

Out of the Attic

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by Leonard Fein

John Salvi, the accused Brookline abortion clinic murderer, was in court for a hearing last week, and his appearance was the occasion for half a dozen conversations regarding abortion. These conversations seem to me to have a cumulative weight, all pointing as they do in the same direction. Having thus learned that both my views and my discomfort in speaking of them are shared by others, it seems to me time to draw a deep breath and speak aloud thoughts that have for many years been stowed in the attic of my mind.

One, then two, now six dear friends, women all, have told me of their own deep anguish regarding abortion. They're all pro-choice, of course; I doubt there are any among my good friends who are not. Three of them are not "merely" pro-choice; they're active feminists, and I've learned much from each. But it turns out that being pro-choice does not necessarily reflect either enthusiasm for abortion or deprecation of the seriousness of the pro-life position.

I've had my own reservations regarding abortion for many years now, but, having been beat up on way back when I sought to express them, I've kept them to myself. It was early on made quite clear to me that such reservations were neanderthal, reflected insensitivity to women, and, more generally, that males were not qualified to participate in the conversation. More: There was no need for conversation, nothing to talk about. And, in any case, who would want to take even a baby step towards the pro-lifers? These were hardly people to evoke one's sympathy.

That was years ago, and the women I've been talking these last several days are not the same as the ones I spoke to then. Maybe it's the passage of time that accounts for the very

dramatic difference between then and now, maybe it's the people; I cannot say. What I can say is that without prodding, the half-dozen people of this week's conversations told me not only of their anguish, but also of their inability over the years to express that anguish. And it occurred to me that we might - not all of us, but many of us - be participants in a giant example of political correctness. Debate about abortion is essentially off the table. What's the point of ongoing debate? Abortion is, after all, not a "more or less" proposition but a "yes or no" proposition; once you've decided "yes," whatever your hesitations may be, there doesn't seem to be much reason to add "but," still less given that your associates in promoting choice include at least some, perhaps many, for whom there are no "buts."

But: Suppose that very many of the pro-choice people arrive at their position not because they view the matter as open-and-shut, but because 'on balance' they believe, as I do, that once a decision has to be made, it's the woman herself who has and ought to have the burden of making it. Suppose further that when pressed to articulate their views, these many people would agree that in most cases, the need to decide about abortion reflects a prior failure - a failure in personal responsibility, a failure in education, a failure in all those things that are collectively our methods for preventing unwanted pregnancies.

Suppose, then, that pro-choice folks were to devote more energy to the prevention of unwanted pregnancies, and suppose that larger number of pro-life folks were to sign on to sex education and to condom distribution and to anti-poverty efforts and to all the other programs and policies that are involved in a strategy of prevention. (As did, in fact, some moderate Republicans in the House a few days ago when they broke with their party and voted to continue support for family planning.) Is it heresy to suggest that so long as the argument is focussed so heavily on the narrow question of abortion, leaving the complex prelude to abortion as a kind of

side-show, we're missing the point?

I am not (I don't think) naive. So long as the crazies dominate the headlines, so long as the bullhorns blare and the curses continue (and the Church, and the Christian coalition, persist in their adamancy), it will be hard to persuade people to seek out common ground. And what common ground can there be since the other side cannot say "yes" to abortion and since anything short of "yes" is "no" and means that others get to decide for a woman how her life will unfold? Still, I wonder what the consequences would be were we to stop letting our own honest views - and the agenda that follows from them - be distorted and corrupted by the crazies.

Odds are, I fear, that there aren't really that many pro-life people who can bring themselves to work together with pro-choice people on behalf of a progressive agenda for prevention, who are ready to help in making abortion legal and safe, as President Clinton urges. That means that we who do agree with the president will have to work harder on behalf of that agenda, for it is the right and the proper agenda whether or not it enables a coalition.

And yes, I know that there are people, in Planned Parenthood and a variety of other organizations, who have been working for prevention for many years. This is not meant to minimize their efforts; it is meant to encourage those of us who have simplified the debate (and thereby caricatured our own true sentiments and beliefs) to join with them in their work.