

# ABORTION, SELF-LOVE, AND VIRTUE: ON THE WORK OF THE CARING FOUNDATION

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WHAT EXACTLY IS SO COMPELLING and attractive about the media campaign of the Caring Foundation, so well described in the presentation by Paul Swope? Clearly, this approach has captured the imagination of many leaders in the pro-life movement. Why is this so?

Well, there are some relatively superficial reasons. The professionalism of the Caring Foundation is impressive: I think we pro-lifers are willing to acknowledge now that we cannot afford the romanticism of thinking it actually a good thing to be working from our kitchen tables with boxes of envelopes and hand-written labels. No, we should be making use of all of the best tools for reaching people employed by professionals in business. Let it no longer be the case that in this struggle over abortion “the children of darkness are wiser in their generation than the children of light.”

Similarly, it is good to see the media being put to use for a good cause. Yes, to some extent “the media is the message,” as the University of Toronto’s Marshall MacLuhan once warned us. It is perhaps easier to mislead and confuse people in sound-bites than it is to tell them the whole truth. Nonetheless, aspects of the truth are capable of being expressed in compressed form with power. That’s what a proverb does. That’s what a good photograph does (think of the Marines raising the flag at Iwo Jima). That’s exactly what a parable does, and Jesus often taught in parables. If we can, why not nudge our fellow citizens toward the truth with some good suggestions made by way of television, to compensate for all the bad? And if, in fact, many people who think of themselves as “pro-choice” arrived at that view by succumbing to propaganda, rather than through reasoning, perhaps they will be reached better through “good propaganda” than anything approaching a real argument. As Hobbes remarked, if a man has not adopted his view

through reasoning, it is unlikely he will be persuaded to give it up through reasoning.

Then again, the practical, pragmatic realism of the Caring Foundation's campaign is refreshing. They do not run a commercial because pro-lifers like it, or because we find it invigorating, or because we think that it *ought* to be compelling to any normal person. Rather, they test their commercials, as all good marketing strategists do, with carefully selected test markets, until the effectiveness of the commercial has been shown, and only then do they run the commercial on a large scale—which is good stewardship of precious contributed dollars as well as shrewd good sense.

Furthermore, the implications of the Caring Foundation's approach are immediately evident, and they offer hope. The 25 largest markets in the U.S. contain over half of the voting population of the country. So, their sensible marketing approach will very likely have immediate political consequences. And the approach can be generalized: after running commercials aimed at women who are likely to face an “unwanted” pregnancy, we can devise commercials aimed at women who have already had an abortion, or who have had multiple abortions and are contemplating another, or who are married and contemplating abortion, or who have been abandoned by the biological father, and so on. The commercials can be aimed at more precise groups, or adapted for use with different kinds of groups. In short, we can see immediately that the Caring Foundation's work is potentially only the beginning of a long-range, strategically sound plan to reach all segments of society.

But there is a much deeper reason why the Caring Foundation's work has rightly been found so compelling. One way of getting at this is by using a distinction that the Foundation likes to make, between *political debate* and *personal persuasion*. A political debate, ideally, aims at the clarification and separation—polarization—of opposed views; it attempts to destroy any appearance of a middle ground, precisely to propel citizens into one camp or the other. As pro-lifers, we are conscious of not recognizing any principled middle-ground in the controversy. Now, the “pro-choice” view is also incoherent, although if it is presented as an ethic of autonomy, it has at least the appearance of coherence. But, without question, any attempt to combine the two views—to be

“personally opposed” but publicly in favor—we rightly deride as muddled nonsense.

But, in contrast, personal persuasion must not only respect this mushy middle position but also be concerned with it to the exclusion of the extremes. The extreme views can take care of themselves: they have a certain cogency and a clearly focused source of motivation. To attempt to persuade a confirmed, radical feminist or a militant abortion-rights supporter through a brief television spot is obviously pointless. Rather, we have to direct our efforts to the middle, without becoming impatient with the muddle. We must ourselves muck around in the dark, irrational, confused world of a young woman in the U.S. today who is facing an “unwanted” pregnancy and figure out exactly what fears, aims, and apparent realities are facing her, and why.

This is what the Caring Foundation has tried to do with its research, prior to its constructing its commercials. That the commercials have proven effective is some indication that their initial research was fairly sound. (They describe this research as “right-brain” research, but they acknowledge that they do not thereby intend to declare their allegiance to a particular neurophysiological theory; they might just as well say that the research is “focused on the imagination and emotions” or on “deep seated, habitual associations.”) And in trying to understand these women, the Caring Foundation’s commercials help to bring about, I believe, a kind of kinship between those of us who support the pro-life view and these women. Mr. Swope describes the commercials as attempting not to erect any “barriers” between those who advocate the pro-life view and the intended viewers of the commercials. One might just as well say that the commercials attempt to create some sympathy or kinship between them and us. Yes, of course: we do have great love for pregnant women in difficult straits, and we are willing to prove this love in deeds, such as through crisis pregnancy centers. But the Caring Foundation commercials implicitly help these women to recognize this love. At very least, the commercials help these women to respond to our concerns with sympathy.

As Mr. Swope mentioned, one surprising conclusion which the Caring Foundation has reached is that a young woman facing an “unwanted”

pregnancy likens the birth of her child to death for herself, so that she views abortion, in contrast, as a kind of self-preservation and, therefore, if not wholly justified, at least necessary, excusable, and ultimately forgivable in the sight of God.

Literally, this view is preposterous. It is more likely that the woman will win the lottery than die in giving birth to her child. Nonetheless, let us carry on with our project of not dismissing the view, for all that, and try to understand it. Better, in the manner of irenic philosophers such as Aristotle and Aquinas, let us go farther and try to find aspects of truth in it. After all, even the “right brain” does not believe in something without there being some truth to it!

Now, it is true, in some sense, that any woman who bears a child and raises it herself dies. The thing could be made philosophically more precise: we could say, for instance, that life should be defined as activity of thinking and perception, that death is the annihilation of these, and that childbirth, insofar as it requires that a woman cease from some sorts kinds of activities and adopt others, constitutes an analogue of death. In the same way, every act of self-denial is, to that extent, some kind of death: it is a “mortification,” a “making dead.” Every act of self-sacrifice involves the destruction of something one holds dear, and the activity and life surrounding it, for the sake of some good of a different and higher kind.

Looked at in this way, childbearing is indeed a mortification and a sacrifice for any woman whatsoever: this is true of my wife or Mr. Swope’s wife, as well as for any young woman facing an “unwanted” pregnancy—which is why motherhood has traditionally and correctly been so highly esteemed. (We might speculate, too, that this is the source of the connection often made in literature and film between sexual relations and death.) But if so, and if, furthermore, no one chooses to lose or give up one good except to obtain a good of a different or higher kind, then we must ask why it is that childbearing appears to some women as *mere death*, and not, rather, as *death which brings about new life for them*.

The answer is not, as we might at first think, that they do not regard their unborn child as a living, human being. In fact, most of them do: pregnant women typically know they are not dealing with a mere “clump

of cells.” In difficult circumstances they might, of course, accept that view as a rationalization because an “expert” assures them that it is so. Yet this is not something they have always believed. Rather, the correct view is a bit more complicated. First, the typical American twenty-year-old hardly has *maturity of character, i.e.*, the ability consistently to “put oneself to death” in pursuit of higher goods; hence, she lacks preparation for a choice of that kind and it is unreasonable to expect large sacrifices from someone unaccustomed even to small exercises of moral strength. Second, young people have not been raised to regard fruitfulness as the completion or perfection of maturity; rather, they have been told nearly the opposite since birth. So, fruitfulness cannot appear to them as a possible pathway that their life as a whole can take: they do not conceive of *their* life as having a better and more perfect stage of fruitfulness. Third, the typical pregnant woman has not made the antecedent act of radically “putting herself to death” through an unqualified commitment to live her life with another in marriage. Someone who has done so can easily see child-bearing as a kind of extension of this: “I stopped living just for myself when I was married, why should I expect to live for myself in relation to my child?” (Of course, even married people today frequently have not made such a commitment.) Fourth, the child is derived not simply from the mother but also from the father, but perhaps the father is absent, and in any case he is not someone with whom she would wish to spend her life; thus she is not helped in thinking of the child as being a new life for her indirectly through its being so for the father.

So then, what we often find with a woman who faces a difficult pregnancy is that all that she has available to her is a point of view from which childbirth looks like death. She lacks all of the experience, background, and conceptual equipment which is typically required for her to look upon the child as a new life for her. The birth of her child, then, is pure sacrifice, with no good coming to her from it. It is as though a Christian were to believe in the crucifixion only and not in the resurrection to follow: what then could possibly be the motive for “taking up one’s cross daily”? Similarly, what could be the woman’s motive for choosing to bear the child? Presumably no motive would be forthcoming

from within. The action would have to appear as something to be done, if at all, only because it was something compelled from the outside. Thus, to pregnant women in difficult straits, any advocacy in favor of her keeping the child necessarily appears to be a kind of bullying, the “imposition” of “morality,” the infliction of a lifeless law “on her body” and this, in short, something which could only be a good for someone else, not for herself. Pregnancy, precisely insofar as someone else urges it, comes to be viewed as enslavement or imprisonment, and pro-lifers, precisely insofar as they act in what they take to be the interests of the child, look to be slave-holders or jailers.

Note that there is simply no question here of the woman viewing pro-lifers as altruistically and selflessly defending the good of the child. Recall, the woman has not been able to adopt any point of view from which the child looks to be *her* good. How can she accept, then, that someone else really takes the child to be *his* good? In fact, we might suppose that she must unconsciously block any thought like that from breaking out. Hardly anyone has the strength to admit that strangers have a greater understanding of one’s own good than one does oneself. It would be precisely in *dismissing* the claims of pro-lifers that she would find some way of affirming her actual and legitimate greater “concern” or authority in the matter.

The Caring Foundation’s approach, then, is compelling because it operates on this kind of diagnosis of the pregnant woman’s point of view. Curiously, if the woman’s conscience is to work, we cannot appeal to it directly. That is, we want *her* conscience to have force for her; but any expressions of our conscience (even though, admittedly, our consciences are simply reflecting upon the objective truth of the matter) will tend be received by her, given her state, as something alien and imposed from without.

Another remarkable feature of the Caring Foundation’s approach is that it operates on the assumption that, as the woman sees it, to bear a child to term is a tremendous act of heroism. If we reflect a little, we can see that there is much truth in this idea as well. For example, consider the comparison frequently drawn in literature between child-bearing and war. In a famous scene the Greek tragedian Euripides, for instance, has the

character Medea assert at one point that “I would rather stand in battle three times than go through a single pregnancy.” And this is a common enough theme in literature, for the reason that both pregnancy and warfare have been ways in which citizens have contributed to the fostering of life in their society while risking their own lives. Let us adopt this analogy as expressing an important truth. Let us, furthermore, suppose that we lived in a nation in which the highest authorities had ruled that every man in the army, while the opposing enemy was approaching, enjoyed the legal right, if he wished, of leaving the field of battle and going home. Suppose also that all of the prestigious institutions in the land, and many of its religious groups, taught that such a course of action was precisely what one should do. We might well wonder how many men would stay and fight. Of course, pregnancy does not pose the same physical threat as warfare. The point, rather, is that it is viewed as if it did. And for the purposes of persuading women to remain and “fight,” it hardly matters that they might be to blame for their incorrect assessment of their plight.

The existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers, writing in the aftermath of World War II, spoke of what he called “borderline” or “boundary” situations—circumstances in which people were challenged to the core of their character in fundamental ways, for example: “Will I shelter this man fleeing from the Nazis or not?” Jaspers was fascinated with how ordinary life could take on this existential significance. For instance, if an Englishman in London tends his little garden in typical circumstances, his action is prosaic; but if, rather than giving into despair, he tends his garden the morning after a vast German air-raid, his action may acquire the character of an affirmation of the worth of civilization.

We might wonder whether, here and now, in our circumstances and time, pregnancy is just such a “borderline situation.” Has the very natural and ordinary action of bringing a pregnancy to term become supremely heroic? And if it is heroic, we might wonder whether it is “objectively” so, or only subjectively heroic (*i.e.*, heroic only given how the woman views it). Suppose *Roe v. Wade* were extended, as it very well could be, to include infanticide and suppose that the Supreme Court were to rule that only religious reasons could serve to distinguish

between the unborn and born child. Laws that prohibit infanticide would therefore be unconstitutional as imposing a particular point of view on a disputed matter in a realm that is deeply personal for the parents. Suppose that mainline religious groups were to agree with this opinion and to advocate infanticide (say, because chemical abortion has become the norm, and infanticide is insisted upon as a backstop in case the chemical method fails). Suppose that, from their youth, children were taught that the right to infanticide is a fundamental freedom (that is, not to be compelled to raise any particular neonate). Suppose, furthermore, that history books were rewritten to obliterate any consciousness that there used to be a different way of living, so that it would seem incredible that people could have endured not having this “freedom.” In circumstances such as these, it would arguably be objectively heroic, and not merely subjectively so, not to kill one’s infant child. (In fact, what we have described is something not unlike the Roman empire at the beginning of Christianity, and we tend to think that the counter-cultural behavior of Christians then was, in fact, heroic.) But, if so, then it would be heroic to choose not to abort one’s child today.

To be sure, in an important sense it is obvious that we should not kill infants. But for an entire society to come to act on this “obvious” principle was the achievement of centuries, requiring the slow building-up of that extraordinary edifice called Christendom. It requires a civilization for obvious moral principles to become automatic to its citizens. A good culture, it has been remarked, is one that makes it easy to be good. But Christendom has broken down, and in our culture it is undoubtedly difficult to be good. We live in a time in which it is a great achievement never to have murdered anyone.

So then, we can say that the Caring Foundation’s approach is additionally admirable because it assumes what is, in fact, very difficult to admit, *viz.*, that something that should be straightforward, obvious, and a basic element of human dignity—do not kill your own child—has in our culture acquired the status of a tremendous act of moral vision and heroism. Rather than lamenting this, the Caring Foundation adopts it as a practical and effective starting point for action.

In closing, we should consider the question: Why has it taken so long



for the pro-life movement to adopt the approach shown by the Caring Foundation? Certainly the pro-life movement has done countless good and effective things, but why have we until this point neglected this one approach? I suggest two reasons. First, we misunderstood at first how deep the problem was. After *Roe v. Wade* it was commonly thought that the Supreme Court's decision was a quirky aberration which could be quickly reversed, thus returning us to the earlier (pro-life) condition within which we as a nation would again simply see, as something obvious, the wrongness of abortion.

The contemporary philosopher John McDowell has pointed out that virtues play a role in deliberation which he calls "silencing." His idea is that, for a virtuous person, some courses of action do not even appear as possibilities. For example, a chaste man on a business trip does not even *think* of going to a bar to pick up a woman. Hence it is not something that he must struggle to resist. His not being unchaste is hardly, for him, a matter of praise. He cannot boast that he remained faithful to his wife; for him, this was "simply doing his duty." Yet there are men for whom remaining chaste would be a terrific step forward. In the years immediately after *Roe v. Wade*, the pro-life movement was under what we can now clearly see to be the misapprehension that the "virtue" of our country as regards abortion was basically intact and that all that was needed was for the Supreme Court's ruling to be overturned. We imagined that we could then return to the condition in which the choice of abortion would be "silenced" for women. Yet, in fact, even at that period the condition of our culture was such that it was something heroic for a woman not seek an abortion.

A second consideration has to do with what might be called a popular "Kantianism," a view which has, I think, gripped the imagination of the pro-life movement. This is a view which pays little attention to virtue. It conceives of morality as a set of principles or rules enjoining altruistic and disinterested behavior. A morally good person is someone who accepts the right principles and then chooses to act on them rather than on the basis of self-interest. On this view any woman who was tempted to seek an abortion would, to that extent, either lack the right principle—and thus we would need to prove to her that "the fetus is a person," or

that “it is wrong to take innocent human life”—or she would be favoring her own self-interest over the claims of conscience and acting out of “convenience”—and thus we would try to make it less inconvenient for her not to have an abortion, through crisis pregnancy centers, *etc.* But, in fact, morality consists of the development of settled habits of action which inform our emotions in such a way that we extend our concern gradually from just our own good to the good of others, taking their good to count as our own. This occurs through friendships and attachments of various sorts. It is indeed communal and communitarian in nature, as Rabbi Novak stressed in his lecture opening this conference. Therefore, a woman facing an “unwanted” pregnancy and tempted by abortion might very well have the correct principle, and she might not be strictly selfish. Her problem could be, rather, that she has no developed virtues and that she has had little “training” in extending her self-love, through true bonds of love, to include the good of others. So, she has a hard time discerning what goods are actually at stake in her decision, and she cannot easily see how the right course of action could amount to something good for her. Something that may be straightforward for us is difficult for her.

Such a woman is not very different from ourselves. It is not that we are principled and she is ignorant or selfish. Rather, she is someone who has to deal with difficulties not unlike those we face, but she is morally weaker and less well-equipped to handle them. The Caring Foundation commercials are put forward in that spirit of sympathy—a fact that is recognized by their intended audience. The result, as I said, is a certain kinship. Certainly we should foster such kinship to the extent that we can. As the philosopher Pseudo-Dionysius remarked, love is a bonding and unifying force. In our efforts at persuasion we can be confident that if we draw closer to women facing difficult pregnancies in the manner described, they will quite naturally move closer to us—this strategy will first produce shifts in opinion polls and then political victories and real movement towards a culture of life.