things that should be private. But if you kill somebody, you can't build your defense around saying, "But I did it

privately!” Likewise, sometimes people say we must not interfere in a woman’s decision because they think about it very seriously. But, again, if you kill someone and your defense is “But I thought about it a lot ahead of time!” they’ll say, “That’s what’s called ‘premeditated.’”

And sometimes people would just oppose political action entirely, saying “You can’t legislate morality!” “You have to change hearts and minds instead!”

Oddly enough, Martin Luther King was a target of that argument too. He called it a “myth.” He said, “While it may be true that morality cannot be legislated, behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that’s pretty important.”⁴

And some would say that the matter was just too insignificant for the law to care about. We can agree that our country has a great number of laws—zoning laws, parking laws, leash laws—and some of them may be unnecessary. If you began at the most trivial laws and started eliminating them one by one, things would probably go smoothly for a while. But eventually you would reach an inner circle of laws, the ones that protect the weak from violence. At that point, you have reached the basis of civilization. Where there is no law, might makes right, and the strongest person can take anything and eliminate anyone he wants. But it’s possible for all the members of the community to agree to stand together, and support one another against the powerful. All of us are mightier than any of us.

The most foundational thing in any civilization is that circle of laws that protect the helpless from violence. Laws to make the killing of children illegal are in that circle.

⁴ Martin Luther King, speech at Western Michigan Univ, Dec 18, 1963. Quoted in *MLK at Western* [pdf file], p. 5. Retrieved from [https://wmich.edu > sites > default > files > attachments > MLK](https://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/MLK) on Nov. 6, 2019.

An unused argument

I could also see that there was a great argument available that pro-lifers were not using. It was the fact that there are thousands of pro-life pregnancy care centers. The first one was actually established five years *before* Roe v. Wade. Pro-lifers already saw the needs of pregnant women and began trying to meet them, even before abortion was legal. The charge that “You only care about the baby!” was demonstrably false.

What’s more, pregnancy care centers are consistent money-losers, and yet pro-lifers keep them afloat with donations and material goods. That’s in contrast with abortion clinics, which have an expensive service to sell. Pregnancy centers have nothing to sell. They give everything away at no charge. Abortion clinics have a dependable income stream, which includes federal funding, but pregnancy centers must rely on old-fashioned methods to make their budget. One of the centers near us raised money by taking sandwich orders in an office building. Other centers hold carwashes, sell cookies, sponsor walks and runs “for Life.” Abortion clinics don’t aim at such piecemeal funding; they don’t need to.

So I began to encourage pro-life leaders to talk about this impressive work, and it amused me to see how consistently they forgot. Despite all the wonderful things they were doing to help pregnant women, if you put a microphone in front of them, they would say, “It’s a baby.”

As I said, the reality of the baby is indeed the thing that is galvanizing. But when our opponents said, “You don’t care about women,” we had a great response already at hand, proven by the thousands of pregnancy centers across America. You know how people say, “You talk the talk, but you don’t walk the walk”? This was the opposite: pro-lifers were very admirably walking the walk, but they couldn’t remember to talk the talk.

In time, the work done by those pregnancy centers did become better known, and the pro-choice movement responded by calling them “phony clinics,” saying that they pretended to be abortion clinics to lure women in. That wasn’t true, but it was a storyline the media was eager to hear.

The Muddy Middle

That brings me to the thing that was most disappointing to me. I spoke at many colleges over those years, including all the Ivy League colleges, and participated in many debates—for example, the Yale Debate Association. I would come prepared with my arguments and statistics, ready to explain why abortion didn't help women, but hurt them. I would explain to the audience why abortion was a bad thing—but then my opponent would not explain why abortion was actually a *good* thing. She would tell them why I was a bad *person*.

It was tremendously frustrating to me. I could see that my opponent had no valid response to my assertions, so she just changed the subject. In this case, she changed to a personal attack on me, which is called, in debate, the “*ad hominem* fallacy.” That means it's fallacious—it's not an acceptable argument—to respond to an opponent's *claims* by attacking the opponent's *character*.

In a legitimate debate, such fallacies are not permitted; but in the emotional setting of these events, it was eagerly embraced. That was the most disappointing thing. The audience didn't want to listen to me; what I was saying was beginning to make too much sense. They didn't want to give up siding with the pro-choice side because that was the fashionable opinion, and being pro-life (or “anti-choice”) was a social *faux pas*. When my opponent told them they didn't have to listen to me, they were almost foolishly grateful. An excuse to write me off was received with joy.

Who was the audience we were trying to reach? Polls regularly showed that there were 20% of the American public who were committed to the pro-life cause, and 20% who were committed to pro-choice; and there were 60% in what we called “the muddy middle,” who were uncertain about it. Both sides were trying to reach and persuade the muddy middle.

It was a standard comment at the time that people think very deeply about the abortion issue. But what I found, over the years, was that the middle didn't want to think about it all. Why should they? Abortion is an

unpleasant, ugly thing. It was politically incorrect to oppose it. The pro-choice side kept saying, “Leave women alone, don’t get involved. Move along, nothing to see here.”

And that was, in fact, what the muddy middle craved: permission to think about something else. There were so many things to think about that were much more enticing—gossip, food, shopping, movie stars, what’s on TV. There was no good reason to think about abortion—except that they had seen a sonogram, and sensed that something is going on here that could be tragic and unjust on a colossal scale, surpassing all the genocides of the 20th century. The middle understandably didn’t want to think about it, and pro-choice rhetoric let them off the hook. Then they could go back to thinking about Kim Kardashian, or whoever was the equivalent then.

I found as well that when I talked to people at random—like the person next to me on an airplane—I found that they had wholly uninformed opinions, about which they were radiantly confident, composed of sound bites from both sides. I could hold up my end of the conversation politely and persuasively, but they would pull out one secondhand talking point after another, contradicting themselves with ease. And they fully believed they were as competent to discourse on the topic as I was, who had spent years researching and exploring it.

So that was another big disappointment: that the muddy middle had a settled, if muddy, mind, and preferred to think about anything other than evidence that abortion is wrong. Since the pro-choice side was the fashionable one, was celebrated in the media, and was the one that invited them to wash their hands of the whole thing, that was the direction towards which they preferred to lean.

Gradually the whole issue faded from the public mind. It’s hard to imagine today just how hot the controversy used to be. When I first began speaking on college campuses, in the early 90s, I could expect there would be a number of pro-choice people in attendance who would challenge me during the Q & A. But as the years went by, that changed. Eventually, the only people coming to these events were already pro-life. Pro-choice people

ignored us. I think, by the late 90s, the whole topic of abortion just seemed worn out. People were tired of hearing about it, and their attention was turning toward the next big controversy—gay “marriage.”

Common Ground

Sometimes people ask me why I call our opponents “pro-choice,” when they are, more accurately, focused on abortion. The answer is that we should call someone by the name they prefer as a matter of common courtesy. That’s one of the lessons I learned in the 90s, while participating in “Common Ground” dialogues between pro-life and pro-choice people. The movement brought together pro-choice and pro-life people for private discussions, in hopes of understanding each other. For example, when Operation Rescue was planning a major event in New York, they held meetings with abortion clinic owners ahead of time to set ground rules and establish lines of communication.

I was part of the movement from the beginning, and helped form a national organization that enabled ongoing dialogues in 12 major cities. We held two national conventions; at one, I shared the podium with author and activist Naomi Wolf. We called this group “The Common Ground Network for Life and Choice.”

The term “common ground” here did not mean compromise, but a neutral space where opponents could speak to each other honestly. In a typical session, two pro-life and two pro-choice would sit together, and each would take a turn explaining why they held the position they did. Then, someone on the opposite side would restate that person’s beliefs in terms that they found accurate.

It was a wonderful thing to hear a pro-choice person restating my beliefs accurately and with respect. And it was wonderful to listen carefully to a pro-choice person and understand why she held the beliefs she did. That helped me, as a partisan, to get a better grasp of the reasons underlying the

position, so I could address it more effectively in my writing and speaking. I used to say, “We are trying to get past misunderstanding, to arrive at genuine disagreement.”

Participants agreed on certain ground rules, like calling each other by the term the person chose, pro-life or pro-choice. We agreed to not use our time together to attempt to persuade each other. And we agreed that what was said in the groups would remain confidential.

There were two overall lessons I learned, though. One of my pro-choice Common Ground friends said to me, “You know, every thinking person has to be deeply ambivalent about abortion.” But when I thought about that afterward, I thought, “I’m not ambivalent.” I’m settled and sure about it. A new life begins at conception, so every abortion takes a human life. There’s no shadowy uncertainty there. In fact everyone I knew in the pro-life movement has the same conviction, so we all agree with each other. There’s nothing to be ambivalent about, when you see the matter from a scientific perspective.

But when I listened to pro-choice people describe their beliefs, it was clear they were all over the place. They all had different ideas about when and whether and how abortion should be limited. Some said no abortion after 12 weeks, some said not after 6 months. Some said only in the “hard cases” of rape, incest, or the life of the mother. Given that those are a bare handful a year, it’s a position pretty close to pro-life.

Pro-choice people didn’t agree with one another, because there’s no logical place to stop. Once you approve abortion, no matter where you try to draw the line, it’s arbitrary. Life is a continuum, and they know it. Each individual human begins life as that single cell, and continues to whatever end God has appointed. There are no divisions, no stopping places. So they have to mark their life-or-death decisions in midair. No wonder they feel ambivalent, and no wonder pro-lifers don’t.

Real Choices

Another surprise was that I found that people who were actively involved in providing abortions—clinic directors, doctors, and counselors—were more ambivalent about abortion than other pro-choicers. Those on the front lines were seeing unsettling things—for example, how often women seeking an abortion would say, “I don’t have a choice.” One abortion doctor was quoted as saying, “I didn’t go into this work so women *wouldn’t* have a choice.”

In time, I came to believe that when abortion is legal, it can seem irresistible, because it looks like the perfect solution. At least, to everyone *around* the pregnant woman. Abortion looks like it can push the rewind button on life, as if the woman was never pregnant. This magical ability of abortion to change reality, to literally “turn back the clock,” seems more real to the friends and family around the pregnant woman than it seems to her.

Legal abortion looks like a great big funnel that can solve all the problems at once. To those friends, family, professors, and employers, it’s the obvious choice. Deciding to have the baby instead looks like a frivolous, self-indulgent whim. As one post-abortion woman told me, “Everyone said they would ‘be there for me’ if I had the abortion. No one said they would ‘be there for me’ if I had the baby.”

The effect of this subtle pressure on the woman can be strong. She herself may be more ambivalent about things; she may be hoping the baby’s father will marry her, or just sensing that unexpected, ancient connection that bonds a mother with her child. She might secretly long to keep the child, but her friends and family assume that abortion is the only sensible thing to do. So a woman may end up in an abortion clinic, not because it’s really her choice, but because she feels alone and deserted.

If you see a lot of such women (for example, if you run an abortion clinic or a pregnancy center), you know that the abortion is often the husband’s or boyfriend’s idea. In the early 90s I wrote a book about the reasons women have abortions—*Real Choices: Listening to Women, Looking*

for Alternatives to Abortion. I wanted to research what post-abortion women said they needed most, in hopes that it could help pregnancy care centers organize their resources and their appeals for donations.

I hoped to have three streams of material by asking pregnancy centers what they needed most, and asking post-abortion women about their situation and their reason for choosing abortion. I was able to travel around the country and have “listening sessions” with post-abortion women in seven cities. The third stream, I hoped, would come from abortion clinic counselors, who were seeing women in the same situation pregnancy centers were (often enough, seeing the same women). I was not able to get that third stream, though. I was able to make connections with a number of pro-choice leaders, but after some initial conversation they went silent.

Talking to pregnancy centers and post-abortion women, I expected to come up with a list of practical needs, like medical care, a place to live, job training, and maternity clothes. But I found something entirely different instead.

When I asked women, “Why did you have the abortion?,” they didn’t say things like money or health care. Instead, 88% of the time, they told me they had the abortion because someone they loved—usually the baby’s father, but sometimes their own parents—told them they should.

Sometimes that came in the form of a direct order, like the husband who told his wife, “Only stupid people have more than two children.” Some boyfriends threatened to leave their girlfriends if they didn’t get an abortion; other boyfriends simply left. A wife told me that, on the way to the clinic, she was telling her husband she still wasn’t sure it was right. He replied, “Do you think you’re smarter than the Supreme Court?” Two women told me they were lying on the abortion table, praying that their boyfriend would burst through the door and say, “Stop, I changed my mind!”

I heard some heartbreaking cases, like the teen who saw her mother struggling to raise the family alone, and couldn't bring herself to add more heartbreak by saying, "Mom, I'm pregnant." I heard from a young woman who was happily planning to marry her boyfriend and start their new family, but her parents ordered her to have the abortion rather than embarrass them. Sometimes the baby's father wanted to marry the girl, but he had heard so many times that men have no right to an opinion, that the decision must be the woman's alone, that he stayed silent.

It's sad, because I think many women would have made a different decision if the baby's father had spoken up. If the young man says, "I love you, I love our baby, I want to marry you and spend our lives together"—there's a good chance that's a baby who's going to live. Even if they have to start out with little in the way of earthly goods, that kind of love can make great things happen.

On the other side, many times what drives abortion is the woman's sense that she has been abandoned. Pregnancy is inherently a time of connection, when women discover an unexpected link to the larger world and the ongoing flow of biological life. A pregnant woman looks for safety; she looks for a husband, a family, a village that will stand with her and protect her in this vulnerable time. Without that, abortion can look like the best course. In pro-choice rhetoric, all those first-person-singulars—"My body, my life, my choice, my decision"—reveal the absence of support and security, and how alone she is.

It was this loneliness that drove women into abortion clinics, more than material needs. One woman told me she knew where to find all kinds of resources—from pregnancy care centers, the county health clinic, and more. But it didn't matter. She had the abortion to try to save her relationship with her boyfriend; and in this case, as in roughly half of all cases, when a woman has an abortion to save her relationship, the relationship breaks up afterward anyway.

So when I asked, “What made you decide to have an abortion?” and, “Tell me the story of what was going on then,” I got a range of answers, nearly all pointing to the influence of another person the woman loved. But when I asked my next question, “Was there anything anyone could have done that would have enabled you to have that baby?” the answer that came was swift and surprising. “I needed one person who would stand by me,” they said. They needed a steady and reliable person to help and encourage them. They needed “moral support.” They needed a friend.

One woman was in a particularly impossible position—she was a babysitter for the family next door, and had gotten pregnant by that family’s father. It’s a situation that makes the mind reel, if you picture her living next door to him, getting bigger day by day. But even this woman said to me, “If I had had one person who would stand by me,” and she held up one finger—“If I had had only *one* person to stand by me, I would have had that baby.”

So, as I pulled the research together and completed the book, I realized that I’d come to a truly unexpected conclusion. I thought I would help pregnancy centers prioritize their needs and resources, but it turned out that the main thing women needed was what the center already had: people who care about women in difficult pregnancies. What women wanted most of all was already there: someone to have the doors open and the coffee pot on, and a kindly smile for the next heartbroken woman who comes in the door.

What Difference Does Faith Make?

There was another thing, something surprising, I noticed about pro-choice people. This especially struck me at a TV debate, when I was communications director for an abortion referendum in Maryland. After the debate, the pro-lifers gathered to socialize on one side of the sound stage, and the pro-choicers on the other. But I noticed something odd: the pro-lifers were smiling and chatting in a relaxed way, but the pro-choicers looked grim. They looked like a big thundercloud was hanging over their heads.

That was funny, because we knew we were going to lose. It was Maryland! We didn't stand a chance. (In the end it was 60-40, closer than we'd expected. As usual, people in the big cities voted for the referendum, while people at the rural ends of the state voted pro-life.)

I wondered why the people over on the pro-choice side were so tense and unsmiling. They had it in the bag; even the host of the show had been visibly sympathetic to their side. Yet it was the pro-lifers whose faces were open and bright, while they all looked grumpy.

Later on, I came up with a theory. I think it might be because we were Christians, and so we were all aware of the expected "code of conduct" toward each other. We knew we were supposed to be gentle, humble, helpful, and generally kind. But if you don't have Christ, that's not the case; our opponents were free to be as back-stabbing and ruthless as they liked. They were free to compete for each other's jobs, free to gossip, free to lie.

I can't say that we pro-lifers always *were* gentle, humble, helpful, etc., but at least we knew we were *supposed* to be. We knew there was a way we were supposed to act, even when we didn't feel like it. And I think that can make a big difference. That's why there was a veritable weather system of warmth and radiance over our side of the room, while people on the other side of the room were what they would describe as "free"—they had no "punitive, scolding God," as they might put it, so they could do whatever they wanted. They were free to be their most authentic and selfish selves, free to treat each other in any way they liked, free to enjoy all the mistrust and hollowness which that brought them.

We lost; we knew we were going to lose. But in the long run, we won.

That's a good thing to keep in mind as we look ahead. It's been 47 years since the Roe v. Wade decision. I've been writing and speaking about abortion for 30 years. Looking back, it seems like we spent much of that time

stuck in molasses. There was no progress on the cause, and we even saw some losses. And every day the body count got higher.⁵

I heard someone back in the 90s say that, if there were a wall for the unborn like the Vietnam Veterans' Wall, where we could engrave the names of all the babies killed by abortion, that wall would have to stretch for 50 miles. But it was decades ago he said that; the wall would have to be many miles longer today. Such a wall can never exist, though, because those babies have no names.

When you think about the sheer horror of that, you can be pardoned for wanting to think about anything else instead. It's horrifying to contemplate. A pro-life activist in Maryland once took me to his county dump and pointed to a big green hill: "I estimate there are 5000 aborted babies in that landfill," he said. Something like that is just too big, too horrifying. Naturally, people who are pro-choice or muddy-middle can't bear to think about it, and they'll attack you for bringing it up. Because if it were true to the tiniest extent—if they had been complicit in the death of only *one* baby—it would be so overwhelming that it would cause them to collapse. When the day comes that our culture realizes what it's done to 60 million unborn babies, it will be overwhelming.

And they already know it. Everyone has seen a sonogram. Everyone knows that life is a continuum from the first moment. They just can't face it. They can't handle it. All they do is try to change the subject. And belittle you, and say you're a bad person. Anything, if it helps them stop thinking about what they already know inside.

I have met so many ordinary pro-life citizens over the years. I have spoken at so many pro-life banquets, for pregnancy care centers in small towns where they have no money and scarce resources, but where they love

⁵ When I wrote this in 2019, things looked grim. The fall of the Roe decision in June 2022 was so unexpected, and so overwhelmingly joyful. Now we are in a situation comparable to the fall of Prohibition, where every state can make its own laws on abortion, in recognition of what that state's citizens believe. The fight to protect unborn life isn't over, but we've been given an extraordinary victory; and for the first time in 50 years, that protection can begin.

women and try to serve them. When I fly in from out of town they treat me like I'm a celebrity, but I think, "No, *you're* the heroes. You're the ones who are actually making a difference, staying faithful when the night is so long."

I've spoken for so many pro-life campus groups, where these impossibly young people are so thrilled to have me arrive and deliver my talk. And I think, "But I get to fly home tomorrow. You're the ones who have to stay here and take the consequences. You're the ones who have to go back to class and hear your beliefs ridiculed and mischaracterized, who have to live with a roommate who jeers at you. You have to go on living on this battlefield. You're the real heroes." It's the ordinary people like that, who keep standing up for their faith and offering help and hope to pregnant women, who shine like the stars across the dark sky of our time.

I've often thought, why doesn't God just fix this? He's omnipotent, right? He can break in on someone and confront them with the truth. He could have had Justice Blackmun wake up the morning after the Roe v. Wade decision and slap his forehead, and say "I've made a terrible mistake!"

We long to have a simple faith in God as our Father, and then we feel perplexed when He allows evil to reign in this world. We'd like to come up to Him like a child with a broken toy, and have Him fix it. We hand Him a little wooden car with a broken wheel, knowing He could take a hammer and nail and tap that wheel back into place.

But when God went to fix His broken world—a world that has misused and abused so many over the centuries, a world that thinks it's a good and liberating thing to kill children—when God went to fix that broken world, He used a hammer and nail. And He let those nails be driven into the hands and feet of His Son.

That's how God fixes things. In a mystery, that's how He fixes things. When we take our stand and witness to His truth, when we see so little improvement over the decades, when the number of tiny bodies grows higher and higher, it can feel like those nails are being driven into our hearts. But that's how God fixes things—by suffering-with, by sharing pain.

That appears to be where He wants us to be today. We are despised and ridiculed, and maybe He thinks that's good for us. The babies are already with Him; every baby that was aborted is in the Father's arms today. But we are here on this continuing battlefield, sometimes perplexed and saddened, and wondering how it can ever end.

What we suffer is so small compared to what others have endured over the centuries. We've been given the opportunity to suffer some small amount of rejection and ridicule, in unity with our Lord. Let us bear it nobly. Let us bear it well. When we enter the company of the saints, we will be given crowns that are comparatively small and flimsy, beside those of the noblest saints and martyrs. But let us make the best of the struggle that's been appointed to us, appointed for such weaklings as us. Let us live with even a small portion of the courage that other saints have shown, so that when we receive our simple crowns, we will deserve them.

Appendix

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The Bitter Price of Choice

by Frederica Mathewes-Green

When I was in college the bumper sticker on my car read “Don’t labor under a misconception —legalize abortion.” I was one of a handful of feminists on my campus, back in the days when we were jeered at as “bra-burning women’s libbers.” As we struggled against a hazy sea of sexism, abortion rights was a visible banner, a concrete, measurable goal. Though our other foes were elusive, within the fragile boundary of our skin, at least, we would be sovereign. What could be more personal? How could any woman oppose it?

I oppose it now. It has been a slow process, my path from a pro-choice to a pro-life position, and I know that unintended pregnancy raises devastating problems. But I can no longer avoid the realization that legalizing abortion was the wrong solution; we have let in a Trojan Horse whose hidden betrayal we’ve just begun to see.

A woman with an unplanned pregnancy faces more than “inconvenience;” many adversities, financial and social, at school, at work, and at home confront her. Our mistake was in looking at these problems and deciding that the fault lay with the woman, that she should be the one to change. We focused on her swelling belly, not the pressures that made her so desperate. We advised her, “Go have this operation and you’ll fit right in.”

What a choice we made for her. She climbs onto a clinic table and endures a violation deeper than rape—the nurse’s hand is wet with her tears—then is

grateful to pay for it, grateful to be adapted to the social machine that rejected her when pregnant. And the machine grinds on, rejecting her pregnant sisters.

It is a cruel joke to call this a woman's "choice." We may choose to sacrifice our life and career plans, or choose to undergo humiliating invasive surgery and sacrifice our offspring. How fortunate we are—we have a choice! Perhaps it's time to amend the slogan—"Abortion: a woman's right to capitulate."

If we refused to choose, if we insisted on keeping both our lives and our bodies intact, what changes would our communities have to make? What would make abortion unnecessary? Flexible school situations, more flex-time, part-time, and home-commute jobs, attractive adoption opportunities, safe family planning choices, support in handling sex responsibly: this is a partial list. Yet these changes will never come as long as we're lying down on abortion tables 1,600,000 times a year to ensure the status quo. We've adapted to this surgical substitute, to the point that Justice Blackmun could write in his Webster dissent that "millions of women have ordered their lives around abortion." That we have willingly ordered our lives around a denigrating surgical procedure—accepted it as the price we must pay to keep our life plans intact—is an ominous sign.

For over a hundred years feminists have warned us that abortion is a form of oppression and violence against women and their children. They called it "child-murder" (Susan B. Anthony), "degrading to women" (Elizabeth Cady Stanton), "most barbaric" (Margaret Sanger), and a "disowning [of] feminine values" (Simone de Beauvoir). How have we lost this wisdom?

Abortion has become the accepted way of dealing with unplanned pregnancies, and women who make another choice are viewed as odd, backward, and selfish. Across the nation three thousand crisis pregnancy centers struggle, unfunded and unrecognized, to help these women with housing, clothing, medical care, and job training, before and after pregnancy. These volunteers must battle the assumption that "they're supposed to abort"—especially poor women who hear often enough that their children are unwanted. Pro-choice rhetoric conjures a dreadful day when women could be

forced to have abortions; that day is nearly here.

More insidiously, abortion advocacy has been poisonous to some of the deeper values of feminism. For example, the need to discredit the fetus has led to the use of terms that would be disastrous if applied to women. “It’s so small,” “It’s unwanted,” “It might be disabled,” “It might be abused.” Too often women are small, unwanted, disabled, or abused. Do we really want to say that these factors erase personhood?

A parallel disparaging of pregnancy itself also has an unhealthy ring. Harping on the discomforts of pregnancy treats women as weak, incompetent; yet we are uniquely equipped for this role, and strong enough to do much harder things than this. Every woman need not bear a child, but every woman should feel proud kinship in the earthy, elemental beauty of birth. To hold it in contempt is to reject our distinctive power, “our bodies, ourselves.”

There is a last and still more terrible cost to abortion, one that we have not yet faced. We have treated the loss of our fetuses as a theoretical loss, a sad-but-necessary loss, as of civilians in wartime. We have not yet realized that the offspring lost are not the enemy’s, nor our neighbor’s, but our own. And it is not a loss of inert, amorphous tissue, but of a growing being unique in history. There are no generic zygotes. The one-cell fertilized ovum is a new individual, the present form of a tall blue-eyed girl, for example, with Grandad’s red hair and Great-aunt Ida’s singing voice. Look at any family, see how the traits and characteristics run down the generations in a stream. Did we really think our own children would be different?

Like the gypsy in Verdi’s opera, *Il Trovatore*, our frustration has driven us to desperate acts. Outraged by the Count’s cruel injustice, she stole his infant son and, in a crazed act of vengeance, flung him into the fire. Or so she thought. For, in turning around, she discovered the Count’s son lay safe on the ground behind her; it was her own son she had thrown into the flames. In our desperate bid for justice we have not yet realized whom we have thrown into the flames. The moment of realization will be as devastating for us as it was for her.

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