

WE ARE ALL PRO-LIFE

Re-examining the abortion debate to find common ground

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Imagine mobilizing the passions of each side of the abortion debate toward a collective goal. The potential power of such an alliance would be incredible.

Still, for many, it is difficult to overcome the stigmas of today's politically disputed debate. Abortion. The word drips with connotation. Arguably the most polarized, hotly contested issue in contemporary society, the abortion question has reshaped the American political climate as well as individual minds alike.

Inflammatory dialogue and provocative claims create a seemingly irreconcilable divide. "Pro-Choice" and "Pro-Life" labels euphemize the fundamental issue at hand and pull the sides farther apart. Tragically, as they yell to overpower their opposition, each loses the ability to listen. Communication breaks down all together. The potential for progress deteriorates.

So the question remains: how can we transform this hostile conflict? Within a composed dialogue, it is critical that conviction on every side of the issue remains intact and never marginalized. How might we arrive at some collective discussion while addressing the sincere, fervent opinions of all involved?

First, it is of great importance to recognize the complexities of each position. "Pro-Choice" and "Pro-Life" categories oversimplify. Each side incorporates varied ideologies and reasons for their support. Aligning itself with the

anti-abortion position, the Christian Coalition of America (CCA), bases its position both on respect for the dignity of human life, and also on a broader adherence to generally nonviolent practices. An interesting juxtaposition stems from the group Feminists for Life, an organization that aligns themselves with the 'pro life' side based on feminist concerns.

The "Pro-Choice" group proves equally diverse, with women arguing for government protection of their fundamental rights, to libertarians claiming that abortion ought not to be a concern of the government at all. Still, taking away inflammatory rhetoric, the underlying goals of each interest remain remarkably similar. Indeed, many of the published concerns and goals of each organization are scarcely distinguishable.

All emphasize the need to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies. All insist upon respect for the mother, and medical and psychological counseling for them, and in recognizing the extremely difficult position of pregnant women, seek to help. In the fundamental concerns of seemingly irreconcilably opposed groups, common concerns abound. The groups all value life and respect it; the conflict comes from how to go about implementing and institutionalizing such sentiments. The issue can be simplified to a trite question of the degree to which each life is valued; some sides lean towards the life of the mother, while others favor that of the yet-unborn child.

Imagine the power that would result from a coalition of all

Mission Statements of pro-choice and anti-abortion NGOs are surprisingly compatible

Planned Parenthood	"We believe that respect and value for diversity in all aspects of our organization are essential."
NARAL Pro-Choice America	"better access to more effective contraceptive options and better access to other kinds of reproductive health care and information...works to reduce the number of abortions."
Birth Choice	"What do <i>you</i> really want...Becoming fully informed empowers you to make an intelligent, thoughtful, confident choice."
Feminists for Life	"no woman should be forced to chose between pursuing her education and her career plans and sacrificing her child" "believe in the strength of women and the potential of every human life"
Catholic Church's Project Rachel	"aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and ... does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision." "one-on-one spiritual and psychological care for those who are suffering"

Please see resources on next page for the websites where you can read the mission statements in their entirety.

sides. A united force of such powerful concerns could do wonders. Consider a practical application. Each interest agreed on the need for improved sex education. While they may differ in their methods, the CCA pushing for abstinence programs, and NARAL encouraging more explicit contraceptive education, still in addressing the national ethos, one that in their minds encourages and de-values sex, the groups agree that a shift in education must occur. So perhaps in an attempt to find more compatible positions, it is necessary for each to step back even from the education level and attempt to agree on a question of society's attitude toward sexuality, and by extrapolation toward pregnancies. It is very conceivable that the religious right and spiritual left would agree to work together to alter media and popular culture's degradation of modern sexuality.

In uniting to implement such programs, not only would each obtain some of their goals, but in the process would begin to re-humanize the conflict. With cooperation, individual articulation and genuine concerns would replace violent slogans and outspoken figureheads. Increased dialogue would allow for an increased likelihood to find common ground, which will ultimately lead to a more fruitful engagement of the issue. We must each respect dissenting views and listen to others if we hope to reverse the trend of hostility and work toward our

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Such sentiments are not mere theoretical proposals. A group called Search for Common Ground helped to mediate a dialogue between each side of this very conflict. During a 1993 abortion conference, representatives from a wide breadth of interests came together in a discussion which produced three joint-authored statements. The diverse group came to consensus on issues such as making adoption more accessible, preventing teen pregnancies, and alleviating societal pressures in school and the workplace which prompt many women to resort to abortion. Written policy plans concerning adoption, teen pregnancy prevention, and clinic activism serve as tangible proof of the real benefits of civil discussion. The conference hoped to increase productive, peaceful dialogue in the abortion debate. With combined efforts, they hope to have increased

power to push forward legislative reform which will forward their combined goals: promoting respect and dignity of both potential mothers and children.

Still, more important even than an immediate solution to the problem, it is imperative to mitigate the violent nature of the abortion debate. For a debate about respect and love of life to take such a vicious, aggressive form is truly paradoxical. These fundamental concerns for respect and life must even extend to individuals seen in opposition.

Resources

Search for Common Ground:

http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/us/us_life.html

Planned Parenthood Federation of America:

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/pp2/portal/files/portal/aboutus/mission.xml>

NARAL Pro-Choice America:

<http://www.prochoiceamerica.org/about/>

Birth Choice:

<http://www.birthchoice.net/home.html>

Feminists for Life:

<http://www.feministsforlife.org/who/aboutus.htm>

Catholic Church, Project Rachel:

<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/>

Join the Conflict Transformation Resource Center!

We are a group of dedicated students who will offer mediation, preventative education, facilitation, and other services to the Berkeley campus. Do you want to join our team? Do you want to help build a vibrant, sustainable program to address conflict in a proactive manner? We are looking for dedicated volunteers interested in learning and practicing:

- mediation
- intake and case management
- workshop building
- and much more!

If you are interested, please email: [calmediate {AT} softhome.net](mailto:calmediate@softhome.net) (replace {AT} with @) and let us know how you would like to be involved!

Also, sign up for our decal class, which will be listed online at decal.org for Fall 2005. Search for "Campus Mediation and Conflict Transformation." Our web site: <http://ocf.berkeley.edu/~conflict/>