

Abortion: A Practical Exercise in Balanced Wisdom

An excerpt from *The Hand That Rocks the World*, by David Shackleton

*“He who learns must suffer.
And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget,
Falls drop by drop upon the heart,
And in our own despair, against our will,
Comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.”* – Aeschylus , Greek playwright, c. 525/524 BC – c. 456/455 BC

It is impossible to struggle for civil rights, equal rights for blacks, without including whites. Because equal rights, fair play, justice, are all like the air: we all have it, or none of us has it. That is the truth of it. – Maya Angelou

We have now developed a set of basic theories of human psychosocial development, and looked at where we are in society in terms of our progress towards mature wisdom. We have played with the ideas a little, seeing how they might extend to form a framework of formal definitions for concepts of human behavior and relating. I want to pause in this chapter and work with these theories, to explore what it looks and feels like to use them in a practical application. I have chosen, intentionally, probably the thorniest and most difficult gender issue facing contemporary society, the question of abortion.

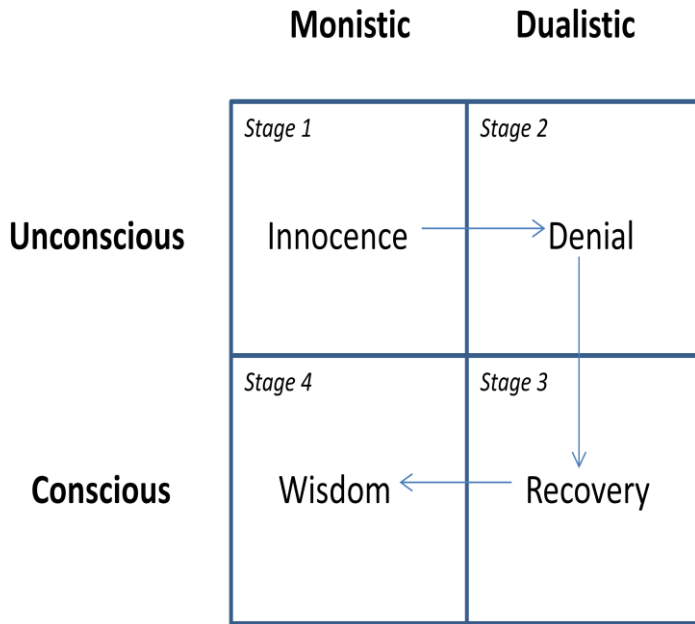
This is a central gender issue, and one that calls us to wisdom since the stakes are so high. Just about everyone has a strong opinion about this question, so if we can see how it might be explored honestly and reasonably, with mature, balanced wisdom, that will be a significant accomplishment. What would wise people do, in approaching such a major, high stakes decision? How would they resolve the issues and deal with each other? How can we set up a structure so that people who aren't so wise still might be able to work through to a worthy solution, or at least a better one than without the structure?

It is difficult to reach towards wisdom. Much must be unlearned and let go of, including things that may feel like foundations of one's identity. That is the reason that I chose the quote from Aeschylus to start this chapter, which begins “He who learns must suffer.” Carl Jung said, “The foundation of all mental illness is the avoidance of legitimate suffering.” The path to wisdom, in anything, proceeds through suffering. The suffering is because as we approach balanced wisdom, we also discover that we have been wrong, one-sided and unbalanced about important issues for most of our life, and this hurts. It is hard to take in. We discover that we must give up coercive or manipulative strategies that have been foundational for us in the past.

Jesus said, “The truth will set you free,” and that's true, but that comes later – he didn't mention that first the truth will seem to convict you. The fact that you later discover that you can and should forgive yourself, and that then you really do experience freedom, doesn't reduce the initial pain of the conviction. Indeed, it is that pain that the whole denial system is designed to avoid. The *purpose* of dualistic one-sidedness is the avoidance of pain.

What happens if we don't do this work? Well, nothing very remarkable – our lives stay stuck and ineffective in terms of meaning, wisdom, or having our major decisions work out for us, but we don't notice the lack, or more precisely, we don't recognize our problems as flowing directly from our own choices. Let's consider, as an example, how we would likely work with gender issues from the various stages of spiritual growth. We have seen that feminism is built on a mistaken idea, the notion that the history of gender relations is one of general oppression of women by men, supported by the dualistic imbalance of compassion without accountability for women and accountability without compassion for

men. This is because feminism is itself coming from stage 2 on the journey of spiritual growth, where women are believed to be victims and only women's issues are felt to be important. Women's issues *are* real, just as men's are, but feminist analysis privileges women's issues as uniquely important because men are perceived as having the power that matters. How would someone seek to address the imbalance of feminism, to correct this error from the different stages of spiritual growth? (As a memory aid, here is the map of the four stages again.)



From stage 2, denial, one would hold feminists accountable for this error, but angrily, without empathy for their situation. This is pretty much what Men's Rights Advocates have been doing for years now, and the internet is full of "dialogs" between MRAs and feminists that consist entirely of accusations and counter-accusations, with no meeting of minds. There *can* be no meeting of minds between two groups that are both in stage 2, but with opposite views of the world. In stage 2, one has little empathy to spare for others, since it is entirely applied in favor of one's 'in' group. Indeed, from stage 2 one is convinced that it is *inappropriate* to feel any empathy for the 'out' group, since one has convicted them in one's mind. Each party is righteously certain that any progress depends on a change in the *other* party, while being sure that no change is needed on their own part. This is clearly a stuck situation.

Things improve considerably if one of the parties moves to stage 3, recovery. In stage 3, one looks at one's own responsibility for creating the problems that one experiences, and seeks opportunities to discover what is true and to change oneself if indicated. Such a person can benefit from dialog with just about anyone, since every dialog is an opportunity to discover and explore new facts and information. In fact, stage 2 and stage 3 can be in positive dialog with each other for a while, since their worldviews can match quite well – the stage 2 thinks that all the problems are the fault of the other, and the stage 3 is exploring that very possibility. However, once the stage 3 has learned what they can from the stage 2, there is little juice left. The stage 3 is seeking to discover truth, but the stage 2 is focused on maintaining a false cover story, and so the dialog tends to end fairly quickly. Stage two is stuck and static, but stage three is growing and simply moves on.

Stage 4 is where things get really interesting. At stage 4 a person has integrated and come to peace with the partial truths of the earlier stages and can empathize with all of them, so dialog is not a problem for them with anyone. A stage 4 can be of great assistance to a stage 3, assisting them to grow their

understanding like a parent with a child. However, a stage 2 is typically so stuck and so defended that even stage 4 wisdom makes little – or slow – impression on their worldview.

It is clear that people who are largely in stage 2, with perceptions that are both false-to-fact in important ways and highly resistant to reason, present the major difficulty for any negotiation. For example, both of the better-known positions on abortion, called pro-life and pro-choice by their adherents, are dualistically one-sided, stage 2, partial solutions that simply privilege the needs or desires of one party over all the others. Pro-choice advocates believe that the mother's wishes should trump everything else; while pro-life adherents believe that the fetus' right to life overwhelms every other consideration. These completely one-sided positions yet feel exactly right, and powerfully important, to those who hold them. Good solutions, on the other hand, attempt strenuously to address the needs of all. But how does one pursue them?

I am going to present two different answers to that question, aimed at different circumstances. Each will be an answer to the question, how should a decision be made whether or not to abort a child. This is a tough question, probably the most difficult issue in gender politics, since the stakes are high and the parties are often highly polarized. My first answer will address the question of legal rights and responsibilities, what the law would say if it were just and gender balanced. The second will address the moral question of how to make a particular decision with a particular mother and father.

It took me years to work out what I think is a genuinely gender equal analysis of rights and responsibilities around abortion. Gender equality is difficult to figure in this case because the biology is highly unequal – only women get pregnant. When I did finally work it out, I published my thinking in an internet blog post, which I chose to address to women. I have reproduced that post below.

“I want to speak to women, to all women, in this post. It's about abortion. A great injustice has been perpetrated in your name and on your behalf. I hope that you will wish to correct it.

What is this injustice? The cry we hear from women on the question of abortion is usually, “My body, my choice.” This slogan is designed to silence men on the issue. I want to go on record, here and now, as repudiating this campaign. Let me walk you through the argument.

“My body, my choice” says that men have no right to a place at the table when abortion is considered. This is wrong. If I am the father of a child that you are carrying, then I have a right to be part of the process that leads to a decision whether or not to abort. My right is based on three facts.

1. The child is as much mine as yours, for we both contributed equal amounts of genetic material to make it.
2. Except for the matter of the pregnancy, the future that is being contemplated is my future just as much as it is your future; the decisions made affect me hugely just as they affect you.
3. I care as much about the question of children, of whether I want or don't want to be a parent, as you do.

I acknowledge that women's bodies and not men's are the delivery vehicle by means of which children come into the world. But owning the delivery vehicle does not mean that you own the product it carries, as any commercial delivery driver knows. The “My body, my choice” slogan is designed to deny and obscure this vital distinction.

“My body, my choice” is a policy which disenfranchises fathers, steals their right to have a say in what happens to their offspring. There was a time when women were legally disenfranchised in that only men had the vote. Suffragettes campaigned for the vote for women; men considered the question and agreed with them. Men passed the legislation which gave women the vote.

Universal suffrage feels right to us these days, but let's be clear about how big a cultural change this

was at the time. The culture of the time was that men were the heads of households, a role that involved authority and also duty, obligation. Men could have said, with perfect sincerity, “My household, my choice” in response to women’s claims about disenfranchisement. That was undoubtedly what felt right to many of them at the time. But men didn’t just go by their feelings or their fears about loss of power and control. They thought about the question, and they shared power because it was right, because it was just.

I know that women have fears about sharing power with men in this area, fears about being coerced into aborting or delivering a child against their will. But let’s be realistic here. There is not the slightest chance today that we would pass a law coercing women around abortion. The days of men legally coercing women, in the west at least, are over. The days of women legally coercing men, however, as in this abortion issue, are still with us. Men’s fears around abortion, of being silenced about a decision which will change their lives, are completely realistic. That is exactly what is happening throughout the western world; men are being told that on the question of abortion their concerns are irrelevant, their lives subject to women’s control without the slightest accountability. That is the very definition of disenfranchisement.

What I want is that men be granted the legal right to be heard by the mother about what will happen to their unborn offspring. A place at the table, an opportunity to express their fears and their wishes. “My body, my choice” silences men’s voices in a way that women would be outraged if it were done to them. It is not right, it is not just. A father has a right to be heard on what is to be done about his unborn child, a right that is absolute and not subject to a woman’s agreement, not contingent on her goodwill.

There is one significant way that the disenfranchisement of women through the vote is not parallel to the disenfranchisement of men in abortion. Whatever decision is made about abortion, it is the woman’s body and not the man’s that is involved in completing or terminating the pregnancy. This difference is not enough to justify silencing him, but it means that his power to influence the decision should not prevail over hers. His power is limited to expressing what he wants to the mother. A woman who chooses to abort a child that a good and willing father wishes to raise, even on his own, should not be entitled to avoid knowledge of what she is doing. She must not be protected from seeing his pain as she chooses to deprive him of a choice, single parenthood, that she takes for granted, a choice that she would be outraged if anyone suggested depriving her of.

In the opposite case, where she wishes to keep the child and he does not, she must not be allowed to sue him for child support. She has the right to abandon her fetus, after conception, in three legal ways; through abortion, through leaving it at a drop-off center, or through adoption. A man must have the same right not to be forced to support a child he doesn’t want, just because a woman wishes it. A woman who chooses to raise a child alone should accept the consequences of her decision, and not be able to force a man to subsidize her. Lack of the right to walk away from a fetus that he doesn’t want is another way that men are disenfranchised compared to women.

I started this argument with the issue of rights, because that is the bedrock that determines what should be done. But involving the father in an abortion decision is also the best and most practical thing to do. The mother and the father are the principal stakeholders, the two whose lives are most affected by what will be decided. We should give them an opportunity to come together, to pursue a solution that works best for both of them. Sometimes two heads really are better than one. If they can’t agree then the woman’s choice will prevail, but at least a decent, honorable process was followed rather than a cruel exclusion of one of the parties.

Women, what will you do about this? You can go with your fears and your feelings, deny the legitimacy of my claim, and keep the sexist, coercive status quo. You have all of the power in this area of reproduction, and men have none, the same way that once men had all of the political power

and women had none. You have the power to keep oppressing me, but you will not be able to shut me up about this issue. I am asking you for this, but I am also demanding it as my right and as your obligation, as you once demanded the vote, trusting you to recognize a matter of justice even when it goes against your immediate interest. This is what you demanded of men, and this is what you received from them. I know that it likely goes against the culture, against what feels right to you right now, but when faced with a similar challenge in their area of power, men trusted you by stepping aside in order to share power with you.

Will you return the compliment?"

That's what I think the law should say around abortion, the rights and responsibilities of the parties. But how should a particular decision be made, whether or not to abort in a given case?

What I am offering here is a vision of how to work difficult human issues with wisdom. I will present this in a general way, as principles and guidelines, because I want to offer it as an example of a general process for finding one's way through any issue to a fair and just resolution. Note that we are no longer looking at what the law should be around abortion, but at how to reach a good decision in a particular case, with specific individuals and circumstances. By a good decision, I mean a decision that takes into account all relevant parties and factors and helps people to recognize and move beyond coercive, manipulative or dysfunctional positions. A good decision also means a decision that is arrived at lovingly, with respect and empathy for all involved. In the process we will generate a general framework for considering difficult issues and a procedure for seeking a good solution. This process is applicable for any decision that has major life consequences, such as making child custody and financial support decisions after divorce, or deciding whether to divorce in the first place.

The process I will suggest has three parts. In the first we generate a general framework by identifying stakeholders and principles. In the second we bring in practical concerns, specific details of the particular circumstances and consider how they change things. In the third we dialogue together to seek the best outcome for all concerned. Let's begin with part one.

In any issue, the stakeholders are those whose lives will be significantly affected by the decision on the table. In the case of a potential abortion, they are not hard to identify. Clearly, the fetus is one such – it will live or die by the decision that is made; there are no higher stakes than that. The fetus' needs can be presumed to be the wish to live, although the life situation that it faces might be taken into account if it presents significant shortcomings. The mother's life is affected in two major ways, first in whether her pregnancy will continue to term or not, second by whether she will get to be a parent to the child. The father's life is affected in whether he will get to be (or be compelled to be) a parent. Finally, society may be a stakeholder in the case where the child will need public financial support (e.g. a single mother). So there are up to four stakeholders whose needs and aspirations matter and should be taken into account. Not an easy prospect, but that's the reality of the situation. Note: a doctor is not a stakeholder, but an agent. A doctor's role is to advise the stakeholders, but since his life is not significantly affected by the decision of whether or not to abort, she is not a stakeholder and does not have a direct voice in the decision.

Now let's look at the general principles. There are three. First, there are no absolutes, by which I mean there is no one principle which trumps all of the others. It is common for parties in a dispute to seek a device, a strategy to make their own concern paramount and absolute. This is simply an illustration of our lack of maturity, our lack of empathy for certain others and for concerns that aren't our own. Pro-life advocates do this by making the life of the fetus absolute, by equating abortion with murder and claiming that nothing can justify murder. But even if one accepts the assumption that a fetus is a full human being, the fact is that killing a person is not an absolute either. As columnist George Jonas observes, "All societies, religious societies included, authorize individuals, sometimes classes of individuals, to kill for

certain reasons. Judges, parents, police officers, ship's captains, inquisitors, soldiers, executioners and others have been entitled to terminate human lives, provided they did so for compelling reasons." ⁱ

So abortion is not absolutely wrong. Neither is it morally determined by the woman's choice alone. The pro-choice position argues that the woman's choice must rule over all other issues by virtue of her absolute control over her own body. But she is not the only one affected by this decision; the lives of others are hugely impacted. The mother does not have an absolute moral right to abort.

Absolutes are wonderful things; they make decisions easier by overwhelming all competing claims. But they do not often conform with reality; like it or not, real life has a tendency to be non-absolute.

The argument I am making here is a moral, not a legal one. I have already described what I think the law should say about abortion, and it does not include coercing women to abort or to carry to term. If a woman chooses to repudiate her obligations to others in this matter, the law should permit her to do so. However, we are not considering law now. From a moral point of view, the right thing to do is for all parties to make best efforts to come together around an equitable solution, and that is what we are about.

The second principle is that no stakeholder may be silenced. Feminists often argue that men should have nothing to say about abortion because they don't get pregnant. If pregnancy were the only issue at stake, this might be appropriate. But eighteen years of child raising, or the deprivation of the same, is arguably a larger stake than nine months of pregnancy. Fathers are major stakeholders in the issue of the possible abortion of their child and they must have a role in making this choice – and that role must reflect their own concerns, not just support of the mother. The fact that we have legally denied this role to fathers in all western democracies is because of the unacknowledged power of women under the current dominance of the feminine archetype.

The third principle is the prevention of coercion or manipulation via power plays. No one should be allowed a privileged power position, in which they exert influence beyond the weight of their argument. If you think back to my gender codependent power matrix in chapter five, you will see that this is easy to recognize in the case of traditional masculine power (threats of violence or economic sanctions) but very difficult to recognize in the case of feminine power (moral shaming or emotional manipulation). The difficulty in the latter case is because feminine power is still in our shadow, still not raised to consciousness, so that neither contemporary culture nor women themselves recognize these behaviors as powerful and manipulative. They just feel like what comes naturally. Indeed, the wholesale shaming of men that has proceeded from fifty years of feminism has been of this ilk; women (and many men) doing what felt right to them. As I have noted numerous times, however, feeling right doesn't make it right. At this stage, I will simply note that the principle of prevention of power plays is an important rule for effective decision making. I will have more to say later about how to work with this principle in practice.

We have now identified the stakeholders and the principles of a fair and equitable decision process, and that completes the general framework. Let's proceed now to consider how practical issues and specific circumstances modify or customize the general framework.

There are two types here. The first is primarily about modifying the weight given to the various stakeholders. If the pregnancy is the result of a rape of the mother, for instance, then the father's rights as a stakeholder are eliminated. Similarly, if the pregnancy is in an intact family that will support the baby if it is carried to term, or if it will be given up for adoption, then society's role as a stakeholder, which is predicated on having an obligation for financial support of the child and/or mother, falls to zero. If the fetus is found to have a genetic disorder which reduces its viability or its prospects for a happy life, then its "right to life" stake is reduced. If there are medical complications in which carrying the baby to term would threaten the life or health of the mother, then the decision becomes more weighted towards abortion, and only a strong determination on the part of both parents should prevail over that bias.

Additionally, participation in such a decision process is voluntary – if any party does not want to participate (such as the father), he effectively abandons any control over the process. The interests of society and of the fetus would be represented by delegates,

The second way that practical considerations modify the general framework is about practical logistics. If an abortion decision is to be made, there is strictly limited time in which to make it. Perhaps the father cannot be readily identified or found. Perhaps medical issues abbreviate the time available. Perhaps one of the parties has limited availability, or there are geographical challenges. Such complicating factors are difficult to deal with in a way that is fair to all, and it is probably impossible to say in a general way what should be done about them. As with many human issues, there is no general answer; wisdom is not formulaic. If there is limited time to reach agreement, then there is limited time, and the process that is put in place should reflect this urgency. Geographical challenges can often be reduced with technology. With good intent, adequate solutions can be found to logistics challenges.

We have now put in place most of the structure, the process to support a good decision. In part three of the process, we get to the content, which takes the form of dialogue among the stakeholders. It is ultimately up to the participants, but I suggest that a mediated dialogue, assisted and moderated by a skilled and experienced mediator, be the general rule. The mediator is not a stakeholder and does not have any personal input into the decision, his or her role is simply to assist the participants in reaching an effective and equitable, a wise decision. A particular responsibility of a mediator is to recognize and prevent the use of power plays by any participant, indeed to prevent any process that would divert or subvert a healthy dialogue.

In *The Different Drum: Community Building and Peace*, M. Scott Peck described a process by which a group can reach a place of wisdom. He called it community building, and he spent some time describing the stages. Unsurprisingly, the stages bear a resemblance to the stages of spiritual growth in my own model described in chapter six. The first stage he calls pseudocommunity. It is where people are simply being polite with each other, getting along by going along, i.e., by not saying anything difficult or potentially offensive. They are pretending to be in good relationship with each other but it's all superficial, with their differences hidden from each other. His second stage is called chaos. It's where people have abandoned the pretence of agreement and are expressing their real opinions, but in hostile and accusatory terms. It looks like a descent from pseudocommunity, since it's aggressive and judgmental, but it's actually healthier because it's more honest. In the chaos stage there is truth telling, but no reconciliation, no community. Both of these stages are related to my stage 2, denial.

Peck's third stage he calls emptiness. It's where people turn their honesty spotlight on themselves and confess their judgments, their fears, their shame and insecurity. It corresponds closely with my own stage three, recovery. It is this difficult and painful process, he says, that leads to the final stage, which he calls community. A group in community is one where respect and empathy for others is integrated with accountability and responsibility. It corresponds with my stage 4, wisdom.

Peck argues that a motivated group can move all the way from pseudocommunity to community in just hours or at most a few days. He has personally led many such groups, and he founded an organization dedicated to just such work. I can personally vouch for the power of this process, as I brought one of his community building facilitators to my own work group at a Canadian telecom company in 1992. Our group of a dozen managers reached community in three days of intense dialogue.

A group that has achieved community is a powerful, effective and wise decision making body. I can think of no better process for a small group to approach the making of high stakes decisions like whether or not to abort a fetus. With a good facilitator, and a degree of willingness in the participants, a small group (usually no more than four – the mother, the father, and the delegates for society and for the fetus) could be expected to reach a wise decision, one well considered and agreed to by all, within a day or two, three at the most. Of course, determined intransigence by any party can defeat such a process, but I

believe that it is hard to remain unreasonably intransigent in the face of earnest, informed goodwill on the part of other participants. If a person who is locked into a position can be persuaded to express the fears that lie behind their intransigence, then groups can usually find ways to address those fears while also accommodating the real needs of others. This process really works.

Not only does this process work well for reaching wise, balanced decisions about difficult issues, but it also has the effect of growing us up. The subjective experience of being in community is almost always one of joy – deep and memorable joy as we surrender our individual focus, perhaps for the first time, to the wisdom of a group.

The experience of being genuinely loved within a group, of having a group care deeply about meeting our personal needs, is life-changing. I still remember the first time it happened for me, about twenty five years ago. I was in a men's group that had been meeting for a couple of years, and we were considering whether to admit two new members. We "interviewed" the two men, and then invited them to remain present in the group while we discussed whether to admit them permanently. I argued strongly against admitting them, I don't remember my reasons now, but they persuaded me fully. The group decided to accept the new members – and I felt its wisdom in this. I still felt the legitimacy of all of my individual arguments against the decision, but I somehow knew that the group was smarter, wiser than I was. It was a profound moment of transcendence, when I felt the wisdom of the group without understanding it. It was intensely exciting to me. I remember that I sent an email to the other members about how I felt, how moved I was by the experience of surrendering to the wisdom of the group. It was an experience of transcending the self/other duality, I know now, and it was my first experience of the joy, the intense rightness of that process.

The process that I have described above has this power because it is dualistically balanced itself. It is balanced on the self/other dimension, on the truth/love dimension, and on the accountability/compassion dimension. It is, in fact, a truth and reconciliation process, giving equal weight to truth telling and to loving respect for each participant. A group like this is willing to wrestle honestly with the issues, and to care genuinely about each participant, for as long as it takes to find the solution that works best for all. The process of loving each other, listening carefully and speaking thoughtfully, grounded in truth about the issues, is a process that blesses each person involved.

I recommend this process for all really tough decisions where choices need to be made that have profound effects on the lives of several people. For instance, deciding on custody, child support and alimony following a divorce would be well suited to this process, which would involve all family members, including non-infant children. We need to find ways to do better than the win/lose protocol that rules in family court and that almost always results in lasting resentment and discord. The community building process offers a means for people's fears to be heard, respected and addressed, and an opportunity for them to co-create a solution that will work for everyone.

i George Jonas, "Abortion is a Parent's Decision, not the Government's," *National Post*, Canada, Feb. 15, 2014.