

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING Peter Schwartzman**I'm Pro Life and I'll be voting that way, too**

Author's note: I'll be using the term "pro life" to refer to "the support of ethics and behaviors that promote life," and I'll use the hyphenated form, "pro-life," to refer to "the opposition to abortion and support of fetal rights."

Biking (and driving) around town the past month, I've come across several "Vote Pro-Life" lawn signs. I couldn't help thinking, "Shouldn't I also be voting for the candidates and referenda that promote life?" Perplexed by this question, and moved by its implications, I thought I'd share my thoughts. All living humans should be treated with dignity and respect and every effort should be made to ensure that they live healthy, full and fulfilling lives. According to many statistics that cross my path regularly, we are not doing very well to ensure these things—over 15,000 children die daily from hunger-related causes (Bread for the World), more than 1.5 million females die from "poisonous fumes as they cook or heat their homes" (Clean Air Initiative), and more than 200 million children worldwide do not get basic health care (leading to around 10 million preventable deaths annually) (Save the Children). These are things that can and should be avoided. Any person who is pro life would think so, wouldn't they? Any candidate for elected office would hopefully think so as well. Unfortunately, these matters have largely been ignored by our representatives and leaders. But we need not look at poor countries to find evidence of unnecessary disease and suffering. Our health and lives are compromised by so many bad decisions that other have made for us. Harmful, and potentially deadly, chemicals are all around us. As, local hero, Dr. Sandra Steingraber told us in a visit to Galesburg earlier this month, most of the 80,000+ synthetic chemicals being manufactured today haven't been properly tested for health effects; more than half of the ~4,000 most widely used ones haven't even been tested for toxicity, not to mention their effects on children or fetuses (*Trade Secrets*). And remarkably, many of those that have been tested and shown to be carcinogenic, mutagenic, or immune suppressors are still manufactured and widely available. Leaded gasoline, used in the U.S. from the early 1920s until it was phased out in the 1980s, was responsible for nearly 70 million toxic exposures. We still have serious lead problems in our communities from this gasoline lead which continues to circulate in our biosphere as well as from lead paint (in older homes) and lead pipes. Similarly, mercury is still allowed to be emitted by coal-fired power plants causing unknowable numbers of neurological problems, especially among children. Anyone claiming to be pro life would endorse the testing of all chemicals (before their release into the environment), the rapid phasing out of chemicals known (or suspected) to be detrimental to life, and the introduction of healthy alternatives. Wouldn't any politician worth his or her salt also be in favor of these things? Have you heard one running this year call for any of these things? If you haven't, look until you find someone who does? If they don't, demand that they do. One of the biggest takers of life is war. The 20th Century saw more than 100 million die because of it. Early centuries saw massive deaths as well—as many as 700 thousand people were killed during the U.S. Civil War and, earlier still, it is suspected that over 30 million people died during the An Shi Rebellion in China during the 8th Century. Yet, despite the lessons that should have learned from these deadly affairs, we continue to actively pursue war. And sadly, the U.S. has become one of the biggest war-machines over the past 50

years—count them, Korea (for 3 years), Vietnam (for 15 years), Gulf War (for less than year), Afghanistan (for 7 years so far), and Iraq (for 5 years so far) (and this list doesn't include our strong military involvement in the Bay of Pigs, Grenada, Panama, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Serbia); note that none of these were actually wars since the U.S. Congress never authorized/declared them as such. And since war is clearly pro-death, why do we continue to support these killing sprees? Scarier still, the U.S. now not only expends about half of the world's military budget annually (though it is home to less than 5% of the world's population) but we are also seeing more and more private contractors (i.e., profit-seeking companies; e.g., Blackwater USA) deeply involved and imbedded in these deathly escapades. We must find non-military ways to resolve our differences and live in greater harmony with fellow members of our species. We may have the most bombs but this isn't something for which to be proud. If we are going to lead the world in the future, it will have to be through peaceful (non-violent) means. Any alternative will only perpetuate more of the same. Would a pro life person advocate the continued use of war to "solve" our problems? Being pro life also requires that one support the preservation of all other living things as well. If we look around the world today, we see episode after episode where humans are knowingly destroying ecosystems and the millions of species found in them. Whether we are overfishing the oceans, sending our agricultural runoff down rivers into oceans, razing/ blazing the forests, or blanketing the earth with artificial chemicals (such as fungicides, herbicides, rodenticides, and insecticides) whose central purpose is to kill life, we are actively engaged in a war (some would say genocide) with nearly all living things. If we think that humans will survive in a world devoid of non-commodifiable life forms (i.e., species that we aren't profiting from), we are in for a rude awakening. (Read *Collapse* by Jared Diamond for historical outcomes of societies that mistreated their natural environments.) From the science of ecology, we now know the critical importance of systems thinking when it comes to our relationship with our environment. We must respect life and be willing to reject old, destruction ways of relating to it. Newer, healthier modes of interaction are being developed (via biomimicry) but much of the wisdom that we need can also be found in indigenous societies the world over. It is time that we had the humility to listen to other, perhaps more ecologically-centered and historically-grounded, minds on these types of issues. Our constant assault on life will end, either because life finds humans antithetical to its designs and intentions, or because humans begin acting as **one** of a beautiful tapestry of species on the planet. With all the above said, it may appear that I am deliberately avoiding the more common understanding of what "pro-life" represents in our culture. Well, I have shied away from it for three main reasons. First, though it is important, it gets too much attention in relationship to the other ideas I have put forth. For those that advertise that they vote "pro-life" as if it is the singular issue that determines how they vote, I am merely trying to suggest that there are a multitude of ways one can be a pro life practitioner. Personally, I can't see how a pro-life (or pro-choice, for that matter) position trumps all of the other pro life concerns. Second, I don't think I, or any other man, should have the right to tell a woman what she can or can't do with her body. For far too long men (in the form of politicians, preachers, boyfriends, fathers, and husbands) have been doing just this and I think it is time that



we, men, took a giant step back. Where we, men, have a say is in promotion of healthy, peaceful ways of engaging with each other and the planet.

Third, I find the current debate about pro-life very confusing. On one hand, the Supreme Court, via *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, ruled that states cannot restrict a woman's right to have an abortion for any reason, up until the point that the fetus is "viable"—i.e., can live outside the mother, usually understood to be about 7 months—or even afterwards to protect her own health. And while Pro-Life advocates have been whittling away at this by promoting laws that allow for more restrictions on women, the *Roe v. Wade* decision is still the basis for the current rights afforded to women in our country. Oddly, and hypocritically, U.S. foreign policy has been aggressively pro-life during Republican White Houses for much of the last 22 years. Starting during Ronald Reagan's tenure, under the "Global Gag Rule," U.S. aid to the United Nations Population

Fund (UNFPA) was reduced to zero during Republican presidencies—on the basis that some women who seek assistance from the family planning programs (FPPs) are informed about the option of abortion. Since FPPs have been so important in educating women about reproduction and prenatal care as well as providing them contraceptives (both things that reduce suffering and unintended pregnancies), it seems extremely wrong-headed that our nation's international policy is so at odds with our national one. I'd hope that our future leaders will rectify this situation and restore funding to the UNFPA. England, Japan, Sweden, Norway, Germany, and Italy are among the biggest contributors to this fund—it is a list that the U.S. should be on.

So, I'll be voting pro life in this election. While my version of pro life is a bit more expanded than our society's narrow focus, I hope you will consider a more encompassing version of the concept when you cast your ballot next week and in the future. And no matter what happens when all the votes are cast and counted, we should still all work together to make our species one that truly respects and values all life forms.

Works Cited

Trade Secrets (2001). Films for the Humanities, 120 minutes.

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