

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## When Abortion Suddenly Stopped Making Sense

By Frederica Mathewes-Green — January 22, 2016

**A**t the time of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, I was a college student — an anti-war, mother-earth, feminist, hippie college student. That particular January I was taking a semester off, living in the D.C. area and volunteering at the feminist “underground newspaper” *Off Our Backs*. As you’d guess, I was strongly in favor of legalizing abortion. The bumper sticker on my car read, “Don’t labor under a misconception; legalize abortion.”

The first issue of *Off Our Backs* after the *Roe* decision included one of my movie reviews, and also an essay by another member of the collective criticizing the decision. It didn’t go far enough, she said, because it allowed states to restrict abortion in the third trimester. The Supreme Court should not meddle in what should be decided between the woman and her doctor. She should be able to choose abortion through all nine months of pregnancy.

But, at the time, we didn’t have much understanding of what abortion *was*. We knew nothing of fetal development. We consistently termed the fetus “a blob of tissue,” and that’s just how we pictured it — an undifferentiated mucous-like blob, not recognizable as human or even as alive. It would be another 15 years or so before pregnant couples could show off sonograms of their unborn babies, shocking us with the obvious humanity of the unborn.

We also thought, back then, that few abortions would ever be done. It’s a grim experience, going through an abortion, and we assumed a woman would choose one only as a last resort. We were fighting for that “last resort.” We had no idea how common the procedure would become; today, one in every five pregnancies ends in abortion.

Nor could we have imagined how high abortion numbers would climb. In the 43 years

since *Roe v. Wade*, there have been 59 million abortions. It's hard even to grasp a number that big. Twenty years ago, someone told me that, if the names of all those lost babies were inscribed on a wall, like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the wall would have to stretch for 50 miles. It's 20 years later now, and that wall would have to stretch twice as far. But no names could be written on it; those babies had no names.

We expected that abortion would be rare. What we didn't realize was that, once abortion becomes available, it becomes the most attractive option for everyone *around* the pregnant woman. If she has an abortion, it's like the pregnancy never existed. No one is inconvenienced. It doesn't cause trouble for the father of the baby, or her boss, or the person in charge of her college scholarship. It won't embarrass her mom and dad.

Abortion is like a funnel; it promises to solve all the problems at once. So there is significant pressure on a woman to choose abortion, rather than adoption or parenting.

A woman who had had an abortion told me, "Everyone around me was saying they would 'be there for me' if I had the abortion, but no one said they'd 'be there for me' if I had the baby." For everyone around the pregnant woman, abortion looks like the sensible choice. A woman who determines instead to continue an unplanned pregnancy looks like she's being foolishly stubborn. It's like she's taken up some unreasonable hobby. People think: If she would only go off and do this one thing, everything would be fine.

But that's an illusion. Abortion can't really turn back the clock. It can't push the rewind button on life and make it so that she was never pregnant. It can make it easy for everyone *around* the woman to forget the pregnancy, but the woman herself may struggle. When she first sees the positive pregnancy test she may feel, in a panicky way, that she has to get rid of it as fast as possible. But life stretches on after abortion, for months and years — for many long nights — and all her life long she may ponder the irreversible choice she made.

This issue gets presented as if it's a tug of war between the woman and the baby. We see them as mortal enemies, locked in a fight to the death. But that's a strange idea, isn't it? It must be the first time in history when mothers and their own children have been assumed to be at war. We're supposed to picture the child attacking her, trying to destroy her hopes and plans, and picture the woman grateful for the abortion, since it rescued her from the clutches of her child.

If you were in charge of a nature preserve and you noticed that the pregnant female mammals were trying to miscarry their pregnancies, eating poisonous plants or injuring themselves, what would you do? Would you think of it as a battle between the pregnant female and her unborn and find ways to help those pregnant animals miscarry? No, of course not. You would immediately think, “Something must be really wrong in this environment.” Something is creating intolerable stress, so much so that animals would rather destroy their own offspring than bring them into the world. You would strive to identify and correct whatever factors were causing this stress in the animals.

The same thing goes for the human animal. Abortion gets presented to us as if it’s something women want; both pro-choice and pro-life rhetoric can reinforce that idea. But women do this only if all their other options look worse. It’s supposed to be “her choice,” yet so many women say, “I really didn’t have a choice.”

I changed my opinion on abortion after I read an article in *Esquire* magazine, way back in 1976. I was home from grad school, flipping through my dad’s copy, and came across an article titled “What I Saw at the Abortion.” The author, Richard Selzer, was a surgeon, and he was in favor of abortion, but he’d never seen one. So he asked a colleague whether, next time, he could go along.

Selzer described seeing the patient, 19 weeks pregnant, lying on her back on the table. (That is unusually late; most abortions are done by the tenth or twelfth week.) The doctor performing the procedure inserted a syringe into the woman’s abdomen and injected her womb with a prostaglandin solution, which would bring on contractions and cause a miscarriage. (This method isn’t used anymore, because too often the baby survived the procedure — chemically burned and disfigured, but clinging to life. Newer methods, including those called “partial birth abortion” and “dismemberment abortion,” more reliably ensure death.)

After injecting the hormone into the patient’s womb, the doctor left the syringe standing upright on her belly. Then, Selzer wrote, “I see something other than what I expected here. . . . It is the hub of the needle that is 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 he was seeing the fetus’s desperate fight for life. And as he watched, he saw the movement of the syringe slow down and then stop. The child was dead. Whatever

else an unborn child does not have, he has one thing: a will to live. He will fight to defend his life.

The last words in Selzer's essay are, "Whatever else is said in abortion's defense, the vision of that other defense [i.e., of the child defending its life] will not vanish from my eyes. And it has happened that you cannot reason with me now. For what can language do against the truth of what I saw?"

The truth of what he saw disturbed me deeply. There I was, anti-war, anti-capital punishment, even vegetarian, and a firm believer that social justice cannot be won at the cost of violence. Well, this sure looked like violence. How had I agreed to make this hideous act the centerpiece of my feminism? How could I think it was wrong to execute homicidal criminals, wrong to shoot enemies in wartime, but all right to kill our own sons and daughters?

For that was another disturbing thought: Abortion means killing not strangers but our own children, our own flesh and blood. No matter who the father, every child aborted is that woman's own son or daughter, just as much as any child she will ever bear.

We had somehow bought the idea that abortion was necessary if women were going to rise in their professions and compete in the marketplace with men. But how had we come to agree that we will sacrifice our children, as the price of getting ahead? When does a man ever have to choose between his career and the life of his child?

Once I recognized the inherent violence of abortion, none of the feminist arguments made sense. Like the claim that a fetus is not really a person because it is so *small*. Well, I'm only 5 foot 1. Women, in general, are smaller than men. Do we really want to advance a principle that big people have more value than small people? That if you catch them before they've reached a certain size, it's all right to kill them?

What about the child who is "unwanted"? It was a basic premise of early feminism that women should not base their sense of worth on whether or not a man "wants" them. We are valuable simply because we are members of the human race, regardless of any other person's approval. Do we really want to say that "unwanted" people might as well be dead? What about a woman who is "wanted" when she's young and sexy but less so as she gets older? At what point is it all right to terminate her?

The usual justification for abortion is that the unborn is not a “person.” It’s said that “Nobody knows when life begins.” But that’s not true; everybody knows when life — a new individual human life — gets started. It’s when the sperm dissolves in the egg. That new single cell has a brand-new DNA, never before seen in the world. If you examined through a microscope three cells lined up — the newly fertilized ovum, a cell from the father, and a cell from the mother — you would say that, judging from the DNA, the cells came from three different people.

When people say the unborn is “not a person” or “not a life” they mean that it has not yet grown or gained abilities that arrive later in life. But there’s no agreement about which abilities should be determinative. Pro-choice people don’t even agree with each other. Obviously, law cannot be based on such subjective criteria. If it’s a case where the question is “Can I kill this?” the answer must be based on objective medical and scientific data. And the fact is, an unborn child, from the very first moment, is a new human individual. It has the three essential characteristics that make it “a human life”: It’s alive and growing, it is composed entirely of human cells, and it has unique DNA. It’s a person, just like the rest of us.

Abortion indisputably ends a human life. But this loss is usually set against the woman’s need to have an abortion in order to freely direct her own life. It is a particular cruelty to present abortion as something women want, something they demand, they find liberating. Because *nobody* wants this. The procedure itself is painful, humiliating, expensive — no woman “wants” to go through it. But once it’s available, it appears to be the logical, reasonable choice. All the complexities can be shoved down that funnel. Yes, abortion solves all the problems; but it solves them inside the woman’s body. And she is expected to keep that pain inside for a lifetime, and be grateful for the gift of abortion.

Many years ago I wrote something in an essay about abortion, and I was surprised that the line got picked up and frequently quoted. I’ve seen it in both pro-life and pro-choice contexts, so it appears to be something both sides agree on.

I wrote, “No one wants an abortion as she wants an ice cream cone or a Porsche. She wants an abortion as an animal, caught in a trap, wants to gnaw off its own leg.”

Strange, isn’t it, that both pro-choice and pro-life people agree that is true? Abortion is a horrible and harrowing experience. That women choose it so frequently shows how much worse continuing a pregnancy can be. Essentially, we’ve agreed to surgically alter

women so that they can get along in a man's world. And then expect them to be grateful for it.

Nobody wants to have an abortion. And if nobody wants to have an abortion, why are women doing it, 2,800 times a day? If women doing something 2,800 times daily that they don't want to do, this is not liberation we've won. We are colluding in a strange new form of oppression.

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And so we come around to one more March for Life, like the one last year, like the one next year. Protesters understandably focus on the unborn child, because the danger it faces is the most galvanizing aspect of this struggle. If there are different degrees of injustice, surely violence is the worst manifestation, and killing worst of all. If there are different categories of innocent victim, surely the small and helpless have a higher claim to protection, and tiny babies the highest of all. The minimum purpose of government is to shield the weak from abuse by the strong, and there is no one weaker or more voiceless than unborn children. And so we keep saying that they should be protected, for all the same reasons that newborn babies are protected. Pro-lifers have been doing this for 43 years now, and will continue holding a candle in the darkness for as many more years as it takes.

I understand all the reasons why the movement's prime attention is focused on the unborn. But we can also say that abortion is no bargain for women, either. It's destructive and tragic. We shouldn't listen unthinkingly to the other side of the time-worn script, the one that tells us that women want abortions, that abortion liberates them. Many a post-abortion woman could tell you a different story.

The pro-life cause is perennially unpopular, and pro-lifers get used to being misrepresented and wrongly accused. There are only a limited number of people who are going to be brave enough to stand up on the side of an unpopular cause. But sometimes a cause is so urgent, is so dramatically clear, that it's worth it. What cause could be more outrageous than violence — fatal violence — against the most helpless members of our human community? If that doesn't move us, how hard *are* our hearts? If that doesn't move us, what will ever move us?

In time, it's going to be impossible to deny that abortion is violence against children.

Future generations, as they look back, are not necessarily going to go easy on ours. Our bland acceptance of abortion is not going to look like an understandable goof. In fact, the kind of hatred that people now level at Nazis and slave-owners may well fall upon our era. Future generations can accurately say, “It’s not like they didn’t know.” They can say, “After all, they had sonograms.” They may consider this bloodshed to be a form of genocide. They might judge our generation to be monsters.

One day, the tide is going to turn. With that Supreme Court decision 43 years ago, one of the sides in the abortion debate won the day. But sooner or later, that day will end. No generation can rule from the grave. The time is coming when a younger generation will sit in judgment of ours. And they are not obligated to be kind.

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