

First Things

Abortion:

A Failure to Communicate

Paul Swope

For twenty-five years the pro-life movement has stood up to defend perhaps the most crucial principle in any civilized society, namely, the sanctity and value of every human life. However, neither the profundity and scale of the cause, nor the integrity of those who work to support it, necessarily translates into effective action. Recent research on the psychology of pro-choice women offers insight into why the pro-life movement has not been as effective as it might have been in persuading women to choose life; it also offers opportunities to improve dramatically the scope and influence of the pro-life message, particularly among women of childbearing age.

This research suggests that modern American women of childbearing age do not view the abortion issue within the same moral framework as those of us who are pro-life activists. Our message is not being well-received by this audience because we have made the error of assuming that women, especially those facing the trauma of an unplanned pregnancy, will respond to principles we see as self-evident within our own moral framework, and we have presented our arguments accordingly. This is a miscalculation that has fatally handicapped the pro-life cause. While we may not agree with how women currently evaluate this issue, the importance of our mission and the imperative to be effective demand that we listen, that we understand, and that we respond to the actual concerns of women who are most likely to choose abortion.

The importance of a new approach became clear from the results of sophisticated research pioneered by the Caring Foundation, a group that presents the pro-

life message to the public via television. This group has been able to tap into some of the most advanced psychological research available today, so-called Right Brain Research. (The distinction between “right brain” and “left brain” activity may be physiologically oversimplified or even wrong, but it remains useful as a shorthand description of different ways of thinking.)

The right side of the brain is thought to control the emotional, intuitive, creative aspect of the person. Whereas most research involves analytic, rational questions and thus draws responses primarily from the left side of the brain, Right Brain Research aims to uncover the underlying emotional reasons why we make particular decisions or hold certain beliefs. Such an approach has obvious applications to an issue such as abortion, as a woman in the grips of a crisis pregnancy certainly does not resolve this issue in a cold, logical, “left-brain” manner.

These studies were carried out by a national leader in this type of research, one that has worked with companies such as General Motors, Ford, Coca-Cola, Toyota, Whirlpool, ABC Television, Federal Express, GTE, Saturn Corporation, Maybelline, and the Department of Defense. The technique used is a series of in-depth, one-on-one interviews that utilize visualization, repetition, and relaxation to evoke deep-seated emotional responses to a given topic. The results of these studies, which were conducted in 1994 and 1997, can be accepted at a better than 95 percent confidence level.

One objective of the research was to answer a question that has baffled pro-life activists for

some time. How can women, and the public in general, be comfortable with being against abortion personally but in favor of keeping it legal? Because pro-lifers find it morally obvious that one cannot simultaneously hold that “abortion is killing” and “abortion should be legal,” they have tended to assume that people need only to be shown more clearly that the fetus is a baby. They assume that if the humanity of the unborn is understood, the consequent moral imperative, “killing a baby is wrong,” will naturally follow, and women will choose life for their unborn children. This orientation has framed much of the argument by pro-lifers for over two decades, with frustratingly little impact.

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The new research shows why the traditional approach has had so little effect, and what can be done to change things.

The summary report of the study bears the intriguing title “Abortion: The Least Of Three Evils—Understanding the Psychological Dynamics of How Women Feel About Abortion.” The report suggests that women do not see any “good” resulting from an unplanned pregnancy. Instead they must weigh what they perceive as three “evils,” namely, motherhood, adoption, and abortion.

Unplanned motherhood, according to the study, represents a threat so great to modern women that it is perceived as equivalent to a “death of self.” While the woman may rationally understand this is not her own literal death, her emotional, subconscious reaction to carrying the child to term is that her life will be “over.” This is because many young women of today have developed a self-identity that simply does not include being a mother. It may include going through college, getting a degree, obtaining a good job, even getting married someday; but the sudden intrusion of motherhood is perceived as a complete loss of control over their present and future selves. It shatters their sense of who they are and will become, and thereby paralyzes their ability to think more rationally or realistically.

When these women evaluate the abortion decision, therefore, they do not, as a pro-lifer might, formulate the problem with the

radically distinct options of either “I must endure an embarrassing pregnancy” or “I must destroy the life of an innocent child.” Instead, their perception of the choice is either “my life is over” or “the life of this new child is over.” Given this perspective, the choice of abortion becomes one of self-preservation, a much more defensible position, both to the woman deciding to abort and to those supporting her decision.

Even those women who are likely to choose life rather than abortion do so not because they better understand fetology or have a greater love for children, but because they have a broader and less fragile sense of self, and they can better incorporate motherhood into their self-identity.

Adoption, unfortunately, is seen as the most “evil” of the three options, as it is perceived as a kind of double death. First, the death of self, as the woman would have to accept motherhood by carrying the baby to term. Further, not only would the woman be a mother, but she would perceive herself as a bad mother, one who gave her own child away to strangers. The second death is the death of the child “through abandonment.” A woman worries about the chance of her child being abused. She is further haunted by the uncertainty of the child’s future, and about the possibility of the child returning to intrude on her own life many years later. Basically, a woman desperately wants a sense of resolution to her crisis, and in her mind, adoption leaves the situation the most unresolved, with uncertainty and guilt as far as she can see for both herself and her child. As much as we might like to see the slogan “Adoption, Not Abortion” embraced by women, this study suggests that in pitting adoption against abortion, adoption will be the hands-down loser.

The attitude of these women toward abortion is quite surprising. First, all of the scores of women involved in the study (none of whom were pro-life activists and all of whom called themselves “pro-choice”) agreed that abortion is killing. While this is something that is no doubt “written on the human heart,” credit for driving home the reality of abortion is also due to the persevering educational work of the pro-life movement. Second, the women believe that abortion is wrong, an

evil, and that God will punish a woman who makes that choice. Third, however, these women feel that God will ultimately forgive the woman, because He is a forgiving God, because the woman did not intend to get pregnant, and finally, because a woman in such crisis has no real choice, the perception is that the woman's whole life is at stake.

In fact, while abortion itself is seen as something evil, the woman who has to make that choice is perceived as being courageous, because she has made a difficult, costly, but necessary decision in order to get on with her life. Basically, abortion is considered the least of three evils because it is perceived as offering the greatest hope for a woman to preserve her own sense of self, her own life. This is why women feel protective towards the abortive woman and her "right to choose," and deeply resentful towards the pro-life movement, which they perceive as uncaring and judgmental.

Note that the primary concerns in any of the three options revolve around the woman, and *not* the unborn child. This helps to explain the appeal of the rhetoric of "choice." It offers the sense that women in crisis still have some control over their future, and it allows women who may dislike abortion themselves to still seem compassionate towards other women in crisis.

These insights also shed light on another fundamental source of frustration and failure in the pro-life movement. A quarter century of polling has shown over and over that most Americans oppose most abortions, and that women are slightly more pro-life than men. Yet Americans are increasingly comfortable with the pro-choice rather than the pro-life label, and pro-life activists are still viewed as dangerous extremists. Is this due entirely to media bias? Why is it that the pro-life movement has not been able to build on the innate pro-life sentiment of the average person, and may even be losing ground in the arena of public opinion?

Results from this study suggest that the difficulty in gaining public support is not due entirely to unfair treatment by the media, although such treatment has no

doubt played a significant role. The pro-life movement's own self-chosen slogans and educational presentations have tended to exacerbate the problem, as they focus almost exclusively on the unborn child, not the mother. This tends to build resentment, not sympathy, particularly among women of child-bearing age.

It is not surprising that the first people in the pro-life community to notice the need for a different approach were those who actually work with women in crisis. When crisis pregnancy centers first sprang up across the country, for example, they chose names such as "Home for the Little Ones" or "New Life Ministries." Today you will see names such as "A Woman's Concern" or "Lighthouse for Women."

In contrast, consider a common pro-life slogan: "Abortion Stops a Beating Heart." While this may be an effective phrase among pro-lifers, the effect upon a young woman in crisis would probably be to: 1) provoke anger at the messenger (pro-lifers), 2) confirm

her sense that pro-lifers ignore her life and situation, and 3) drive her further into denial and despair. If the pro-life goal is to lower the abortion rate and not just to state an objective fact, we have to ask whether such a message may well be counterproductive.

When a woman faces an unplanned pregnancy, her main question is not "Is this a baby?"—with the assumed consequence that if she knows it to be so she will choose life.

Women know, though often at the subconscious level, that the fetus is human, and that it will be killed by abortion. But that is the price a woman in that situation is willing to pay in her desperate struggle for what she believes to be her very survival. Emphasis on babies, whether dismembered fetuses or happy newborns, will tend to deepen the woman's sense of denial, isolation, and despair, the very emotions that will lead her to choose abortion.

Her central, perhaps subconscious, question is rather, "How can I preserve my own life?" The pro-life movement must address her side of the equation, and do so in a compassionate manner that affirms her own inner convictions. Without

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As an example of how this is put into practice, the Caring Foundation will run two contrasting ads in a given television market. One offers a role model of a woman who can identify with the concerns of the target audience but who has chosen life and presents it in a positive light; the other, again framed from the woman’s own perspective, presents abortion as a negative resolution to her crisis.

One of the pro-motherhood ads runs as follows:

*[A woman is in front of a nice house, raking leaves. She says good-bye to her daughter, then turns to the viewer.] “I was sixteen when I found out that I was pregnant with Carrie. I wasn’t married and I was really scared. You know, some people today say that I should have had an abortion, but it never occurred to me that I had that choice, just because it wasn’t convenient for me. Hey, I’m no martyr, but I really can’t believe I had a choice **after** I was pregnant. Think about it.”*

While this ad is not always popular among pro-life activists, polls showed it is extremely effective with young women. This is because it presents a role model who is approachable and believable, and the subliminal message in the ad—the nice house, the good relationship with the daughter, the image of control as the woman stands holding the rake as she takes care of her own yard—all reinforce the message that this woman *is*, in fact, a kind of martyr, because she has made a difficult decision but “gotten on with her life.” The ad subtly offers the very kind of resolution a woman facing a crisis pregnancy desperately seeks and which she is too often deceived into thinking abortion will provide.

An ad that more directly discourages abortion runs as follows:

[A woman rises from her bed, the clock showing 3:00 a.m. She goes to the window, staring into the black, rainy night. She stands silently, as a female voice speaks.] “They said you wouldn’t be bothered by a voice calling for you in the night. . . . There would be no trail of cereal through the house, no spills or stray toys. The clock ticks. All is calm. And you realize, there is still a voice. If you’ve faced the pain of an abortion, call 1-800. . . .”

In both cases the focus is on the woman, on someone who has been through the experience of an unwanted pregnancy. The ads do not make an explicit judgment; they only convey lived experiences, with very different resolutions and different consequences.

Here is another very effective ad:

*[A young woman sits by a fireplace, facing the camera.] “You know, I used to be pro-choice, and then something happened to me—I had a baby of my own. When I was pregnant I finally realized that all this little kid was trying to do was make it, just make it, just like all of us. So I haven’t figured it all out yet, but why, when I wanted the baby, it **was** a baby, and when I didn’t, it was something **else**? Think about it.”*

Again, this woman does not pretend to have all the answers or to fit neatly into the pro-life camp. She simply shares her own experience and asks a question that effectively undermines pro-choice rhetoric.

How effective have such ads been? The work of the Caring Foundation originated in Missouri, where ads have been airing for a number of years, and that state has had the fastest dropping abortion rate in the United States—almost six times the national average. From 1988 to 1992 the abortion rate dropped just 5 percent nationally, but 29 percent in Missouri.

In addition to the falling abortion rate, recent polls of teens in the Kansas City, Missouri, area also suggest a pro-life sentiment that is dramatically different from the midwest average. Whereas a Gallup poll showed teens in the midwest mirroring the national average of 29 percent of youths who are strongly pro-life, a 1996 poll of over seven thousand students from thirty-three schools in central Missouri showed over 60 percent of the teens to be strongly pro-life.

Two other states have also been airing ads for a number of years, and both have seen a drop in abortions of just under 40 percent. In Michigan, the number of abortions has dropped from 49,098 in 1987 to 31,091 in 1995. In Wisconsin, abortions have declined from a high of 20,819 abortions in 1981 to 12,782 abortions in 1995. A much more careful and tightly controlled study needs to be done to determine to what extent the use of television ads may have contributed to these numbers, though it is doubtful if enough variables could be

controlled to reach a solid conclusion.

Because the Caring Foundation hires independent, professional polling firms to conduct pre- and post-polling, it can be stated without doubt that the ads do shift public opinion and do affect young women's decision to abort or keep their children. Many crisis pregnancy centers have reported that women have come to them who were planning to choose abortion until they saw the pro-life ads on television.

In 1997, a thirteen-week television campaign was conducted in the greater Boston market, covering an audience of 4,400,000 adults. Baseline & Associates of Houston, Texas, conducted the polling. Five hundred interviews were completed in both pre- and post-polls, with a margin of error of 4.9 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

The post-poll showed a shift of 7 percent among the entire population of the region, translating into a total of 308,000 adults who switched to the pro-life position. Was this shift perhaps due to other factors, such as the partial-birth abortion debate? This question was answered by studying the cross-tabulations, which showed that the pro-life shift was entirely among those who remembered seeing the ads on television. There was no movement in the pro-life direction among those who did not recall any such ads.

In fact, the pro-life sentiment among those who recall the ads almost doubled (from 20 percent in the pre-poll to 36 percent in the post-poll), while the pro-choice position dropped significantly (from 33 percent in the pre-poll to 25 percent in the post-poll.)

The most recent poll was completed in December 1997 for the Indianapolis, Indiana, market, with data that closely mirrored the Boston results. Pro-life sentiment among the entire population increased from 36 percent to 45 percent. Among the target audience of women under age forty-five, the pro-life response increased from 33 percent to 44 percent.

In addition to the Massachusetts and Indiana polls, similar surveys have now been completed in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Ohio, Iowa, Colorado,

Missouri, and Michigan. Movement in the pro-life direction has been seen in every poll and on virtually every question (eight different questions relate to the abortion issue). The total market reach of the various campaigns underway in the last few years totals over forty-six million adults.

Because these ads have proven to be so effective in reaching women, they now include an 800 number to help women reach crisis pregnancy centers. Over five thousand calls have been received via these numbers, providing women with the counseling and healing

needed after the trauma of abortion.

This is a dramatic advance for pro-life unity, as direct-service agencies receive enormous exposure and an increase in clients (all without any charge to them), and the educational message is simultaneously reaching millions in the general population.

The direct testimony of women who have been affected by these ads is

particularly intense and supports the evidence from the polling data.

I found myself so depressed that I could hardly get out of bed. I couldn't go to work. I just curled myself into a ball and cried and cried over the abortion I had undergone about one year earlier. I felt so guilty and so alone. Then this TV ad came on with an 800 number, and I knew God was reaching out to me. I called the number, and the people at Daybreak were there to help. . . . Now my entire life has changed. . . . I have a chaste relationship with my new boyfriend. . . . I am attending a weekly Bible study. My job is going great. . . ."

A new wave of ads is now being developed based on another Right Brain Research study conducted in 1997. Whereas the first study focused on young women who were conflicted on the issue, the second study included only women who had already made the choice to abort or to keep the child. While the full analysis of this report lies outside the scope of this article, a key finding was what was termed the "locus of control" or "character maintenance" within each woman.

A new ad is now being tested that is based on this latest research:

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[A young woman is jogging through city streets. It is raining. As she runs, her inner thoughts are made audible.]
“Everyone’s telling me how I should feel. . . . It’s not like I planned to get pregnant. Not now. [Referring to angry boyfriend, shown in brief flashback.] Telling me how to feel, what to do, then not sticking around when it really counts. So now it’s all up to me. But abortion? Not me. I have to live with myself. [Pause. She runs into distance, skies clearing.] We’ll make it. Yeah, we’ll make it just fine.”

The ad’s three objectives are to engender admiration for carrying a pregnancy to term, to present a woman who serves as a role model, and, in a nonconfrontational way, to put abortion in the negative.

It is significant to compare these objectives with the comments made by women in focus groups who were asked for their response:

“That’s just like me back then. Cold, rainy. It says a lot. She’s very determined. It gives me a good feeling. Within herself she’s strong.”

“Hits home. True to life. . . . I feel her strength. It is okay to keep the baby.”

“You can feel the stress she’s having. You know it’s not the happy wonderful thing, but she’s standing up. She’s doing what’s best. She’s strong—being a strong woman jogging instead of sitting down, ‘poor little me.’”

These responses suggest that a campaign of carefully produced ads could encourage a “culture of life” ethic. Using language and imagery that will attract rather than alienate, the pro-life movement must show that abortion is actually not in a woman’s own self-interest, and that the choice of life offers hope and a positive, expanded sense of self.

But a woman is never the same once she is pregnant, whether the child is kept, adopted, or killed.

It should be noted that descriptions of fetal development and even graphic abortion pictures can still be used to great effect with certain audiences, particularly among people already disposed to the pro-life message and as a means to activate pro-lifers. Further, the means shown here for developing an

effective strategy to reach women are not necessarily transferable to strategies intending to effect political and legislative change. However, in the use of mass media to reach the general public, it is vitally important that the pro-life movement reframe the issue in terms that will be better received by women.

The terrible miscalculation of young women is that abortion can make them “un-pregnant,” that it will restore them to who they were before

their crisis. But a woman is never the same once she is pregnant, whether the child is kept, adopted, or killed. Abortion may be a kind of resolution, but it is not the one the woman most deeply longs for, nor will it even preserve her sense of self. If those of us in the pro-life movement can help women see this for themselves, we will have done much to disengage our culture from the abortion mentality.

If pro-lifers are willing to reframe the debate in a way that affected women can better understand and appreciate, the movement can regain the moral high ground in the mind of the American public, and begin to reach successfully the very women who most need the pro-life message.

At the time of publication Paul Swope was Northeast Project Director of the Caring Foundation and President of LifeNet Services, Inc.

Editor’s Note: Caring Foundation refers to Vitae Foundation.

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