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Our Stephen

King-ishy Culture?

May 24, 2018 | by Brian Shoemaker, PhD, Assistant Executive Director, KRLA

Our culture has become so “sophisticated” we have progressed to be creatures with little, if any, buffers through which we can filter what is entertaining from what is barbaric. We seem to have evolved into a predatory culture, feeding on the vulnerable, the innocent, and the ignorant. Perhaps all we can expect now from a sophisticated population such as ours is folly, fantasy, and...ferocity?

Case in point. The many books-turned-films of Stephen King. King has a reputation for writing blood-lusty novels. Many of which target innocent children and teens with intentional brutality. In “Salem’s Lot,” blood is sucked from the veins of children by vampires. In “Carrie,” a teenage girl is rampaged by her religious fanatic mother, ravaged by her peers, and baptized with a bucket of pig blood. Then in the closing scene, Carrie herself sparks telekinetic revenge upon all of her prom-attending perpetrators. In “Cujo,” a small boy nears death by heat hydration confined in a stalled Volkswagen. (He’s confined there so he won’t be eaten by his rabid pet St. Bernard.)

But the lowlight of all of this is the book-turned-box-office-sensation, “IT.” No filter, no buffers, just outright brutality perpetrated upon an innocent and unsuspecting little boy. Dismemberment of the boy’s arm in the teeth of a predator—gushing blood and all! Then he is quickly swept away down the sewer, washed away as if nothing happened.

The book is still a best seller. The film “grossed” record attendance. Is this entertainment at its best or most brutal? In this country we have the right to choose either.

But consider the deeper questions: Have we become so uncompassionate for life—all of life—we can no longer distinguish between what is wholesome and what is horrible?

Could this trend desensitize us toward becoming a predatory culture, wherein only the “fittest” decide who is esteemed to survive and who is worthy of victimization?

I hope there is still a modicum of compassion in our culture to counter the horrors of such depictions in our culture—fictional and otherwise. Particularly as brutality is perpetrated upon the innocent and the vulnerable. Especially upon babies in the womb who have yet to experience the wholesome possibilities of life.

Impressions of the Rhetoric for “Reproductive Rights”

April 5, 2018 | by Brian Shoemaker, PhD, Assistant Executive Director, KRLA

There seems to be unconscionable messages underlying the rhetoric of some who grandstand for “reproductive rights” in our state. In the shadows of what I noted to be a few ill-tempered political tirades are more subtle messages that need to be of concern if Kentucky is to strive toward a healthier way of life – one that promotes the potential and well-being of all, including Kentucky moms and babies.

While I have a strong propensity to honor the life process beginning at conception, I am not in any way anti-woman. In fact, I affirm the statement of the Honorable Representative, Joni

Jenkins of Louisville in the explanation of her “dissent vote” regarding HB 454 (“Abortion by Dismemberment Ban”) when she said, “I do not believe that all who are Pro-Choice are anti-baby, nor do I believe that all who are Pro-Life are anti-woman.” (2018 Kentucky Legislative Session)

However, not all who propagate “reproductive rights” are inclined to consider the life process within the womb as awe-inspiring. Nor do they consider abortion a tragedy-of-sorts. In fact, my impression is that there are some anti-Pro-Life persons who even glorify abortion-on-demand, just for the sake that women be “free to decide...and not be subjected to the whims of old, white, male politicians who have never been pregnant.” (Actual Testimony)

Their abortions (some with more than one) may have been a legal “choice,” but the procedure did not seem to resolve for them other underlying issues: their personal economic challenges, the “inconvenience” of their pregnancies, or their respective unhealthy relationships with men. Regardless, their abortions were freely chosen, legally performed, and “someone who should have been born, is gone.” (Anne Sexton, 2008) Or as Planned Parenthood boasts, “Care...no matter what.” (2017 brochure) ...or perhaps a better slogan: “no matter WHO.”

Here were some observations/impressions of the anti-Pro-Life panel presentation during a meeting of the House Committee on Welfare and Family Services in their discussion of HB 454, a bill banning abortion by the dismemberment of the human fetus. The following messages came through via vehement tones:

- 1) Children are a fatal hindrance to personal career choices.
- 2) Multiple abortions can be as easily celebrated as liposuction.
- 3) Children are nothing but an inconvenient financial liability for 18 years.
- 4) The Pro-choice arguments can be merely a smoke screen for personal grievances against men, especially “old, white, male politicians,” who have never been pregnant.
- 5) There is no such thing as a natural “maternalistic instinct.” It is all about personal “survival instincts.”
- 6) Saving money that would be spent on litigation is more important than investing it in potentially saving the life of one child.

7) Through complicated eisegesis, religious politicians can come to believe that God not only justifies, but encourages abortion as a practice of “doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly before the Lord.” Justice is defined as giving the poor the financial means to abort their children, carte blanche—just because they are poor.

Simply put, Pro-Life persons ARE concerned with the health of the mother, but we do not believe that the well being of the mother automatically necessitates the demise of her child. As we advance technologically, medically, and care for one another in a renewed sense of community, there are more and more alternatives to abortion.

Here are a few brief responses to the impressions above:

- 1) I may have a professional career, but my personal life-in-family and community is my calling.
- 2) Is there any remorse for the intentional extermination of a life-in-process within one’s own sphere of influence?/li>
- 3) Children are a multi-economic investment: the economy of heart, mind, soul, and strength./li>
- 4) Women have every right to express past grievances with the men in their lives. But while men have never had the experience of being pregnant, there ARE men who know what it means to be a father, and sacrifice their own lives for their children...and their wives./li>
- 5) IS there a maternal instinct that naturally supersedes and sacrifices a woman’s personal comfort for her children?

(I actually have seen this phenomenon with the women in my own life.)/li>

6) Litigation for the sake of saving the lives of targeted persons is a noble thing. What is the cost of one child --saved?/li>

7) A. Who ARE the poor, but those most vulnerable in our society? Can we include exercising acts of justice for the unborn?

B. While there is justice FOR the poor, can we also expect justice FROM the poor, to act with justice toward those who truly have no voice. C. The first century church manual of discipline, called the "Teaching" states, "Do not murder; do not commit adultery"; do not corrupt boys; do not fornicate... do not murder a child by abortion or kill a newborn infant." (Didache, 65-80 AD) Aren't the above expressions of "doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly before God" (Micah 6:8) — particularly as we revere the process of life that God created?

I have learned through listening to the anti-Pro-Life voices in this Kentucky Legislative session that there is a common cultural undertow in our thinking. We have become an extraction society! Renowned Kentucky Senator Harry Caudill spoke out against the exploitation of land—by those who owned the land themselves, or sold it to self-serving corporations and companies for profit. He was concerned that the ecology of our lives would be forever disrupted by irresponsible myopia. Caudill believed he spoke for the land, but also for generations to come. He remarked, "somebody needs to speak for the unborn..." (from "Harry Caudill: A Man of Courage" Deaton films, 2015) In an extraction society, the ecology of the land and the economy of the unborn are most vulnerable.

Let us be warned with the words of environmentalist, Elizabeth A. Zimmerman: "In a materialistic society, people may accumulate so many things that they many not value any of them." (Villager, 2008)

Could it even be true that we have accumulated so many personal privileges or "rights" that we not only do not "value" them, but we also have no sense of responsibility FOR them? This, I believe is one of the major challenges in the debate between "reproductive rights" versus the protection of life within the womb: valuing responsibility for our choices.

In processing all the brouhaha, am reminded that "we are really not ALL THAT, we are only a part of ALL THAT IS." Maybe with this reminder, we can esteem a healthier approach to affirming the intricate and awe-inspiring process of our common existence we call life.

Beating Hearts for the Sake of Life!

January, 2018 | by Brian Shoemaker, PhD, Assistant Executive Director, KRLA

"...you shall not corrupt children; you shall not be sexually immoral...you shall not abort a child or commit infanticide..." The Second Commandment of the Way of Life; The Didache, first century book of church discipline

"Let the beauty you love be what you do." - Rumi

"Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison [of self-absorption] by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation, and a foundation for inner security." -Albert Einstein

Abortion has become technologically perfected and legally sanctioned since 1973. Since the legalization of the procedure via Roe V Wade, the number of reported abortions in the United States to date is nearly 70 million. And although the escalation of the number of abortions has slowed in recent years, due to intervention with and alternative strategies for the well-being of

the mother, the number of abortions in our own nation so far this year is closing in on a reported 800,000.

While the procedure of relinquishing life from the womb seems to have become somewhat culturally-commonplace in our high tech culture, it is still regarded by a significant number of Americans as a “quick fix antidote” to a series of more complex social challenges.

As a compassionate man and father, I propose that abortion-on-demand is not the cure toward solving the deeper challenges of our society. The jolting news of an unexpected and/or unwanted pregnancy may exacerbate the need for competent counsel, but it does not merit the “quick fix” mentality. Abortion does not solve the social conditions that would drive a woman to choose such a desperate, and often violent act upon herself or her baby-to-be.

Whether the decision to have an abortion is due to: (1) socio-economic stress; (2) an imaginative recourse for the salvation of one’s own, private American dream; (3) a impulse of insecurity at the thought of bringing a child to full term, or the subsequent inconvenience of offering for the child a lifetime of care; or (4) a chosen means of population control,- --other than for the life of the mother, — abortion on demand is a demoralizing procedure that is not a cure for the challenges in our society.

Too often, the procedure is a consequence of poor counsel, impulse, or dim awareness of the more beautiful hope that is inherent in the DNA of life itself. Not only has the procedure become technologically perfected, but since 1973, there are healthier alternatives—even in the glaring reality of the social and personal challenges that we all must face every day.

While I do not choose to criminalize the woman who makes this procedure a matter of personal “choice,” I do highly question her personal “reproductive right” —for any reason- that would disrespect and dishonor the process of life within her womb. Surely any truly liberated woman must be aware of more creative ways to proceed with such a way-out-of-no-way than to extinguish this process of life in which she herself contributed. Even if they are not “criminalized,” both she and her male colleague are responsible for this process of life.

Martin Luther King, Jr. invested his lifetime trying to ignite our society to actualize the “the beloved community...to create a society in which all will be able to live together as [family] and respect the dignity and worth of all human personality.” If that “personality” begins in the DNA of merging cells, then even the developing life within the womb is deserving of our “respect for her/his dignity and worth,” and within the purview of Dr. King’s dream.

Those of us who still believe in our own vision of Dr. King’s “beloved community” must undauntedly strive on toward peaceful and healthier ways of co-existence. In a world given to serious challenges, is the choice to abort our most vulnerable beings the best we can do?

The “disputed question” of Thomas Merton remains relevant today: “corrupt forms of love wait for the neighbor to ‘become a worthy object of love’ before actually loving him.” (Merton, 1953) In other words, when does that life within the womb become a “worthy object of love?” Could there be a sacredness about simply loving the vulnerable developing child without yet knowing her/his name?

Is life at all sacred or worthy of being defended in any stage of development? From the very early stages of life in the womb to the end-of-days of the aged, if anything in this world IS sacred, certainly the phases/stages of human life-time must be.

Put another way: As sophisticated as we like to think ourselves to be—technologically, medically, and scientifically, we remain challenged in how to love well in community. Incivility in the marketplace, road rage, political intrigue, brutality as entertainment, injustice in systems of socio-economics, “wars and rumors of wars,” — challenge us all in spite of all our intellectual advances.

Often our impulses direct us to escape from the challenges we face rather than to confront and

conquer them...or to find solutions that are in keeping with the “noblest angels of ourselves.” In our desire for the privatized self, we can quickly compromise our quest for “beloved community” with the “quick fix antidote” that only adds to our woes. This includes the decision for aborting the process of life within the womb.

Life is not easy—but it can be awe-inspiring — from conception to cessation.

However, grandiose self-interests and the lust for personal autonomy have evolved us into a culture that can too easily exploit or extricate even the most innocent and vulnerable among us. We now seem to be engrossed in the notion that we can pick and choose (from our own private vantage points) who is and is not worthy of joining us in the process of becoming fully human: physically, socially, intellectually, and spiritually.

But at the end of the day we must all evolve/grow to realize that all life matters. If we are to be fully human ourselves, we must affirm the sacred processes that deepen our experience of life...and our common quest for the fulness of the “beloved community.”

Many years ago, Mark Twain wrote that we had become “a civilization which has destroyed the simplicity and repose of life, its poetry, its soft romantic dreams and visions, and replaced them with a money fever, sordid ideals, vulgar ambitions, and the sleep which does not refresh. It has created a thousand useless luxuries and turned them into necessities, and satisfied nothing. It has dethroned God and set up a shekel in his place.” Is the number of abortions in our country an indication of such incivility as Twain described our “civilization” to be?

Have we become so distracted by “money fever, sordid ideals, and vulgar ambitions” that even the natural process of life no longer offers to us a sense of sacredness—the “simplicity and repose of life?” Has the process of life that we once viewed as awe-inspiring, now been superseded by the “shekel”—or the restlessness of self-interest? Can we now too easily cut off the process of life for another being even in the womb?

In computer terminology, the word default refers to the response a computer is programmed to have unless the user instructs it to do something different. Our society has so de-evolved to the level of personal privilege that abortion has become the default for an unexpected or unwanted pregnancy. But we can progress to our better selves in a deeper appreciation for every moment of life.

So...L'Chaim! “Jews appreciate every moment of life. It doesn't matter if things are going the way you want them, stop and pause, and raise your glass to the delicious opportunity life is giving you right now. You'll never get that moment back again.” (Rabbi Jack Kalla, 2015)

We can choose the most politically correct language, but the result is still the same. No matter how that new life is labeled—a unique, DNA-designed embryo, a fetus, or a baby-on-the way — that new life IS extinguished. “It” is gone... forever. “You can't bring back the potential that was lost during a negative chapter in your life...” (Rabbi Aron Moss, 2015)

Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, abolitionist, activist for women's rights, and the first woman in the US to earn a medical degree wrote: “ Look at the first faint gleam of life, the life of the embryo, the commencement of human existence. We see a tiny cell, so small it may be easily overlooked; it is a living cell; it contains a power progressive growth, according to laws, according, towards a definite type, that we can only regard with reverent admiration. Leave it in its natural home, tended by the rich life of the healthy maternal organism, and it will grow steadily into the human type; in no other by any possibility.” (The Laws of Life, with Special Reference to the Education of Girls, (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1852 70 – 73)

The “visibly brutal means of elimination” (Antonin Scalia, 2000) has not just stunted the growth of what has been described as mere “tissue,” it has terminated a process through which one becomes fully human. Why? For what better purpose does this happen? Especially when after the procedure has been performed, the complex circumstances undergirding such a choice

continues.

Is this the best we can do as an advanced civilization?

If we stretch our thinking toward the “beloved community,” we must continue our efforts toward the realization that all life matters! This includes the processes through which we experience our humanity.

This proposition is not an either/or debate. The life of the mother AND the life-in-process in her womb MATTER! Ideally, all lives surrounding that life in the womb matter. If we choose to find sacred the process and interconnectedness of all life neither are mutually exclusive. How we view and hold sacred the very beginning of life itself is an essential dynamic to the vitality of our communities—our neighborhoods.

In the Pro-life movement, our hearts beat for the sake of life from conception to cessation. We cannot become desensitized to persons in any stage or phase along the way if we are to be fully human ourselves. Our compassion must deepen for needs of the woman who becomes profoundly entrusted with the care of the beginning of life within her; to enable her to protect and defend the promise of life she carries is within the scope of our purview. But that does not automatically mean abortion—by default!

The most important ordinances or admonitions of any ideology is the respect for human life. Although abortion may be technologically perfected and culturally acceptable, there remains a tension regarding that violent procedure and the better good for a progressive society. “The stress on the sanctity of human life is a tremendously important moral insight” (Keith Ward, 2003) that cannot be easily denied.

That is why there are so many “beating hearts for life” that have been ignited not only to stand up for the life of the unborn child, but also invest their own lives in founding offices for insightful counseling, pregnancy care centers, homes for destitute families, and join their voices in the call for more proficient adoption services. We must articulate a vision in society that promises a loving environment into which all children may be welcome.

Abortion is not the way out of no way! Health care for the woman should not automatically mean death care for the child. In the genius of humanity, there are more and more healthy alternatives to this most questionable act. We, as “beating hearts for life,” are prompted in 2018 toward a culture of peaceful co-existence wherein such brutality in our culture ceases and all life is cherished, nurtured, articulates beauty and promotes well-being for all in a community that is called “beloved.”

A Prayer

Our Lord, our minds stagger and our hearts swell within us when we realize even a few of the things that can go wrong in the conception and birth of a child. We know that your own creation catches most of these maladies in creation and corrects them. We thank you for revealing to us remedies and technologies in which we can participate with you in preventing others. Reveal to us those mysteries yet unknown whereby every child will be born healthy and live well and wanted. Above all, help us to be faithful companions to parents and all of your children in every situation and challenge. May we reflect a caring and "beloved community" to all persons, but especially to those who are the most vulnerable in our Metro Louisville. Amen.