

DEFINING THE

MARY S. ALEXANDER* **ABORTION DEBATE**

MY FRIEND LEXI once said that when she looks at newborn babies she sees the "wisdom of the ages" in their eyes. I did not see this "wisdom" then and, now that I have my own little girl, I still don't. But I do understand why Lexi and I are not communicating. For me, "wisdom" has something to do with language and time-binding. It is something we pass on from generation to generation, something acquired with age. Hence the phrase "wise beyond her years." For Lexi, wisdom has something to do with being uninhibited and at one with nature. If I use her definition, I can agree, babies do have the wisdom of the ages in their eyes. But I don't like her definition because it goes against what I consider to be the most important of human characteristics: the ability to share knowledge. So, we have agreed to disagree.

Of course, we are friends and it is easy for us to do this. We agree to disagree about all sorts of things that are not that important and allow us to maintain our friendship. But there are times when people are unable to reach this kind of

* Mary Alexander is a teaching fellow at New York University. She is pursuing her Ph.D. in Media Ecology.

compromise. Sometimes definitions are so concrete or so unexamined that it becomes impossible for people to speak to one another. Postman has called this "definition tyranny." He describes the problem here:

Some people are greatly tyrannized by definitions. They seem unable to put any distance between themselves and a system's way of defining things...What I am talking about is people who have so internalized a definition that they cannot even imagine an alternative way of seeing matters. They make a definition into *the* definition, and, as a consequence, sharply limit their ability to evaluate what is happening to them (1976, p. 188).

One of the most heated, angry, and irreconcilable instances of definition tyranny is in the abortion debate. As a nation, we seem to be locked into the stupid and simplistic expressions of each side. As the Pro-choice faction screams accusations of backward thinking, religious fanaticism, and male domination; the Pro-life group counters with cries of baby killers, satan-worshippers, and inhumanity. These slogans make a true debate impossible. Neither side is willing to stop yelling and consider the perspective of their opposition. Each group is trapped by a definition of life that leaves no room for compromise.

In a moment of disgust and exasperation, I began thinking about these definitions. I am uncomfortable with continued non-communication so I tried to examine these two movements by using Hayakawa's abstraction ladder (1990). I was hoping to find some agreement, some general principle that both sides could believe. Unfortunately, no matter how high up that abstraction ladder I climbed, I still could not find this magical resolution. Instead, I found a fundamental difference in how the Pro-choice and Pro-life groups define life. I believe this difference has to do with time, that is, tenses. The Pro-life movement lives in the future tense and the Pro-choice movement lives in the present tense.

For the Pro-life movement, in general, life happens in the future. This may seem counterintuitive because they define life as beginning at conception, but the reasons for this

definition have to do with the future. Their concern does not rest with the woman or teenager who already exists. They don't care if a woman feels that having a baby will destroy her chances for a productive life. They are concerned with what the new life will bring. Is it a Mozart, a Shakespeare, a Messiah?

Indeed, it is no coincidence that the Pro-life movement is associated with religious fundamentalism. Religion is, by its very nature, oriented toward the future. It asks that we wait for a better world, that we give up our self-control and trust that God knows best. To abort an unwanted pregnancy is to fly in the face of God's plan. From this point of view, it is vanity to believe that we can control our fate. We should wait and see what tomorrow will bring.

It is also no coincidence that recent Republican platforms have taken a Pro-life position. The "ideology" of the Republican party is focused on the future. Their version of progress and the American dream has to do with waiting for things to get better. The poor should wait for the wealth of the rich and powerful to "trickle down." Rather than giving money to the "underprivileged," those in need should wait for jobs to be created, for entrepreneurs to improve our schools, and for the economy to get better. Those who exist now must sit by and be patient. The future will bring a better world.

Most Pro-choice advocates seem strictly concerned with the present. They are determined to save the life of the existing woman and not worry about the life that will never exist. If a Mozart is lost, one may be created, molded through education. It is a movement focused on controlling fate and viewing the accidents of nature, not as God's will, but as things that must be fixed.

The affiliations of the religiously-oriented members of the Pro-choice movement are varied. They tend toward liberal Protestantism and reformed Judaism. These orientations are at home with science. They attempt to reconcile human intervention with a divine plan. They make it okay to tamper with the present by making science a gift from God. In this view, God gave us science as well as nature and thus we are allowed to try to control the world. It is an uncomfortable and fragile reconciliation at best, and the religious often

waiver in their support of abortion. This is why a religious Pro-choice activist can often be heard saying "Well, of course, I could never have an abortion, but I still believe that it must remain legal to have one." They are trying to hold on to a future orientation while living in the present.

Politically, the Pro-choice movement stands with the Democratic party. This party hopes to fix the world as it exists now. They cannot wait for the money to "trickle down" from the rich, they want to take it now. Jobs need to be created, schools need to be repaired, the poor and downtrodden must be repaid and remolded into happy citizens. The Democrats don't have time to wait for the future, things must be fixed now. Like the Republicans, they believe in progress, but they want to make it happen immediately. They want hands-on control, not the "invisible hand."

Obviously, both sides have their problems. A future orientation may mean that those alive now will have to suffer until that magical future arrives. A present orientation often leads to poor planning, lack of forethought and disastrous results from well-intentioned acts. Neither group can claim the moral high ground and neither group can see the other perspective. Each side is so locked into their definition of life, they cannot possibly consider an alternative view. What an unfortunate standoff in a world that, in order to survive, must deal with the present and the future.

For me, it all comes back to my disagreement with Lexi's definition of wisdom. My definition of wisdom has to do with acquired knowledge and so must my definition of life. I stand with the Pro-choice movement. I am concerned with the person who already exists, in whom we have already started to invest our time and pass on our knowledge. But Lexi does have a point. Nature is also important and new ideas often come from the uninhibited. That new life, unencumbered by tradition, may bring more insight to the world than all the knowledge I have so diligently tried to acquire. I don't want to believe this but I can allow for the possibility of it being true.

But this open-mindedness cannot be applied to political movements and my hope for a reconciliation in the abortion debate has waned with my investigation. I see now that

abortion will remain a political struggle, that there will probably never be a comfortable moral resolution. We are bound to our definitions and cannot really allow ourselves to consider the other point of view. It would mean giving up too much. It would mean changing everything that we believe is important. And because we, as abstract members of two very different movements, are not friends — we cannot agree to disagree.

REFERENCES

- Hayakawa, S. I. (1990). *Language in Thought and Action* 5th edition. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Postman, N. (1976). *Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk*. New York: Delacorte Press.

