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## The Perverse Logic of Abortion

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Abortion is back as front-page news and is once again in the forefront of the nation's concern. The nomination of Judge Samuel L. Alito to the U.S. Supreme Court and the Court's consideration of an important abortion case this week have focused attention on the issue and energized both sides in the controversy.

Nevertheless, the issue of abortion is not merely a major front in the nation's culture war. It is also a deeply personal tragedy. Every single abortion terminates an innocent human life, and each abortion represents an individual moral catastrophe. Yet the vast majority of Americans go about their everyday lives, even as the death toll from abortion continues to rise.

A poignant and chilling perspective on the issue of abortion has been provided by an article published in the November 29, 2005 edition of the *Los Angeles Times*. In "Offering Abortion, Rebirth," reporter Stephanie Simon takes readers into the life and logic of one of the nation's most notorious abortion providers.

Simon focuses on Dr. William F. Harrison of Fayetteville, Arkansas. Dr. Harrison has performed abortions at his clinic on College Avenue in Fayetteville for more than twenty years. Now, at age seventy, Harrison estimates that he has terminated at least twenty thousand pregnancies.

Readers of Simon's article will be shocked by Harrison's candor. He refers to himself as an "abortionist" and acknowledges, "I am destroying life." According to the article, Dr. Harrison gave up his practice of obstetrics in 1991, having delivered six thousand babies. "Childbirth," he says, "should be joyous; a woman should never consider it a punishment or an obligation," Simon reports. As Dr. Harrison states, "We try to make sure she doesn't ever feel guilty for what she feels she has to do."

The very fact that Dr. Harrison has delivered six thousand babies and aborted twenty thousand others, coupled with his shocking candor, means that a look into his practice and philosophy of life offers rare insights into why a highly trained medical practitioner, supposedly committed to the preservation of all life, would dedicate the largest part of his professional career to abortion.

Simon takes her readers right into Dr. Harrison's clinic. She describes an eighteen-year-old with braces who has come for an abortion. "A pink blanket is draped over her stomach. She's 13 weeks pregnant, at the very end of the first trimester. She hasn't told her parents," Simon reports.

Once the young woman has been given an anesthetic, along with Valium and a drug intended to dilate her cervix, Harrison administers a dose of Versed, a sedative that "will wipe out her memory of everything that happens during the 20 minutes she's in the operating room." As Simon comments, "It's so effective that patients who return for a follow-up exam often don't recognize Harrison."

"This is not going to be nearly as hard as you anticipate," Harrison tells the patient. After the doctor has observed the fetus on an ultrasound screen, noting the curve of the baby's head, the bend of an elbow, and the ball of a clenched fist, he tells his patient: "You may feel some cramping while we suction everything out." This warning is followed by his

observation, “You’re going to hear a sucking sound.”

According to the report, the abortion took only two minutes. “We’ve gotten everything out of there,” Harrison assures her.

Speaking to the reporter, this young woman acknowledged that she understood that abortion is, at least in some sense, morally wrong. “There’s things wrong with abortion,” she commented. “But I want to have a good life. And provide a good life for my child.”

Simon also provides insights drawn from other patients who have come to Dr. Harrison’s clinic for abortions. One high school volleyball player “says she doesn’t want to give up her body for nine months.” A single mother of three “says she couldn’t bear to give away a child and have to wonder every day if he were loved.” As Simon reports, this woman believed that ending the pregnancy would be easier, so long as she doesn’t think about “what could have been.”

The logic offered by many of these women appears to be little more than an effort to convince themselves that they are not killing an unborn baby. Simon writes of a seventeen-year-old who assures Harrison’s nurse that she does not consider the unborn child within her to be a baby. “Not until it’s developed,” she explains. The nurse tells her that the fetus will not be completely formed until about the ninth week. “Yours is more like a chicken yolk,” she asserts. “Then no,” the girl said, “it’s not a baby.”

According to Dr. Harrison, the moral status of the unborn child is entirely up to the woman herself: “It’s not a baby to me until the mother tells me it’s a baby,” he stated.

The stories of other women visiting the clinic are both heartbreaking and deeply troubling. A twenty-year-old administrative assistant, preparing to end her first pregnancy, assured herself: “It’s an everyday occurrence. It’s not like this is a rare thing.” She didn’t like having to pay 750 dollars for the abortion, but she demonstrated no doubt about her decision. “It’s not like it’s illegal. It’s not like I’m doing anything wrong.” Furthermore, “I’ve been praying a lot and that’s been a real source of strength for me. I really believe God has a plan for us all. I have a choice, and that’s part of my plan.”

That last statement represents one of the most convoluted—and yet revealing—comments made by any of the women interviewed in Simon’s article. The logic of “choice” finds its ultimate culmination in this young woman’s decision to abort her baby as “part of my plan.”

Another young woman has come to the clinic seeking to terminate her pregnancy so that she can fit into her wedding dress in coming weeks. A 32-year-old college student acknowledges that she has already had four abortions in the last twelve years. Abortion, she tells Simon, “is a bummer, but no big stress.”

Dr. William F. Harrison is one of the most outspoken abortion providers in the United States. In a statement provided to Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health, Dr. Harrison commented: “I provide abortions because if I did not, my patients would have to travel anywhere from 90 to 200 miles to get this service in an abortion clinic from someone whose qualifications are totally unknown. I am firmly committed to the ideal that all people, male and female, should have as much autonomy as possible and that they should have the best medical care feasible. That means that some caring and competent physicians in each community should provide abortions.” He continued: “In my community, all the other physicians providing abortions from the early 1970s to 1984 were frightened away from their duty to their patients by pro-life militants. I have no intention of permitting extremists to dictate my morals, my ethics or my professional activities then, now or ever.”

In an article published in the August 2002 edition of the newsletter of the Reproductive Freedom Task Force, Dr. Harrison explained, “No one, neither the patient receiving an abortion, nor the person doing the abortion, is ever, at any time, unaware that they are ending a life. We just don’t believe that a developing embryo or fetus whose mother cannot or will not accept it, has the same moral claims on us, claims to autonomy and justice that an adolescent or adult woman has.”

Perhaps the most shocking dimension of Dr. Harrison’s candor is the manner in which he cloaks his practice of abortion in religious language. In the *Los Angeles Times* article, Harrison refers to women who have terminated their

pregnancies as being “born again” through the experience.

In his statement published in the Reproductive Freedom Task Force newsletter, Harrison claimed to have heard “a still, small voice asking, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ to which I was at last compelled to reply, ‘Here am I, send me.’” Here we confront the breathtaking delusion of a man who would cite God’s call to the prophet Isaiah as a parallel to his “calling” to be an abortionist.

The debate over abortion is often reduced to a battle over statistics and politics. Stephanie Simon’s article should remind us all that the reality of abortion is unspeakably ugly, undeniably tragic, and morally corrupting. The statements made by these women seeking abortions—and by the doctor who so gladly performs them—reveals the true nature of the challenge we face. The culture of death is rarely revealed with such clarity.

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