



Don't Judge a Book...

A Classic Phrase Proves True at the Free Speech Board



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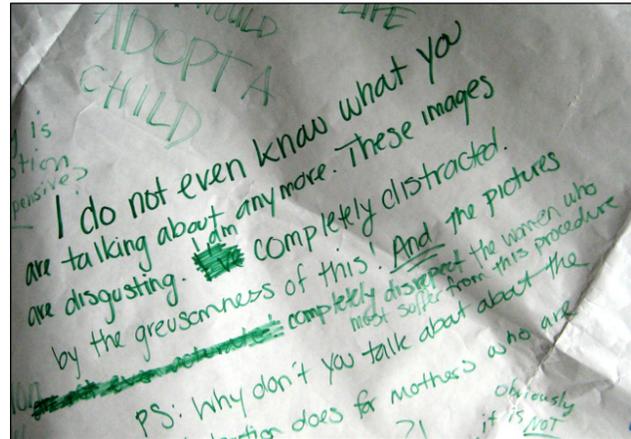
STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

APRIL/MAY 2009

Dear Friends,

It was the way she wrote. The way she held her head. I wasn't eager to start a conversation.

I did it anyway. "I saw what you wrote. May I ask you a question?" Although she appeared angry as she was writing, the young woman seemed relaxed when she turned to face me. She began to clarify. Mentally, I was preparing to defend the photo accuracy, but I didn't need to. She went back to the board virtually mid-sentence and changed what she wrote (right).



As the conversation continued, I learned that the young woman, "Eva," was at the University of Colorado (Boulder) to study philosophy. I wasn't surprised then, when I made a reference to "the truth" later in the conversation and she said she "didn't believe in truth." "Are you making an *ontological* or *epistemological* claim?" I asked. She clarified that her concern was epistemological. Truth might exist, but even if it does, we can't know for sure. (See sidebar for an explanation.)

Like many students, philosophers and otherwise, Eva was proudly skeptical. I offered this challenge: "Why should I take your skepticism seriously?" She clarified that she didn't think I should. She was skeptical even about her skepticism.

We talked for the better part of an hour. At the end of the conversation Eva said, "It was an absolute pleasure talking to you."

This interaction illustrates at least three ways we can miss an opportunity God has for us: (1) First, decide whether the person you are about to meet will respond favorably to your message. In other words, judge a book by its cover. (2) Then, because you're so sure this person is not someone who will respond well, focus on how you don't want to talk to her. You're really sure you don't want to "read the book"... for so many reasons. In short, focus on yourself. (3) Finally, give up useful tools like graphic pictures at the slightest hint of opposition. Again, seek comfort for yourself.

Eva showed me how each of these strategies robs us of the joy of partnering with God in His work. The beginning of this conversation was a near-disaster. *It almost never happened.* I was sure Eva would not be a good person to talk to. My *pre-judgment* was a *mis-judgment*. By asking clarifying questions, I found out who Eva was. Even though I thought I had heard it all, I hadn't yet heard from her.

Before the interaction, I was mostly concerned about my own fear of rejection or possible discomfort, but after God gave me the courage (or,

"Ontological" vs. "Epistemological"

Eva said she didn't believe in truth. If she meant this **ontologically**, one might paraphrase her statement like this: "There are no statements that correspond to reality" or, perhaps, "There is no reality." If she meant it **epistemologically** (much more common), one might paraphrase her statement like this: "There might be statements that correspond to reality, but you can never really know if they do." To find out which she meant I had to ask. But I only knew what to ask because I had these categories in mind prior to our conversation. That's the value of study!

Note: I only used these terms with Eva because I knew she was a philosophy student. For others, I might clarify the same concepts, but without the off-putting philosophical jargon. That jargon functions as helpful shorthand for specialists, but isn't helpful to non-specialists.

perhaps, forced me because my job includes modeling for others!) to simply start a conversation, I realized that Eva is worth setting those things aside. Regardless of my needs, she could benefit from a conversation. Her initial concern about graphic pictures dissolved after I spent time in dialogue with her. Far from distracting, the pictures were a catalyst for both of us to think hard about our worldviews.

Many Christians struggle with this: *Will we walk by faith or by sight?* Faith, of course, isn't blind leaps. It's placing our trust in what we have good reason to believe is so. In this case, I have good reason to believe God is real and is at work in our interactions. Scripture teaches this. Past experience confirms it. Our staff and I have seen God work through thousands of conversations with people at the Exhibit and Free Speech Board. Sometimes it's years later when we see how He's been at work.

With all this evidence, still it's difficult to actively place that trust. Simple human weakness or schemes of the enemy deceive us to turn inward and let fear of failure or fear of discomfort keep us from taking a step to talk to someone. That's why we at Justice For All make outreach a priority with our students. It forces all of us to walk by faith and see God work through us.

There's a danger in telling a story like my interaction with Eva. Because of the positive ending, some readers will assume that the point is that if you simply start a conversation and use clarifying questions, you will always have a good result. I could easily have picked another story, though, that went equally well (from an eternal perspective), but seemed completely flawed (from a human perspective). If we focus on results, we will only take those opportunities that appear from a human perspective to go well. Isn't this just another form of being focused on ourselves, instead of being focused on the value and need the other person has?

What now? Let's look for opportunities to talk to people we don't know (see above). You may think the conversation you're starting has no potential, but with God at work, you're likely to be surprised.

Partnering with You,

Stephen

Stephen Wagner



Don't Talk to Strangers?

For a turn-key opportunity to talk to people like Eva, join us for a Justice For All Exhibit Outreach, featuring easy-to-use dialogue tools like the Free Speech Board. We'll be in the Southern California area in mid-May, for all of you who are within striking distance (Californians, see the enclosed flier). We'll also be in Kansas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma in the fall of 2009. Not close by? Why not take a mission trip to one of these JFA Outreaches? We'd love to have you join us. Call the Justice For All office at 800-281-6426.

Recent and Upcoming Events

Please pray! See all past and future scheduled events at www.stephenmwagner.com (upper right-hand corner link)

- 4/4 Reaching Hearts and Minds on Abortion, Ohio Students for Life Conference (Steubenville, OH) – **60 attended!**
- 4/6 Common Ground Without Compromise, University of Pittsburgh Students for Life (Pittsburgh, PA) – **25 attended!**
- 4/7 Pro-Life 101, Clarion University Students for Life (Clarion, PA) – **14 attended!**
- 4/7 Is Abortion a Legal Right or Moral Wrong?, Open Forum, Clarion University SFL (Clarion, PA) – **80 attended!**
- 4/13 ADD, Seminar, Focus on the Family Institute (Colorado Springs, CO) – **76 trained!**
- 4/13 ADD, Seminar, Calvary Bible Church (community training for University of Colorado), (Boulder, CO) – **15 trained!**
- 4/15-16 ADD, Campus Exhibit Practicum, University of Colorado (Boulder, CO)
- 4/18 Unborn in the USA, Dessert Event hosted by the Wilsons (Colorado Springs, CO) – **10 attended!**
- 5/6-7 What Is It?, Presentations to the Juniors at Kapuan Mt. Carmel Catholic High School (Wichita, KS) – **200 attended!**
- 5/16-29 Various CA Events, including Ventura, Pasadena City College, and UC San Diego (See www.stephenmwagner.com)

Help Steve train pro-life advocates to engage those who disagree!

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