

3

If It's Life, Does It Matter?

“Good evening, all. I’d like to apologize for not being mindful of the clock during our last session. The topic was quite controversial, I thought, and we were all so involved in the discussion that, I for one, lost track of time. So, tonight, let’s just dive into our topic, how’s that?”

“Tonight, it’s abortion, another hotly debated issue. Let me begin by prefacing my initial question.

“Without making any judgments, just stating a fact of life, women happen to have been selected by nature or by God, whoever or whatever people believe was responsible, as being the designated drivers for the unborn.

“Women are the primary and only vehicle of human life. Men can’t do it. This is a distinction that many women cherish. And, one would think that both men and women—even those who may never want to have children—value women for their faculty to engender and deliver human life. Why? Because all of us owe our lives and the lives of our spouses, soul mates, daughters, sons, and friends to women.

“Many women, however, including those who value motherhood, regard pregnancy as a burden at some point in their lives. They find pregnancy inconvenient and emotionally agonizing, and that would seem natural. After all, the choices they have to make in their lives, sometimes setting aside their careers and their dreams, to *put up* with a heavy emotional and physical load, literally, to raise their offspring is not an easy thing to do. I think that not too many devoted husbands would want to trade places with their wives when it comes to pregnancy.

“Pregnancy involves unimaginable predicaments, the least of which more often than not is the pregnancy itself. At times, pregnancy may endanger the health of the mother, which is troublesome, and certainly emotionally agonizing.

“But pregnancy also may come as the result of rape or incest; it may result in unwanted and unloved babies; may be the source of humiliation in the case of unwed women; may prove to be a significant burden that may limit one’s ability to care for their other children.

“Pregnancy may result in bringing to life deformed or very sick babies who will suffer, although not, perhaps, as much as the parent(s), on account of the emotional distress brought about by birth defects.

“We also realize that quite a few women regard pregnancy as an inconvenience—as an obstacle—during a particular time in their lives. And even though abortion has become a rather safe medical procedure, I can only imagine that contemplating what to do about one’s pregnancy, can be quite excruciating; definitely not a walk in the park.

“So, given that pregnancy can be a joyful occasion, as well as a woman’s burden, I ask, do men have sufficient grounds to render our views on the issue of abortion? Are we capable of doing so, or is this something on which women alone should be allowed to speak? Mr. Wasserman?”

“I think we have more than sufficient grounds, sir,” he replied. “After all, in our roles as fathers, husbands, siblings or friends, men share in every burden that women go through, assuming we’re sensitive enough. How can we not share in the pain of anything that happens to them?”

“I realize that some women demand that men stay outside the discussion, I would think that many others, both pro and anti-abortion, wouldn’t want something as important as human life to be left only for them to decide.

“Also, it is well known that we are at the stage where some women are creating their own families with a stranger’s sperm, through *in vitro*. Many think that this is only a minute factor, but a sperm is still required, no matter where it originates. So, that alone should give us some sort of space in the discussion.

“I mean, it’s not as if we’re talking about a group of Amazons living by themselves on an isolated part of the world. Moreover, the significance of abortion is far more important than whether women should wear dresses or pants, dye their hair or not, become lawyers, soldiers, or housewives.

“On the other hand, there might be an angle from which women may have solid grounds for rejecting a man’s view on this issue. Is whatever is inside the womb merely an internal organ—like a kidney or the spleen that can be removed, or are we’re talking about something alien, or different from herself, which merits individual distinction?”

“In other words, you’re asking whether it’s human life we’re talking about or not, and if it is, to what extent it should matter,” I said. I believe you have provided us with a framework for our dialogue this evening, Mr. Wasserman. Thank you.”

“Ms. Williamson, would you give us some basic information?”

“Yes, of course. First, we need to define the term. *Abortion*, as stated in most dictionaries, means the radical termination of a process. As it relates to our discussion tonight, it means the intentional or willful termination of a pregnancy. Since it has been deemed to be constitutionally legal, from a political standpoint the issue of abortion is about whether its legality should be continued or

whether it should be reversed in court.”

“Wait,” I said. “There’s no doubt that abortion is a constitutional issue, and we might not be able to avoid discussing this aspect in class. But given that this seminar is about moral values and their role in politics, we have to center our discussion on abortion as a moral choice.

“We take it that those who are against abortion are the only ones that may claim the high ground. I’m sure that those who favor abortion don’t view themselves as immoral individuals. It’s important that on this topic, as with the other ones, that we give each other the benefit of the doubt.

“On the one hand, we may say that the abortion question is about the significance of human life, particularly innocent human life. On the other hand, we have to ask ourselves if there are moral and legal considerations that override the significance that others attribute to the unborn. Viewed from this perspective, the issue is more about the right of the unborn versus the rights of the pregnant woman; and, as Mr. Wasserman indicated, about the extent to which the life of the unborn should matter.”

“Does that mean that to the extent that the rights of the unborn prevail, women lose their rights?” asked Ms. Bynum.

“Well, I think we need to be more specific about your question,” I said. “You’re not equating the same type of rights. The issue in most instances is about the right of the unborn to keep its own life versus the right of the woman to terminate that life. It’s not one’s right to live versus the other’s right to live that we’re discussing here, except in the case when the life of the mother is at risk.

“So, ultimately, we’re talking about a zero-sum outcome. Whichever right is perceived as being more highly valued will prevail at the expense of the other. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, why don’t we take a close look at abortion for what it is, not for what others pretend it is?” I asked. Let’s peel off the caricatures that surround the issue, beginning by identifying the opposing groups. Who are they, Ms. Williamson?”

“Let’s start with the Pro-Life movement, which represents the view that life begins at conception. Its supporters believe that terminating an innocent life is unjustified and wrong. The other group, the Pro-Choice, favors the right of women to control their own reproductive systems through any means that contribute or favor their particular circumstances in life, including abortion, which they don’t see as being morally wrong.”

“Tell me, Ms. Williamson, if the Pro-Life movement is against abortion, why not call it the anti-abortion movement? Same thing with those who favor abortion. We can’t have two *pro-something* if we’re going to have a conflict. We need a pro-something and an anti-something.”

“I think it’s the peel thing, sir. There’s this view that it’s more positive to be for something than against something, in order to deter criticism of negativity.”

“I see. So we give in to euphemisms in an attempt to deflect criticism by the opposition and win adherents to the cause. That means that those who oppose poverty should call themselves Pro-Wealth, right? Because supporting anti-poverty programs is so negative. And, the Pro-Choice followers, I suppose they want to project tolerance, which of course is what the term Pro-Choice seeks to convey while suggesting that the opposition is not tolerant; quite clever.”

“There’s more to it in the case of Pro-Lifers,” said Ms. Vanhurst. “They also want to express that their movement is not just about abortion but that they support life in all its manifestations.”

“The culture of life, of course,” I remarked. “Naturally, the message here is that those who back abortion conjure an image of supporting a culture of death, which is not too appealing, morally speaking. Likewise, very clever, too. But, as you may see, the issue has become a public relations war, a war of words and labels, each one seeking to outdo the other at name-calling, again, with the end in mind of demoralizing the opposition and claiming . . . well, whatever it is they claim.

“Very well, as an exercise in tolerance, this evening we’re setting aside your academic duty to argue against the view that you oppose. You may argue in accordance with your beliefs, although that should not keep you from being reasonably objective when the circumstances demand it. Let’s see how well we do. So, tell us, Ms. Williamson, how do you view abortion?” I asked.

“As I said, abortion is the termination of innocent life, the killing . . . the murdering of a baby,” she declared emphatically.

“What do you mean, *murder*? Who are you to judge others’ actions?” called out Ms. Lewis.

“We’re talking premeditated behavior here!” Ms. Williamson snapped back.

“Whoa! Hold on!” I said. “What do we have here? I think I may have spoken too soon. Ms. Lewis, you’re very combative, and Ms. Williamson, you, too! I realize this is a very emotional issue, but it’s no different than the other ones, or the ones we’re going to examine in the days to come. I understand that we all have convictions, but, please, let’s remember that, at least in class, it might be a good idea to let reason do the talking instead of letting our emotions get the best of us. Now, Ms. Lewis, could you rephrase your question in a less confrontational manner, perhaps?”

“I’m sorry, what I meant to say, Ms. Williamson, was, why do you call abortion murder?”

“Well, because we’re not talking about the accidental termination of a process, but the willful ending of human life. No matter the words you use, it’s called killing, and that’s murder, isn’t it?”

“Ms. Williamson,” I interrupted, “I understand that the perception of a vio-

lent action can be softened by using different words. Termination, bringing something to an end, these terms don't sound as abhorrent as killing or murder. There are, however, two issues here. First, you have provided us with a definition of life without the benefit of a discussion, and not everyone may agree with your definition. Second, assuming that it's life that is being terminated, I hope you realize that there is a difference between killing and murdering, or do you not, Ms. Williamson?"

"Sir, we're talking about premeditated behavior!"

"Agreed. But, premeditated behavior also includes killing in self-defense or while rightfully defending others, like a police officer might do, and that action hardly could be labeled murder. Abortion, whether one likes it or not, is a legally and constitutionally protected practice. In addition, although you may consider abortion to be murder, I think we have to explore and see if either the physician or the patient, or both, regard abortion as murder."

"But, what if they don't?" she demanded.

"It might be useful for us to understand, anyhow, why that is the case. But in the end, to answer your question, the most we could say is that we would have two individuals, the physician and the patient, who not only believe they're not doing anything wrong, but they can claim that what they're doing is lawful. So, while you may believe that abortion is, indeed, murder, I would plead with you to refrain from accusing those who support abortion of murder, at least until we go through this exercise. I realize you're not apologetic about your statement, but . . ."

"How can I be apologetic if I truly believe it," she interrupted.

"I believe you believe it, Ms. Williamson. But I'd like to explore your belief a bit further, if only because murder is, indeed, horrible, the more so if it's allowed under the law. But for now, all we can say is that, in the eyes of the law, this practice is legally called abortion, not murder.

"We all realize that legality doesn't necessarily accord morality. All of us could probably think of laws that run counter to our moral principles. This is what prompts many of us to actively participate in the political process with the intention of changing those laws. We're all contenders in the political arena. And, as in the case of Olympic competitions, a certain civility and sportsmanship should be expected of us. Let's not forget that.

"Let me ask you, Ms. Williamson, here you have Ms. Lewis, your classmate, and let's see, how many of you favor abortion? Five altogether. That's almost half the class. Now, tell me, could you look at all five of them in their faces and tell them that they are murderers?"

"Sir, I believe that abortion is a heinous crime; how can you not see that?"

"But how do you know what I can see or not see, Ms. Williams? Let's focus on the issue at hand. Once again, these five colleagues of yours approve of abortion. Are they murderers? Do you believe they have blood on their hands, if only by indirect complicity?"

“Well . . . I have to say, Yes, even though they all look like good people.”

“Look?” I asked.

“They are good people,” she replied.

“Whew, that’s a relief! Thank you,” said Mr. Edson.

“It might be a relief to you, Mr. Edson, but not to me,” I said. “Right now, I’m a bit puzzled. Ms. Williamson, tell me, how do you explain that those you call murderers for supporting abortion can be good people?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ms. Williamson, believe me, it’s not my purpose to grill you,” I continued. “I think, however, that it’s very useful how we’re now beginning to grasp the gist of the matter. Do you believe that any of your classmates would be capable of murdering a baby, a real newborn baby?”

“Of course not!”

“I didn’t think so, Ms. Williamson. What about those obstetricians who engage in the practice of abortion, would they be capable, willing to kill a newborn baby?”

“I’m not saying that all doctors abide by the Hippocratic Oath, but overall, I don’t think most doctors would kill newborn babies.”

“What about the women who undergo abortion, would they be capable of murdering a newborn?”

“Unfortunately, every year we hear about a few cases in which women do that. I don’t think, however, that we’re talking about emotionally balanced women. Anyone who does that is probably sick.”

“Still, it would be murder! But if we find out that the woman is insane or emotionally troubled, would you still think that she’s morally responsible?” I asked.

“I would think not, although there are some who likely do it while not insane.”

“I agree. Nonetheless, do you believe that most women, including female teens who undergo abortion, or who support abortion, do you believe they would be capable of killing newborn babies, even if the law were to allow it?”

“I think I see where you’re going with this, sir. No, I don’t think so. I hope not.”

“I agree with you, I don’t think most women would,” I replied, “and yet these same women don’t see anything wrong with having an abortion. Do you believe that they just become murderers that easily?”

“I would think not, but . . . so you don’t think abortion is murder?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“So, you think it could be murder!” cried Ms. Lewis.

“We don’t know yet, do we?” I said, and that’s, precisely, what we have to find out. At the very least we are in agreement that good people, who otherwise would not kill newborn babies, don’t just turn into murderers

overnight.

“This means that we have to ask ourselves whether the murder label—assigning moral responsibility for the killing of the unborn—is merited by those directly or indirectly involved in abortion. Also, we have to ask ourselves whether we should continue to refer to abortion as murder, even in the absence of moral responsibility.

“I think that part of the answer lies on how we as a society perceive and define human life,” I said.

“Frankly, I’m mystified about the reason why the unborn is not regarded as being significant enough to be protected the way we protect and care for newborn babies,” I said.

“This is not just in this country but all over the world. I read a news story that in India, as many as ten million female fetuses may have been killed over the last twenty years by families seeking male heirs, in order to reduce the financial cost of female dowries that cultural norms dictate should be given to the husbands at the time of marriage.¹

“And, in the United States, million abortions have taken place since the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v Wade*.² Could it be that the staggering numbers, coupled with the religious element, has transformed abortion into one of the major political battlegrounds in the cultural war? Anyone care to speculate?”

“I think the numbers stem from the law itself,” claimed Mr. Hunt. “It’s not only a matter of how we as a society perceive life, but it’s how the law has redefined our perception of life.”

“Would you care to expand on that, Mr. Hunt?” I asked.

“Sure. I don’t know what the population thought about abortion prior to *Roe v Wade* in 1973. Obviously, there were abortions, although I doubt that they occurred in these numbers. But the only way for abortion to have attained these high numbers was for the value of the unborn to have lessened in relation to new competing values.”

“And?” I said.

“I truly think it was unintentional on the part of the Supreme Court, but what it did was to imply that the life of the unborn, as important or valuable as it may be, becomes less significant under a variety of circumstances.”

“Are you saying that if there had been no law, the life of the unborn would have been perceived differently?” asked Ms. Lewis.

“Perhaps. Let’s take an example from economics, just to drive the point,” replied Mr. Hunt. “When beef is all there’s to eat, beef becomes very valuable. As soon as you provide people with fish, pork, and chicken, at lower prices, don’t you think the value of beef is going to come down?”

“What the law did, and again, inadvertently, perhaps, was to create new opportunities or rights for women that competed in a zero sum manner with the

unborn. In the process, the worth of the unborn, for better or for worse, has declined.”

“I don’t know that I’m prepared to go that far,” admitted Ms. Lewis. “In my mind, the fetus doesn’t enjoy the same hierarchy in life as a baby.”

“Hmm,” I muttered, “let me pick on something you said, Ms. Lewis. On what basis do parents choose their children’s names? What’s the common denominator in their behavior?”

“I don’t understand how your question relates to the topic, sir.” said Mr. Edson.

“I’m just free-thinking, Mr. Edson. Now, anyone?”

“I guess, that names in the family play a role,” answered Ms. Williamson. “Or people use names they like.”

“Let me put it in a different way,” I continued. “Does anyone believe that parents, anyone here, would name a child using, not only a name they don’t like, but choosing a downright ugly name?”

“Nooo, and your point is?” asked Ms. Vanhurst.

“Tell me, Ms. Vanhurst, which term would bring out a woman’s maternal instinct the most, something called a *fetus* or something called a *baby*?”

“I see, words do mean something, yup, I remember. Okay, got your point,” she admitted.

“Ms. Lewis?” I said, requesting her comment.

“But the fetus is not a baby, a baby is a baby!” said Ms. Lewis.

“You mean to say that birth minus one day, minus x months, it’s called a fetus, but the day it’s born it’s a baby? I’m sure that you don’t accept that logic Ms. Lewis, do you? The point I’m trying to make is that words sometimes speak volumes. Who among you would prefer to live under a dictatorship as opposed to a democracy? The term *dictatorship* doesn’t sound too thrilling, does it? So, tell me who would like to keep a *fetus*? Would anyone truly care for a *fetus*?”

“Sometimes, foreign words don’t sound right to our ears, even when their original meaning refers to something pleasant. The term *fetus* is originally Latin; it means “filled with young.” But in English, it doesn’t sound anything like a teddy bear, does it? In the war of words over abortion, could anyone have thought of a more repugnant term for the unborn than *fetus*?”

“Needless to say, the Pro-abortion movement didn’t come up with the term, but it sure helps its cause. Do we believe that the name *Ford* or *Chevrolet* evokes the same high quality and elegance as, say *Cadillac* or *Mercedes Benz*? These names suggest grace, style, class, don’t they? Who would care if an abandoned shack is destroyed? But would you feel the same way if it happens to your elegant mansion?”

“You see, our culture has conditioned us into thinking that *that thing in there* is not a hidden baby, but a *fetus*!”

“Science, nonetheless, has progressed to the point where it can show us the

photograph of a *fetus* only days old. While the Anti-abortion movement uses these photos in its public relations debate, what's interesting about this practice is the reaction of women who are considering an abortion. Many refuse to look at the photos. As if they don't want to be persuaded that the photo will show them something that is more akin to a baby than to a fetus.

"There's a psychological explanation for this reaction. Haven't we noticed that when something gruesome is going to happen to us, one's tendency is to look away? We don't mind facing that which we like; we look forward to it, as a matter of fact. Not so when something bad is about to take place. We simply don't want to know. Why is that, Ms. Lewis?"

"Sir, when we talk about a woman considering an abortion we have to take into account that the pregnancy is unwanted. Suppose someone gives you something that, you not only dislike, but that it will cause you a great deal of grief, why would you want to keep it? In these cases, the woman, as you said, is the designated driver for the fetus, and, I'm sure you will agree, it's tough having to put up with something you don't want at that particular time, for nine months!"

"I agree, Ms. Lewis," I said, "carrying an unwanted human life inside of you for nine months is heroic."

"Yes, but not all women are meant to be that heroic. I think it's natural for a person who's been given something he or she dislikes not want to be persuaded to keep it, if only because it would make her feel miserable. Imagine you're told that you have to live in the same house with someone you dislike, someone obnoxious, arrogant, and selfish. How would you feel being talked into having to accept that person for a long period of time?"

"I would feel very bad, Ms. Lewis. I might not be able to take it. I would probably end up moving out."

"Exactly! Would you not consider that a very human reaction?" she asked.

"Yes, I would," I replied.

"Well, for many women pregnancy is a problem. Would they want to be talked into believing that the fetus is a baby? No, they wouldn't. Instead, they want to believe they're getting rid of a stumbling block that, when removed, their problems will go away.

"I follow you," I said. "Tough choices, no matter how you look at it, but let me further ask you, what about the woman who undergoes an abortion for other reasons; it's an untimely pregnancy that conflicts with her profession; the husband finds out wife is pregnant, abandons her on a very low income, and she becomes depressed and desperate; or the woman who simply doesn't want another child."

"I would argue that a woman under these circumstances must have the right to control her life," she replied. "Some of the reasons you have stated would shallow to some people, and maybe they are! But only she can understand her reasons.

“Do we know what it means to bring a child into this world that you cannot care for, either because you don’t have the financial support or the emotional strength to do so? Sure, she can be heroic, give birth, and give the baby up for adoption. But then we go back to the situation in which you’re being asked to live day in and day out with something inside of you that you dislike. You’re right, sir, being the designated driver is no fun at times. Your buddies have all the fun while you’re stuck behind the wheel!”

“Sir, may I ask Ms. Lewis a question?”

“Go right ahead, Mr. Hunt.”

“Leslie, I wonder, would it make a difference in your mind if you were to find out that, it’s not something in there, but that we’re talking about is a potential baby, a human life?”

“Of course it would, Ted, but that’s the whole point. Look, I will concede that abortion becomes easier when you can’t see what’s being removed from inside of you. It’s also easier knowing that it’s a fetus, not a baby, or a potential baby.”

“Would you accept that the so-called fetus is alive, that it’s a part of you, it’s still something that can live apart from you?”

“Again, Ted, I don’t think any of the woman’s internal organs have the self-capacity to become an individual life. So, yes, we all know that medical science pretty much has substantiated that the fetus is a separate living organism; it’s something that grows and exists apart from the woman.”

Mr. Hunt continued, “And, I presume you believe or would be willing to accept, too, that a baby doesn’t just become a baby when it’s born, as you were saying a minute ago; but that the baby, biologically speaking is but the continuation of something that begins once the male sperm fertilizes the female’s egg?”

“As opposed to what, the so-called “quickenings” of the fetus?”

“Quickening of the unborn baby, Yes,” he asserted.

“I think we all know, and it’s pretty much accepted within abortion circles, that biology tells us that a fetus doesn’t appear all of a sudden during the third month of pregnancy,” replied Ms. Lewis.

“But that’s not what Justice Blackmun said in *Roe v Wade*,” he insisted.

“I agree, Ted, but I don’t believe for a minute that Justice Blackmun himself believed that life originates in the third month of pregnancy. At the time, he had all the necessary scientific information at hand. The court’s decision was more of a practical compromise than an attempt to define when life begins, and that’s my argument for abortion; it’s not about the beginning of life.”

“But about when life may be terminated, right?” he said, anticipating her answer.

“In a way, yes. Far more important, however, from the standpoint of the woman, *Roe v Wade* is about her right to control her body, her right of privacy, and the right to have control over all of her reproductive choices,” she replied.

“But abortion is not only about privacy or control of the woman’s body,” Mr. Radusky claimed. “It’s also about showing compassion for the woman and the circumstances surrounding her decision as well.”

“People speak of compassion for the woman who is terminating her pregnancy,” jumped in Ms. Williamson. “I don’t understand that type of compassion. Isn’t compassion a feeling of empathy for the victim? In most cases of abortion, isn’t the victim the one that is about to die? Where then is the compassion for the unborn baby?”

“That’s an interesting point that you two bring out,” said Mr. Hunt. “Although the issue of abortion can only be expressed in terms of a zero-sum outcome, compassion can still be expressed toward both the mother and the unborn. Nonetheless, and here is where the problem lies, how can someone feel compassion toward something he or she doesn’t understand or doesn’t even appreciate?

“I think the issue of discrimination might help us to understand the problem,” argued Mr. Hunt. “Imagine a man who objects to hiring a woman because he believes that she should stay at home with the children or because he feels that a woman’s intellect is inferior to a man’s; or someone who believes that, at home, she is the maid, while he’s the king of his castle. Take the eighteenth-century slave owner in our country who deeply believed that Blacks were commercial property, that slavery was an economic institution. These were deeply held beliefs! Many slave owners chose to die for those beliefs!

“Aren’t both attitudes revolting today? Of course they are! But, do we think that either the king of the castle or the slave owner was sensitized to the point where they would have accepted that their attitudes were wrong? I don’t think so. They would not have gotten it! That’s what beliefs and customs do to behavior; they validate behavior.

“For there to be compassion toward the unborn baby, there needs to be an awareness, a special kind of sensitivity, that the unborn baby represents the first stages of what eventually becomes a baby. Or is there a need to remind ourselves that once we were *fetuses* that were allowed to become what we are today?

“It’s not difficult for you to feel compassionate toward the unborn, Ms. Williamson,” continued Mr. Hunt. “My question, nonetheless, would be, could you feel compassionate toward a mother whose life is threatened by her unborn, by the woman who became pregnant following a humiliating act of violence, by someone who made a mistake and feels so terrible about it that she wants to kill what’s inside of her?”

Ms. Lewis intervened to suggest that an unwanted pregnancy deserved compassion, as it was a serious problem in a woman’s life.

“Mr. Hunt agreed, “But, let’s face it, an unwanted pregnancy is not the only, or even the most fatal obstacle there is in life.”

“Perhaps not to you,” said Ms. Lewis.

“What I mean to say is that so is a serious chronic disease or losing one’s job or a terminal illness,” said Mr. Hunt. “But just so that we may understand where the differences lie, you believe that abortion is a problem solving alternative, the reason being that you cannot value the life of the unborn baby as others do, not because you refuse to do so—you’re a well intentioned person—but because you’re simply unable to do so, and I can’t hold that against you. I guess that if I were given a piece of coal, not knowing anything about mineralogy, I could very well throw it away without realizing that there might be a rough diamond embedded inside. These serious differences in the appreciation of the unborn baby throughout society are precisely what have people clashing against each other.”

“These differences notwithstanding, abortion has leveled the field for women in many respects to the point where we regard *Roe v Wade* as women’s *Brown v Board of Education*,” said Ms. Lewis.

“It doesn’t surprise me,” replied Mr. Hunt. “But let’s complete the comparison. In *Brown*, Blacks were given rights at the expense of what? At the expense of racist attitudes, something that is morally wrong. Racism was the victim, and the loser, and I think few would object to that.

“In *Roe*, women get their rights at the expense of unborn babies; at the expense of human life. Racial discrimination, more than demeaning human life, reduces its value. Is it too difficult for any to comprehend that had *Plessy v Ferguson*—which *Brown* rejected—remained the law of the land, our country would have become a contemporary, technologically-advanced, lawful form of neo-slavery?

“Let me steer the discussion back to what Ms. Lewis and Mr. Hunt were saying about *Roe v Wade*,” I said. “I believe you were going to tell us what the decision was all about.”

“Yes, in *Roe* the discussion on abortion is not about the origin of human life; that’s pretty much been established by science,” said Mr. Hunt. “The real discussion is about when is it legally permissible to terminate the life of the unborn baby. The woman whose pregnancy threatens her health says to herself, ‘between death and my well being stands *something* that’s alive; it’s either *it* or me, what do I do?’ The young pregnant teenager on welfare who says to herself, ‘I’m neither mature enough nor financially able to have a baby; I can be better off without it, however, there’s this *something* alive inside of me I need to discard first; what do I do?’ And the other one who assesses, not her life but the well being of the child, and says to herself, ‘It would be cruel to bring someone that you don’t want to this world, so what can I do with this *living thing* inside of me?’

“There seems to be one common thread running through all these instances:

the pregnant woman weighs the value of the unborn against her personal choices and freedom, and she decides that she comes first.

“Humans conduct this valuation of human life in many other instances. When the robber kills his victim; when the soldier kills his enemy; when I chose to defend my children and in doing so kill an assailant; when a dictator commits genocide; when elected officials government lead a nation into war; whenever we choose to terminate another life, whether motivated by reason, religious belief, lust, greed, ambition, heroism, or self-defense; the outcome of our consideration is always the same: we end up believing that we are more important and significant in this world than the lives we've chosen to end.

“And, before you jump all over me, Leslie, accusing me of being insensitive, let me say this: I would never take anything away from the incredible pain, the mental and emotional anguish of someone who's been raped, someone whose life is threatened by her pregnancy, the teenager who is alone, or the wife who's been abandoned by her husband.

“I sort of understand these situations; I do and I don't. I guess I will never be able to fully understand them because I'll never be on the shoes of any of these women, but I could relate to any of these instances, quite painfully, by the way, were it to happen to a friend, my sister, to a child of mine, or to my wife.”

“Ms. Lewis,” I called out.

“Yes, I presume that you want me to reply. Very well, Ted, I understand what you're saying, but I still believe that, according to the law, the woman should be allowed to make that decision for herself.”

“Leslie, forget about the law for the moment,” he pressed on. “Let's assume that the woman has that legal right. However, focus just on the choice between an innocent life on the one hand, whether you call it a fetus, a baby, or the unborn, and the pregnant woman. On what basis do you justify that her life is more important than the life of the unborn baby?”

“I don't know there is any justification, Ted. There may be quite a few valid reasons; I don't know that any of them would constitute a justification. That's a pretty strong word. But there are valid, significant, personal reasons that would motivate a woman to abort.”

“I agree,” he replied. “But let me put it this way, suppose someone does something bad to you; suppose someone kills your parents, or your child. How would you feel at that moment? Wouldn't you feel that you want to kill in return? And, wouldn't those feelings be valid and significant to you at that moment?”

“Yes, I probably would feel that way, and if I were to act on my feelings, I believe it would be justified.”

“Are you aware that you would be committing legal murder by taking the law into your hands?”

“Probably so, but I would still feel like doing it, given that he murdered my parents.”

“Very well, we agree that the guy is a murderer because he killed your innocent parents, and you feel that it would be okay to avenge that death. But, at least we can say that the killer is guilty and deserves to be punished, whether by you or by the law. But, what is the unborn baby inside of you guilty of? What did *it* do to you?”

I looked at M. Lewis, not knowing if she would want to respond, “Anyone?”

“I will,” said Ms. Lewis.

“The fetus wouldn’t have done anything to me or to anyone else. I realize and accept what you’re saying. Your argument may be valid; but so, too, would be my reasons. A woman under great emotional stress would deeply feel her circumstances more so than the reasons you give her.”

“Leslie, what you’re telling me is that, whatever the reason might be for a woman choosing to have an abortion, the gist of her decision is that she is valuing her life and her circumstances to be more important than the life of the unborn, right? She’s saying, “I’m more important, more significant than the unborn baby I carry inside of me.”

“Yes!. Ultimately, yes, that would be the answer,” said Ms. Lewis.

“Let me jump in for a second,” said Mr. Edson. “I agree that it’s a difficult choice, Ms. Lewis, but if the woman, or even me—I happen to support a woman’s choice—if she says that her life is more important, could she, you or I, object or disapprove when a punk decides to take someone’s life because he thinks his needs are superior to the victim’s life? Isn’t the punk doing the same thing as the woman who decides to have an abortion?”

“Yes, they’re both doing the same thing, however, abortion is legal,” she said.

So, if Congress passes a law allowing that punk to beat up someone senseless, would that make it right?”

“Each person must be allowed to make his or her own choices in life,” added Ms. Lewis.

“I realize that,” interrupted Mr. Edson. “But that isn’t saying much. Your choice justifies the punk’s behavior.”

“Don’t think I fail to understand what you’re saying, Michael,” added Ms. Lewis. “It’s just that . . . well, we simply see life differently.”

“Which is why if you fail to understand that an abortion is more than just a medical procedure, it would be unfair to think of you as a murderer,” said Mr. Hunt “The same happens when we discriminate. For centuries, we were not sensitive to slavery. We regarded African Americans as inferior to whites. We believed it was right not to accord an equal status to women. That’s why I believe that people need to be sensitized. If it’s established that the unborn is alive since the moment of conception, there must be objective reasons to justify that it’s morally permissible to kill innocent life. Otherwise, others may choose their own subjective reasons to end others’ lives, whether that of someone who doesn’t contribute to society, one’s enemies, very old

people, you name it; anyone who is deemed to be less significant than the victimizer.”

“Well, let me ask you, Ted,” said Ms. Lewis, “it isn’t as if I’m the only one who believes in abortion. Among the many that do are those who are against abortion themselves, but would respect the right of others to terminate their pregnancies.”

“My turn!” said Ms. Vanhurst. “Let’s think through the significance of this view. Frankly, it doesn’t make much sense to me when it comes to abortion.”

“Why is abortion the exception?” said Ms. Lewis.

“Look, people organize their values hierarchically. There are things we value that are extremely important, other things, less so. Now, I can understand you not liking jazz and not wanting to impose your taste in music upon others because there might not be anything morally wrong with jazz itself. Same thing with colors; you don’t like purple, but you don’t think there’s anything wrong with purple, other than you don’t like the color.

“Nonetheless, if you claim that you strongly deplore abortion for moral reasons, then why you saying that it’s okay if others do what you believe is highly immoral. I can buy it if you were to believe that abortion is like cosmetic surgery, but otherwise!

“I mean, think of something that is abhorrent to us, say women’s discrimination; it’s awful; it’s demeaning; it’s unjustified. Well, how would we like it if someone were to say, ‘I’m against sex discrimination, but it’s okay if men decide for themselves to discriminate against women?’ Or could you say, ‘I’m opposed to murder because it’s very wrong, but wouldn’t support legislation against it?’”

“I could relate better to someone who’s completely in favor of abortion and fights for that it than to someone who says ‘it’s bad if I do it, but you may go right ahead. This way of reasoning, suggests a bipolar mode of thinking.”

“Bipolar mode of thinking, Ms. Vanhurst?” I asked.

“Well, if you believe that something is so morally wrong, that you wouldn’t think of doing it yourself, but would not mind, or even defend other people’s rights to do, doesn’t that suggest some sort of ethical disconnect? Same thing with those who say they believe and support the culture of life, yet do not mind going to war for preventive reasons. That, to me, is ethical bipolarity.”

“Well, then you probably have reverse bipolarity, Melanie,” snapped Ms. Lewis. “What about if you were to believe that your faith is sacred, would you impose it upon others?”

“I would not impose my faith upon anyone,” replied Ms. Vanhurst. “But you’re aware that one’s faith imposes on you the moral duty to act in accordance with your beliefs. As long as our society allows us the political means to oppose behavior I consider morally wrong, I will use those means. If not, I’ll combat that behavior in any other way I can.”

“Would overruling *Roe v Wade* be the way to do it?” I asked. “Even liberal experts regard this decision as a constitutional reach, so the issue of *stare decisis* shouldn’t be much of an obstacle to reversing *Roe v Wade*. Abortion would be left up to the states, and that would solve the problem.”

“Well, let’s see,” said Ms. Vanhurst again. “Suppose the state of Oregon would decide that the life of the unborn is less significant in its territory and legalizes abortion while Missouri would hold the opposite view. I’m thinking, how would we like it if the issue of discrimination were left to each state to decide? That African Americans, women, and ethnic minorities are less desirable, less significant in some states, so people would be free to discriminate in public places, in schools, at the work place. After all, the Founding Fathers did not object to slavery or to keeping women outside the political game.

“The fact that changes have taken place in our society is an indication that our national moral conscience has evolved in the right direction. I agree that the color one chooses for his or her automobile is not something that calls for national conformity, but do you mean to tell me that our minds are incapable of identifying those aspects in human society that are so important that we would never allow differences of opinion to devalue that which we believe is essential? Imagine if we were to teach different kinds of mathematics in each state or if a dollar would be worth fifty cents in some states and a buck twenty-five in others.”

“What if we were to look at the abortion issue from the perspective of our social norms and how these norms make us view life from the standpoint of age?” asked Mr. Radusky. “For example, whenever a disaster occurs, our ethical norms dictate that we should first rescue women, children, and the elderly, under the old chivalrous assumption that they are all less able.

“I don’t know that we should continue to include women in this category, given that they have become just as able themselves, but I guess that in many cases the view still holds. Well, according to this norm’s logic, the unborn would seem to require just as much protection, given that it’s younger and more defenseless than anyone in these categories.

“Look at how people feel, and what they say, when an eighty-year-old person dies. While compassionate, we tend to feel that, well, at least that old gizzard was fortunate enough to have lived a long life. But when a teenager dies, don’t most of us feel sad that somehow life cheated the youngster of time, happiness, friends, a profession? And when a baby dies, all we think about is, ‘It was a baby,’ and that would seem to say it all because it was so young. So, if we follow this logic, why shouldn’t we conclude that the unborn should also be afforded the opportunity to make it as a baby?”

“Because we cannot see it, Jim!” shouted Mr. Edson. “We already talked about it. It’s easier dealing with bad things in life when we can’t see them. I

really think that the fact that it's just a fetus, and on top of that we can't hold it as we do a baby, hey dude! let's face it, it doesn't have much of a chance."

"That was the point that Mr. Hunt was trying to drive across," I said.

"Let's go on to another aspect of the discussion," I suggested. "Many object that the anti-abortion movement constitutes the imposition of a religious view of a segment of the population upon the rest. They point out that governmental institutions should disregard religious views on account of the separation of church and state. Further, they add that imposing one's religious views is anti-democratic. Mr. Dickerson."

"Yes, the argument is constantly being made, but I sense that it's a mischaracterization by some pro-abortionists; not that the opposition doesn't do the same toward pro-abortionists, too. But I don't understand what the fuss is all about. Our political process is about the legal, lawful imposition of one set of values over others. Laws represent preferred values. And, whenever a law or a regulation is enacted, it means that a specific value is chosen over another.

"Now, we know that it would be unconstitutional to enact a law explicitly on the basis of a religious view. Neither Congress nor the courts, for example, could say that abortion is illegal because a religious institution says so, anymore than the United States should help the state of Israel because the Old Testament mandates it. Anything like this would require a constitutional amendment."

"I take it that you don't believe that religious arguments constitute an imposition on the part of religious and faith-based institutions, I asked."

"That's correct. People are free to exercise their right to express themselves in either religious or non-religious terms and elect their representatives according to their values. Now, the imposition argument would be legitimate if we were talking about forceful imposition. For example, if a boss were to enforce certain religious practices at work under the threat of firing those who don't abide by them, or if the head of the government were to impose his religious will through force, which is what happens in dictatorial regimes. That's imposition by force, and it would be wrong.

"But a moral value in the form of a law stemming from a constitutional amendment, congressional legislation, a court decision, or an administrative regulation, doesn't constitute forceful imposition. When people don't like a specific law, the means are there to change it.

"Roe v Wade, which by the way has the support of many religious people, wasn't imposed on those who disagree with the decision anymore than its reversal or a constitutional amendment would amount to a forceful imposition upon those who now favor this ruling. Fifty-one percent of the population may have felt that President George W. Bush was imposed upon the majority in 2000. But, let's face it, the Supreme Court had the constitutional authority to decide the way it did, even if its decision appeared to be somewhat arbitrary and political."

“Quite a few people are arguing that the Christian Right movement is imposing its views on abortion on the population. You disagree as well?” I asked.

“Well, either there’s a new fad to redefine the meaning of words or these people are using hyperbole to make a point. I may disagree with quite a few of the Christian Right’s views, but my sense is that, far from imposing its values, the movement is persuading, rather successfully, a great many people! This, in turn, translates into new laws, new justices of the court, new initiatives, some of which get to be implemented.

“May we switch to another aspect of this topic” said Ms. Lewis.

“By all means.”

“Could we possibly discuss the practice of bombing abortion centers. In my mind, this is the same as terrorism, and yet some people defend the practice as a means to stop the killing of fetuses!”

“I understand Ms. Lewis,” I replied. “But, let me say that part of the reason some people advocate or support violence as a means to end abortion is that they see abortion as the killing of unborn babies, not fetuses.

“How one perceives the unborn will shape his or her behavior. Suppose we learn about a foreign government that punishes those who disobey its population control laws by killing newborns and women who are pregnant. Would you favor a revolt by the population if it were possible?”

“Probably so, but it would be because force is being used against the will of the people.”

“But, Ms. Lewis, you must understand that all laws, whether deemed just or unjust, need the power of force to back them up, even in our country. Otherwise people could feel free to violate them.

“Our country has lived through, and participated in two internal wars, in which citizens killed each other. We felt that the first one, the Revolutionary War of Independence, was justified out of the sheer desire to be politically free from British rule. The British were not conducting massive arbitrary killings; their sin was to treat us as one of their colonies—which we were—and tax our tea. And yet, off to killing British soldiers we went!

“During the second domestic war, the Civil War, the North felt justified in using violence to prevent the South from doing what we as a nation justified following the Revolutionary War. We know, however, that the Civil War was fought over a significant moral issue other than secession: slavery. Looking back, wouldn’t you have supported a rebellion to restore the dignity and the freedom of people we believe never deserved to have been enslaved?

“Further, we have relied on violence overseas many times to safeguard what we arbitrarily refer to as *the national interest*. We go to war against specific and truly wicked enemies, but in the process kill hundreds of thousands of innocent

lives, cynically doing so by dubbing these lives as *collateral damage*.

"So, what's wrong, if I may ask, when people, moved by the violence that is being perpetrated against unborn babies decide that it would be inhuman and unfaithful on their part if they failed to use whatever means are necessary to end an onslaught on life that government finds legal?"

"But, it would be illegal to use violence in such cases!" said Ms. Lewis. "The law of the land allows abortion. These people should be apprehended."

"Of course it would be illegal," I replied. "But as long as they know that they are engaging in violent civil disobedience, these individuals would have to be ready to pay the ultimate price for their actions, martyrdom."

"Sir, how can you? I don't understand," she answered.

"Leslie, drop it; you're cornered, hon, it's check-mate," quipped Mr. Edson.

"No!" she yelled. I could see she was on the verge of tears.

"Ms. Lewis," I said in a soft voice, "what is it that you don't understand? We justified killing so that we may be lawfully taxed by those who represent us; to abolish slavery; to get rid of those we believe threaten our way of life; to defend our allies. Now, please tell me, who defends the unborn?"

"If we were talking about tattooing a woman's body, piercing it, or removing an organ, that shouldn't be anyone's concern. If, on the other hand, we're talking about human life, about an independent, distinctive organism that if allowed will become a human being, like you and me, wouldn't you consider the circumstances different?"

"Mr. Wasserman put it in a very succinct manner: if we're truly talking about a separate life in the womb, should it matter at all? Should we give a damn? A little damn? None?"

"No answer? Very well, then, all of you who are against abortion may organize themselves into a militia and do what you think is right. Don't forget, however, that you must be willing to pay the ultimate price for your actions; you will be persecuted by the law and may even end up facing capital punishment. So, go ahead and locate pregnant women who plan to have an abortion. Perhaps, you would want to threaten them first to see if they have a change of heart. If they are not persuaded, what then, hang them, or do you first open them up to save their babies?"

"This is insane!" shouted Ms. Lewis. "How can you even think of saying such things?"

"I understand, Ms. Lewis, violence is not kind, no matter how you look at it, but we're talking about murderers who insist in killing their own babies," I said.

"Sir, we're talking about women who are highly desperate, emotionally and psychologically wrecked, some may be fighting for their lives; and yes, some may be selfish and shallow and may not appreciate life, but are they murderers? Didn't we discuss this already?"

Upon listening to Ms. Lewis, I turned to Ms. Williamson. "What do you say?"

Would you support a moral militia going after these women?"

"No."

"No stomach for justice, Ms. Williamson?"

"I see your point."

"What is my point, Ms. Williamson?"

"They're not murderers. I believe they deserve help."

"Well, I think a lot of women may owe both of you their lives," I said. "You, Ms. Lewis, for not following Mr. Edson's advice and give up, and you, Ms. Williamson, for opening up your mind, and your heart.

"Still, how do we deal with the real *murderers*, those who perform abortions? These individuals are not emotional wrecks; they are cool and collected, rational, willful doctors who are aware of what they do. They are the ones who terminate human life. Why wouldn't it be morally justifiable to hold them accountable for their actions?"

"I'll take a crack at the question!" exclaimed Mr. Wasserman.

"Go ahead, please."

"Thomas Jefferson owned slaves, didn't he? Would we have gone after our beloved president had he been alive during the Civil war? More than likely, quite a few the likes of Jefferson died during the war defending slavery.

"I tend to think that there were many plantation owners who mistreated their slaves, while there were others who, like Jefferson, were kind and compassionate toward theirs. But the war didn't make distinctions. The North went against a practice—against a set of values—that the South wasn't willing to relinquish peacefully. We killed both the good and the bad.

"Here you are debating whether the fetus is alive, or whether it's just an appendix. If we killed those who enslaved others or those who denied the colonies their freedom, why shouldn't we regard human life more important? Or just as important? If we accept precedent, how we can say that it's not morally justifiable to go after abortionists."

"That's kind of eerie, but it makes sense," said Mr. Edson. "Also, what if our government would allow genocide? Come to think of it, isn't abortion kind of legalized genocide? . . . What's wrong?"

"Genocide?" I asked. "That's an interesting observation, Mr. Edson. Genocide involves the willful targeting of racial, ethnic, national, and religious groups. I've never seen it applied to age categories . . . well, except in Exodus, and supposedly conducted by God himself. I can see your point. It's not that the people—acting through our government—persecute the unborn; nonetheless, it condones the termination of life of the unborn, which may be considered a form of genocide.

"It's interesting that our government forbids the wanton killing or abuse of animals. Anyone who mistreats animals or who systematically kills dogs or cats would be fined and possibly imprisoned. On the other hand, the

government is not as sensitive with regard to the unborn. Does that mean that we as a people hold the life of animals more significant than that of unborn babies? Sounds incredible, but it sure looks like it.

“What’s more, if one were to listen to live discussions on the Webster v Reproductive Health Services legal case in 1989, and I mean not just read it . . . you have to listen to the way the justices talk . . . you would think they’re exchanging ideas about some esoteric matter that has little if anything to do with what’s at stake: the viability of an unborn human life.

“I’m sorry, I digressed, Mr. Wasserman, I believe you were discussing whether violence would be justified against those involved in the practice of abortion.”

“I don’t think I can add anything else, sir.”

“Anyone else?” I asked.

“I agree that physicians who perform abortions are not in the same mental or emotional state of mind as pregnant women,” said Ms. Lewis. “And, sure, there’s always a bad apple in the barrel, but aren’t these men and women simply doing what the law allows them to do?”

“Regardless of what they do?” interrupted Ms. Williamson, “one would think that physicians know what human life is all about, particularly obstetricians. So, how can they perform an abortion with as much detachment as the medical team in a MASH episode? Now, that, I don’t understand.”

“Wait a second, we agreed that these are not people who would kill babies, right?” argued Ms. Lewis. “So, why is it so difficult to accept that these men and women can be likable, kind, family-oriented members of the community? Why can’t we accept that these doctors see a fetus instead of a live, unborn baby; something that from their perspective is not worth keeping alive? Why do we have to make them criminals?”

“I guess that it’s difficult for many of us to accept their views for the same reason that they can’t see ours,” said Mr. Wasserman. “These physicians are very much aware that the so-called fetus is alive. But to them, the life of the unborn has much less significance than the reasons that lead them to perform abortions. Under no emotional stress they make the same judgment that a woman makes when she decides to have an abortion. These physicians decide, in agreement with their patient, that the life of the unborn is not worth keeping alive.”

“There’s something else,” I said. “If an abortion is the termination of life, that’s killing. Whether such killing is justified or not is a separate question. But, it’s precisely the answer to this separate question that determines whether we ought to extend the abortionist our compassion; whether they are these generous and compassionate human being who assists women who are in desperate need, or someone who is indifferent to the unborn and simply does a job that the government has deemed legal. We’re talking about the difference

between being a murderer, a killer, or someone doing his or her job in accordance with the law.

"I'm sure there are many abortionists who are compassionate human beings, much akin to the compassionate and kind slave owners of yesteryear who were considerate and gentle masters, but who, nonetheless, didn't see anything wrong with enslaving another human being. As Mr. Wasserman pointed out, the Civil War obliterated the distinctions between the kind slave owner and the mean-spirited one. Should anti-abortionists take this distinction into account or not?"

"How would anyone be able to tell?" asked Mr. Radusky.

"Good question," I replied. "What if we can't? Since some people see abortion as an abominable procedure, should they assume that all who perform it are evil? Kind of like the collateral damage of the abortion war. If violence is to be a last resort tool to combat the wicked one, but we cannot make that distinction, then I believe we have a problem."

Mr. Hunt spoke up. "If each faction in the country were to impose its own morality through violence whenever it finds laws or behavior that contradict its beliefs, our society would quickly disintegrate and become a lawless nation. Our system of government offers us reasonable and peaceful means to change its laws. Why not make use of it?"

"Whenever we choose to rely on violence we project the weakness of our cause," I said. "We show our inability to persuade others, we project our lack of respect for those whom we judge without knowing what's in their hearts. True, reverting to violence could very well indicate others' indifference to the issue. Nonetheless, don't we have a responsibility to ensure that the medicine doesn't become worse than the disease; that violence doesn't bring about a vicious spiral of violence and counter-violence that, in the end, could make things worse?"

"Consider as well," I added, "isn't it important that a just cause be perceived as just? Sometimes, violence can convey the opposite message. It can ruin one's well intended message. Look at how some well-known anti-establishment radical groups failed to attain their objectives, became outlaws themselves, and in the process alienated many who could have supported their views. In view of this, wouldn't it be wiser to persuade rather than to kill, to protest in silence rather than to engage in violence? Sometimes, a view can lose legitimacy if it loses the public relations struggle."

"Meanwhile, abortion would continue," voiced Ms. Williamson.

"Well, what if Roe is overturned and women end up having illegal abortions. Don't we think that the states or the Federal Government should have an interest in protecting the health of these women?" asked Ms. Lewis.

"It's a concern, a serious one," I offered. "Unfortunately, we're talking about a zero-sum outcome. If the right to the life of the unborn prevails, the right of the woman to have an abortion ceases to exist, and vice-versa."

"If we're so concerned with avoiding violence altogether, why don't we legalize bank robbery so that people won't get hurt or robbers go to jail when they desperately need money?" asked Mr. Dickerson.

"It's not the same," answered Ms. Lewis. "When you rob a bank you're taking that which is not yours," she said.

"Now, do you see my point, Leslie?" said Mr. Hunt. "What you're saying is that you don't recognize that killing the unborn is the same as taking that which is not yours!"

"There's something else," said Ms. Vanhurst. "In most cases, we women can choose to become pregnant or not. We can choose what's important to us as well as who's more important. Meanwhile, the unborn can't choose. If we're at a stage in which women are demanding more responsibility and accountability from men, I think we need to start holding ourselves accountable for our actions, too."

"Yes, but Ms. Lewis does have a point," I said. "If abortion were to be outlawed one day, there has to be some alternative to illegal abortion."

"Well, of course," said Ms. Vanhurst. "We need to do more to help women when pregnancy becomes a burden. There's no reason why both government and private organizations can't do even more than what they are currently doing to reduce unwanted pregnancies and to help pregnant women.

"There's a big divide between the two movements that need to be bridged because in the middle of this divide lie both women and the unborn. Both sides need to see what each has in common with the other.

"I realize that Planned Parenthood is the devil incarnate of anti-abortionists, yet this organization has goals and objectives that relate in a positive manner with goals and objectives within the anti-abortion movement. It's a matter of finding that five, ten, twenty percent commonality that may exist between the two groups and build on from there. Of course, calling each other names don't usually lead to productive discussions."

"How do we end up such divisiveness?" I asked.

"Attack the problem at the root cause," said Ms. Vanhurst.

"The root cause being . . ." I said.

"The strident and discordant tones of public demonstrations, the denunciations, the mass hysteria these demonstrations unleash, the disrespectful and insulting language that prevails. These attitudes, not only fail to attain anyone's objectives; they tend to fuel resentment which, more than anything else, hardens each other's attitudes.

"Let's face it. I don't believe there are many leaders of the pro-abortion movement who regard abortion as something positive or desirable, say like cosmetic surgery. While they believe that abortion is an important alternative to which women should have access, I believe that most of them are aware that abortion may also leave deep emotional and psychological scars or even present

potential physiological complications. If both groups were to explore what they have in common, provided they respect each other's views, there's a possibility for pro-abortionists and anti-abortionists to identify common grounds and engage in a socially productive dialogue.

"Unfortunately, hysterical, judgmental, sometimes even insulting behavior characterizes both movements. We've heard about religious and political leaders, who supposedly stand for the culture of life, suggest with incredible temerity and little sensitivity that pro-abortionists are to be blamed for 9/11, or blatantly label those who support abortion as terrorists because they have no respect for innocent life. It appears as if these moral warriors are more interested in verbally decimating the opposition than in defending the life of the unborn.

"Then, you look to the other side and you can't fail to notice the scorn and the contempt that pro-abortionists at times project against anti-abortionists. I remember seeing in the newspaper during a pro-abortion rally a poster someone was carrying that read, *keep your rosaries out of my ovaries*, or another poster described in the article as *an animated uterus with eyes and boxing gloves on each ovary, looking for a fight*.³

"Guys, we're talking about educated, supposedly civilized, family-oriented adults, some of them pillars in their communities, behaving with a lack of decorum and respect that leaves one speechless."

"You're talking about both, the pro-abortionists and the anti-abortionists, correct?" I asked.

"Yes," answered Ms. Vanhurst.

"Sir, must you keep referring to pro-lifers as anti-abortionists," asked Ms. Williamson. "Is there some sort of an agenda in your use of words?"

"Would you believe that's a case of continuous slips of the tongue on my part, Ms. Williamson?"

"Nooo."

"Neither do I. I'll tell you what, the day anti-abortionists become pro-lifers in deed as well as in word, I will start calling them by their preferred name, how's that?"

"You don't believe they stand for a culture of life?" she asked.

"Sure I do, but they do so unequally. What distinguishes one movement from the other is the significance each places on its preferred form of life. Pro-abortionists manifest a lower regard for the life of the unborn, but they show a great deal of understanding and care for the quality of life of the visibly living. And, frankly, one should admire their compassion for those who hurt, those who are suffering, even when you may disagree with their views toward the unborn. We need more people who feel for the living.

"Now, I'm not going to say that anti-abortionists don't care for the living;

just that in their efforts to save the unborn they relegate the living to a lower level. We all remember the yearly January anti-abortion marches that take place in Washington DC. The enthusiasm and the zeal exhibited by those opposing abortion is admirable. But we should ask, how many other marches, of the same magnitude as the anti-abortion march were sponsored by these organizations in support of the poor, the sick, the old, or against corruption?

"I don't think the anti-abortionists have any idea how much this lack of balance hurts the movement's credibility. The message they project is that innocent, unborn life trumps innocent human beings. It should make people living in Darfur wish they remained in their mothers' wombs so they could stand a better chance of receiving political support"

"That's a harsh statement to make, sir," said Ms. Williamson.

"But a fair one!" yelled Ms. Vanhurst.

"Yes, Ms. Lewis."

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Go ahead."

"In the end, could you sit back and decide that a woman whose life is threatened by her pregnancy should die or that a woman who becomes pregnant after being raped give birth?"

I paused for a few seconds.

"I'm not trying to put you on the spot, sir."

"Yes, you are, and I see nothing wrong with it. I've put you all on the spot at times, too. So, let me try to answer in the same way I have asked you all to explore these issues. In this case, Ms. Lewis, I will need your help. Suppose you were having a baby and you were told that, given pregnancy complications, for you to live the baby will have to die, could you tell the doctor, to go ahead and pull the plug, but not on you.

"Or suppose that you and your child were caught in a burning house and the reality of the situation indicated that only one could escape unharmed, would you try to save your child or would you try to save yourself? And if your reply is that you would try to save yourself, would you do it nonchalantly?"

"Tell you what, don't answer that, Ms. Lewis," I said. "There's no need to; I think I know the answer. We all know that once in a while we hear about cases of women abandoning their babies, stuffing their babies in plastic bags, even allowing the baby to die inside the womb rather than submit herself to a C-section that would leave a permanent scar on her abdomen.

"However, that's not typical; far from it! So, I think I know what your answer would be in both cases. My bet is that the motherly instinct would prevail in most instances.

"In the case of rape, I think that the decision would be far more difficult. Having a baby as the outcome of an act of violence? Hmm, definitely heroic.

Yet, you asked me if I could simply make a decision without having any misgivings.

“It’s intriguing that ask the question. Is it because I’m a man, or because being a man would detach me from that particular circumstance?”

“If the situation involved someone close to me, the gender issue would be irrelevant; I can assure you. And if we’re referring to a woman neither one of us knows, do you believe that a man is less sensitive, less emotionally-equipped to render a judgment? I don’t.

“If science were to prove to us that human life begins at the end of the first, the sixth, or the eight month, why would I have any misgivings about terminating something prior to *it* becoming alive?”

“The decision in both situations would be truly agonizing, for a man as much as for a woman. The argument that the man has no voice on this issue is not gender-related. I’m fully aware of the moral principle rejecting abortion; it’s the same one that opposes the murder of an innocent life. In the case of the pregnant mother, she’s no less innocent—and just as worthy of living—as her baby.

“One may think that her life might be more significant in the sense that she might be a wife, the mother of her children, an eminent cancer researcher, the President of the United States. The only problem is that for her to live, an innocent life has to be killed. And, who’s to say that that innocent life couldn’t grow one day to be the one who finds the cure for cancer, or a future President of the United States. The moral principle that we, and most civilized societies, observe, is that no one has the right to take the life of an innocent being. The principle applies to the mother as well; therefore, it would not be right to kill the mother to save the baby.”

“So, how would you respond, sir?”

“How would I respond? Let’s see, there’s no doubt that opting for the life of the baby when the health of the mother is at risk or continuing with a pregnancy that arises out of rape is heroic. But heroism is not something one imposes upon others; you only can impose heroism upon yourself.

“At the same time, while the law should not impose heroism on its citizens, the law has to create fair-minded standards of behavior for all citizens. The law may decide, for example, that individuals living past the age of eighty years of age who are ill and whose retirement income and Medicare payments have exceeded their own contributions are an unfair burden upon the rest of society, so why should they go on living?”

“If the unborn were like a cancer, a malignant tumor threatening the life of a woman, I think every sane person would support extirpation. The problem we face today is that we’re regarding the life of the unborn as if it were a cancer threatening the life of another human being, so we’re opting to kill one innocent life in favor of another. What criteria are we relying on to make this decision? That it’s only a fetus? That it’s not “viable”? That it’s not,

constitutionally speaking, a *person*? Are we at a point where we have come to regard one form of life as inferior, thus more disposable, than another is? What moral criteria could prevent us then from disposing of homeless people? What about individuals with extreme physical and mental disabilities; do we know what burden they are to the emotional health and financial situations of families and to society?

“But rape is an act of violence, we would cry out. Very well, what if an innocent bystander becomes a paraplegic or falls into a temporary coma following a senseless act of violence. Would we, or should we terminate that life?

“The day I get adequate reasons to terminate human life under these situations I might be able to provide you with easier replies. In the meantime, nothing that I have read, seen or learned has persuaded me that the unborn is any less important than other forms of human life we see every day.

“So, to answer your question, I would pray that I will never encounter this situation, and if I ever were to face it, I would hope to have the strength to choose life rather than willfully to kill the mother or the baby.

“I can tell you that my weighing in on this matter at the time would be anything but detached and indifferent. Neither religious nor political beliefs would guide my response; blind faith appears to be too devoid of feelings and reason to allow it to take over my decision.”

“You’re saying that the moral principle overseeing abortion is the same one that applies to all living human beings?” asked Mr. Dickerson.

“It’s the same principle that applies to our condemnation of terrorism, defined as the killing of innocent life for a political end, or the killing of innocent lives to attain a specific objective,” I indicated. “Terrorists, as we all know, don’t accept this principle, so according to their guidelines, killing innocent lives becomes a justifiable means to their ends.”

“But don’t we often violate this principle nowadays?” asked Mr. Dickerson.

“Very much so,” I replied. “As a matter of fact, I decided to test the principle of the sanctity of life that many of our politicians and religious and political institutions claim to defend; however, I was not too successful.”

“How so, if we may know?”

“I tried to contact several of the most influential Religious Right organizations in the country as well as the Catholic Bishops Conference. They are, after all, the backbone of the anti-abortion movement. Naturally, since they all receive so many requests, I expected that it would be difficult to get a reply.

“Nonetheless, some of these organizations said that they would reply to my question; that is, until I asked the question. One said that it had no expertise on the ethics of terrorism. I explained that the issue of terrorism was irrelevant, that the question concerned the respect for human life, a topic about which they definitely knew quite a lot. Still, they refused to offer an answer. The other insti-

tution claimed that its president had no time to reply; two others didn't answer once they received my question, and two didn't even acknowledge receipt of my correspondence.

"Anyways, I was interested to find out the following: Suppose our government learns that a commercial airplane has been hijacked with two hundred passengers on board and takes a turn toward a major U.S. city. The hijackers refuse to obey Air Force interceptors to follow them to a nearby landing strip, leading the government to believe that another 9/11 might take place. Would the government be justified in shooting down the plane?"

"But that's not a hypothetical question, sir," claimed Mr. Dickerson. "We know that, during 9/11, the order had been given, I believe by Vice President Cheney, to shoot down one or more of the hijacked planes. Further, I have read that US Air Force pilots have orders to *shoot down an aircraft deemed to be a threat*.⁴⁹"

"Yes, I know, that's why I was so interested in finding out how these religious institutions would answer the question."

"Do you have any idea why they would be reluctant to provide you with an answer?" asked Mr. Edson.

"This is only speculation on my part," I said. "Religious institutions provide moral guidance to their followers, and they do so by promoting their values within the social and political environments they operate. Moreover, we know that the ethics of human life covers a lot of territory including guidelines towards the unborn, towards the living, the dying, during times of war, peace, and in between. And, remember, these organizations insist that no single innocent human life has more significance than any other because, on what valid grounds will the decision be made that some lives are more valuable than others?"

"The problem is that all religious institutions and organizations operate, as I said, within a political environment. And, I presume that if one of these institutions were to stand by its principle and say that the government is not justified in shooting down an airplane with innocent lives in order to possibly save an even larger number of people, it would take a lot of political heat from its flock. How can a religious institution not justify bringing down the airplane in order to save people on the ground, citizens would argue."

"On the other hand, if these religious institutions were to say that the government is justified in bringing down the airplane, thus killing innocent lives, they would have to explain why a woman is not justified in killing the innocent life she carries inside her womb in order for her to survive. Anyhow, I didn't get any reply whatsoever."

"Wow, I think I would've preferred to have taken a course in history, or thermodynamics," said Mr. Edson. "Definitely, anything else would have been less complicated than this."

"I think you meant to say, less committal, Michael, right?" said Mr. Hunt,

“something less burdensome, more carefree, something that wouldn't create so much emotional distress, right?”

“You took the words right out of my mouth. You're more precise, but I think thermodynamics covers it well; it has to be *much* easier than this,” said Mr. Edson.

“I agree,” said Mr. Hunt. “But in the end, it's the aggregate of choices we make that defines us as a society. We complain about terrorism, about cold blooded murders, and genocide. All these incidents tell us how little life is valued. In my view, the worst impact of *Roe v Wade* was not that of allowing abortion. Far more significant was what the decision said about human life.”

“Which you claim to have been done inadvertently,” I reminded him.

“Yes.”

“Why do you think that *Roe v Wade* diminished the value of human life?” I asked.

“I think it contributed to a redefinition of who has authority over life, not only of the unborn but even of the living. Case in point, a survey sponsored by the well-regarded Guttmacher Institute identified the most important reasons given by women for having an abortion.

“I'll recite each one, but at the end of each reason I read, I will insert the phrase *yet, I became pregnant*. This is how it would read: I'm not ready for another child/or the timing is wrong, *yet I became pregnant* (25 percent); I can't afford a baby now, *yet, I became pregnant* (23 percent); I have completed my child-bearing/have other people depending on me/children are grown, *yet, I became pregnant* (19 percent); I don't want to be a single mother/having relationship problems, *yet, I became pregnant* (8 percent); I don't feel mature enough to raise a child, *yet, I became pregnant* (7 percent); pregnancy would interfere with education or career plans, *yet, I became pregnant* (4 percent); I have physical problems with my health, *yet, I became pregnant* (4 percent).

“Other reasons for ending the pregnancies were: there are possible problems affecting the health of the fetus (3 percent); I was a victim of rape, surprisingly a very low .5 percent ; husband or partner wants me to have an abortion (.5 percent); parents want me to have an abortion (.5 percent); don't want other people to know I had sex or got pregnant (.5 percent); various other reasons (6 percent).⁵

“While I'm not arguing that the reasons that were given were not significant at the personal level, as we may judge from these responses, when we were told that abortion was legal, many interpreted it in terms of a right that was being afforded to make life more convenient. Others took it as a means to free themselves of their responsibilities or their mistakes.

“In other words, if a woman is not ready to have another child or she can't afford to have a baby now or she's involved in a bad relationship, then, as a matter of convenience, according to the law, she should be able to decide if she

wants to terminate her pregnancy or not.”

“It appears that many women and men say to themselves that they—and their reasons—are more important and significant in this world than the lives they’ve chosen to end,” I pointed out. Whenever we make this affirmation, however, we must bear in mind that, this evening, we have not been able to extract out of this discussion a justifiable reason that would allow us to make this type of judgment without justifying, at the same time, the killing of any other innocent life. I think this is why Mr. Hunt believes that *Roe v Wade*, inadvertently, diminished the value of human life.”

“In effect, we’re questioning the justices’ wisdom,” said Mr. Dickerson.

“I think the majority of the justices knew what they wanted to achieve in the short run,” said Mr. Hunt, “but I don’t think they realized how their decision was going to affect how people would perceive human life, both the unborn and the living.

“Let me explain. It’s not difficult to read into Justice Blackmun’s opinion⁶ that the Court used *Roe v Wade* as a means to reach a social compromise on what it perceived as being a highly charged social issue. Justice Blackmun revealed as much when he pointed out *the sensitive and emotional nature of the abortion controversy, the vigorous opposing views ... and the deep and seemingly absolute convictions that the subject inspires.*

“Inexplicably, as if it should matter in the discussion, he chose to bring into view issues such as, *population growth, pollution, poverty, and racial overtones*, that, according to him, *tend to complicate and not simplify the problem*, only to set these elements aside in order, *to resolve the issue by constitutional measurement*. The decision was as practical as it was arbitrary. The Court awarded the first trimester of the life of the unborn to those who favor abortion; the third trimester went to those who oppose it; and the second one is shared by both sides.”

“Except that it back fired,” remarked Ms. Vanhurst. “The virtual baby actually was split into three parts. In addition, the aftermath, as we have witnessed, has resulted in a constant process of hair-splitting decisions seeking to put Humpty Dumpty together: ‘You can do this but can’t do that; you may proceed but only to this extent; you’re rejected here, but we don’t object to this or that there.’”

“Yes, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that it was all done inadvertently,” argued Mr. Dickerson.

“Again, I don’t know,” replied Mr. Hunt. “In *Roe*, the justices literally ducked the issue of the origin of life, which would have resulted in a very different decision. I don’t believe they ever entertained the possibility of dealing with that question. Had they wished to do so, they wouldn’t have been able to dictate their social compromise. They themselves acknowledged that much: *We need*

not resolve the difficult question of when life begins, because there is no consensus among those in the medical, philosophical, and theological fields, said Justice Blackmun.

“This, in my opinion, was a cop-out. I agree that in the 1700s, the origin of human life could only have been explored by philosophers or theologians; medical science simply was not anywhere close to the knowledge the justices had at their disposal in 1973. But in 1973, there was no need to seek a consensus among the three branches of knowledge; medical science had the answer.

“Now, the question of when innocent human life ought to be terminated is definitely something for philosophers and theologians to munch on, not physicians, biologists, or even Supreme Court Justices. Even the question of when innocent life can be ended could be the subject of an ethical debate, and here, medical science, also, would have little, if any, to contribute.

“In 1973, however, there was ample knowledge that human life, as we know it, begins when the sperm fertilizes the egg and a zygote is formed. By the way, sir, you were talking about the fetus not sounding too tender. Well, here’s another term for you: *zygote*!

“Anyhow, I just wanted to add that while it’s anyone’s right to belittle the life of the unborn, the scientific knowledge of when life begins can’t be ignored or disregarded, and this is what the Court did.”

“I think the justices sought to avoid the issue of the origin of human life altogether,” I said. “Yet they went on to establish its constitutional meaningfulness through the concept of *viability*. But, while the term *viable* indicates life’s ability to subsist, logically it underscores that such life is already in existence, although in their view it matters little. How little? By reaching into a dubious right of privacy that the majority acknowledged has little resemblance to *the right of privacy previously articulated in the Court’s decisions*, and combining it with the Fourteenth Amendment, the justices gave constitutional validity to their decision that the so-called *fetus* is not a person until it becomes viable.

“Moreover, the Court didn’t even settle the issue of the significance of the life of the unborn, leaving it up to the states to decide upon it. This means that the life of the unborn could be worth more or less according to where one resides.

“The justices arbitrated the issue, awarding the fetus with as many or as few rights as they wished at whatever stage they chose. That was their prerogative; after all, according to the Court, while corporations constitute a person, the unborn is not.

“So, I’m left to wonder, why should it matter to the justices at what stage abortion takes place? Why all of a sudden this *mea culpa* suggesting that the justices were not that callous, that, after all, they do care about the life of the fetus, a reason for which they could not grant an absolute right to the woman to terminate her pregnancy at any time? The justices broke down what scientifi-

cally is one continuous process of pregnancy into three stages: being a little pregnant, being somewhat more pregnant, and being very pregnant; and then proceeded to disburse rights accordingly!

“Justice Blackmun argued that *the word person, as used in the Fourteenth Amendment, does not include the unborn*, meaning that it has no rights. But, how does his opinion help us to understand what’s constitutionally valid? Nowhere in the original Constitution does it say that a Black human being is a *person*. One would have thought so, but it took a civil war, a constitutional amendment, a Supreme Court decision, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, massive protests, and a myriad of Congressional legislation to make sure that we would get it through our respective skulls!

“Justice Stewart, concurring with the majority in the Roe decision, put it in even simpler terms than Justice Blackmun. The right of a woman to terminate her pregnancy falls under the broad understanding of the concept of liberty.

“According to Justice Stewart, freedom is more important than *the potential human life within her*.⁷ Frankly, I would concur with the majority, too, if someone could explain to me what *potential human life* means in our very advanced scientific era.

“Once it’s determined that we’re not talking about a separate human life when we refer to the unborn, then any other concept would find constitutional validity, including privacy.”

“Not to belabor the issue, but if that’s all the unborn is, a part of the body, then we all understand how the Court could have voted the way it did. Just think that for the Court to have reached its decision, it had to willfully ignore factual knowledge that otherwise would have impeded it from sustaining the view that prevailed in the end: perhaps it’s life, but it shouldn’t matter much when compared to liberty, privacy, and control of one’s body.”

“Do we believe that the current situation is so polarized that it doesn’t offer much chance of a compromise?” asked Captain Francis.

“The situation we now have, Captain, is the result of a compromise,” I argued.

“I meant a solution,” he clarified.

“Not unless we come to grips with the issue that abortion is about the meaning and value of innocent human life,” argued Ms. Vanhurst. “And remember, abortion is but one way of questioning the value of life. I agree with Mr. Hunt, we already have started to judge which innocent human life gets to be terminated. We make these decisions when we go to war.”

“Thank you, Ms. Vanhurst, Mr. Hunt, and you, too, Mr. Edson; well, actually the entire class participated, so thank you all. I’d like to think that we’ve exhausted the topic. Next time we’ll be discussing sexual mores and their impact on our society throughout the years. I’ll see you all next week.”

Endnotes

¹ Millions of Abortions of Female Fetuses Reported in India, *The New York Times*, January 10, 2006.

² Abortion Surveillance—United States, 2001, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, November 26, 2004, Center for Disease Control, statistics between 1973 and 2001; Induced Abortion in the United States, *Facts in Brief*, The Allan Guttmacher Institute, May 18, 2005, statistics for 2002; National Right to Life cites statistics and estimates by the Guttmacher Institute from 1973 to 2002, and provides its own estimates for 2003 and 2004, in *Abortion in the United States: Statistics and Trends*, on line.

³ Body Politics, *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2004. p. C2.

⁴ Disturbance Diverts London-D.C. Flight, in *Guardian Unlimited*, August 17, 2006 online.

⁵ Finer, Lawrence B., Frohwirth, Lori F., Dauphinee, Lindsay A., Singh, Susheela, Moore, Ann M., "Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, September, 2005, <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/3711005.pdf>.

⁶ The Supreme Court's decision on *Roe v Wade*, decided on January 22, 1973, appears on line.

⁷ *Ibid*.