

It's Personal

JOANNA WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE



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Dear Friend,

During a rainy, cold morning in February at Kennesaw State University (KSU), "Paige" made eye contact with me and asked if she could sign our "Should Abortion Remain Legal?" poll question. Given the weather, I was surprised that she wanted to weigh in without any prompting from me. It was so rainy that we had put our poll signature notebooks away, but she stayed to talk with me anyway.

Over the course of the next several minutes, Paige shared with me that she believed women should have access to legal abortion. While she said she respected my efforts to share my position, she was firm in claiming that a woman's right to her body entails the right to an abortion.



JFA mentor Jon Wagner interacts with a University of Georgia (UGA) student as high school trainees listen in. The UGA Students for Life Club president (far right) said it "did his heart good" to see the nearly 20 high schoolers we brought to his campus this February creating conversations about abortion with his peers.

In the same way that we train our volunteers, I promptly built what common ground I could, making it clear that our bodies are indeed valuable, and that I think women's rights are very important. It seemed to me, however, that Paige was missing the central question in the discussion of the morality and legality of abortion: "What is the unborn?" After all, could our own rights possibly extend so far as to allow the killing of another innocent human being?

We discussed this point for some time, but Paige stood firm. From what I remember of the conversation, she held a strict bodily rights position, asserting that even if the unborn is an equally valuable human being, a woman can kill him anyway because the child is *in* her body. In the midst of our discussion about bodily rights, she added the question of abortion in the case of rape. As I began to answer her questions, I was reminded of something that is so easy to forget. This discussion about abortion and women's rights is rarely theoretical. For most people, it is profoundly personal.

When Paige brought up rape, I took a break from my previous line of reasoning. The best I could, I instead tried to express my deep abhorrence regarding rape. (I don't think it's possible to express this fully enough.) I shared that, as an advocate for the value of all human beings, I am angered by the fact that one human being would ever force himself on another, completely disregarding her dignity.

"That never, ever should have happened to you. Never. I am so sorry."

I am thankful that I did not side-step this critical moment of acknowledging the horror of rape, because right after I did, Paige said, "Two years ago, when I was seventeen, I was raped." Tears began to flood into her eyes, and she quickly apologized for crying.

"Please don't apologize," I said. "You have every right to cry. That never, ever should have happened to you. *Never*. I am so sorry." I turned to comfort her, and she responded by giving me a big hug. "Thank you. Thank you," she said.



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It wasn't long after that that Paige had to leave. But before going, she expressed more than once that she was very grateful for the conversation.

As she walked away, I stood dumbfounded... Dumbfounded that our conversation had been meaningful to her (after all, I hadn't really persuaded her) and dumbfounded that yet another beautiful human being I'd met on a JFA outreach event was a victim of the horror of rape. I've been increasingly struck by how many people on U.S. university campuses have been raped. This violence is completely unacceptable.



Explaining to a KSU international student how abortions are performed

As I've reflected on my conversation with Paige, a few things have continued to strike me as significant. I hope they can help you in your conversations about abortion and women's rights:

1) Be aware that a person who advocates for abortion based on bodily rights *may* be someone like Paige – someone who has had an experience of her own bodily rights being severely violated.

This issue of the violation of bodily rights is extremely personal for many people. I am not advocating granting abortion rights (the right to do violence to an unborn human being) to those who have themselves experienced violence. Being aware of this possible dynamic in a conversation, however, can help you better understand the person you are talking to so that you can better care for him or her.

2) We can't make a compelling case for the dignity of the unborn if we bypass the dignity of the person with whom we are speaking.

If someone has experienced rape or abuse, not taking time to express how evil rape is communicates a lack of regard for human value in general and a lack of regard for this person in particular. Even if someone hasn't experienced rape or abuse, if we are not gentle or willing to listen, we can also seriously compromise our message of the value of all human beings. With our manner, we must reflect human value back to all people, including those who disagree with us.

3) Consider how to best minister to the person in front of you *before* making an intellectual argument against abortion in the case of rape.

What about the moral question of whether or not it is acceptable to obtain an abortion in the case of rape? In a future newsletter, I hope to explain my view, that abortion isn't justified in the case of rape. But for most pro-life advocates, just holding our tongues for even a few seconds before giving an intellectual response is very difficult. From my experience, this lack of self-control can destroy a conversation very quickly. We have to think first about focusing on the victim of rape.

In my conversation with Paige, my sense was that, in that moment, she needed me to simply listen to her and identify with her pain. As I said before, how could she have been persuaded of the value of the unborn if I had ignored her value (by ignoring the horrendous thing that had happened to her)? If I'd had more time, I might have discussed the intellectual case with her, but only if it had seemed helpful to her. We don't want to compromise truth, but we also don't want to unintentionally communicate falsehood by being so laser-focused on one piece of truth (the value of the unborn) that the person in front of us is devalued in the process.

Please pray for Paige. She is still hurting. Please pray that our conversation would plant seeds in her life, not only of seeing the value of the unborn, but also of finding the peace that can only come from Jesus himself. And of course, thank you for your support which makes it possible for me to have conversations across the country like the one I had with Paige.

Let's end the violence,

Joanna