

# Earn Trust First...Then Defend the Unborn

*The Key to Discussing Abortion with Strangers*



STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY LETTER

REPRINT: SEPTEMBER 2004



*Note: This is a reformatted version of the letter I sent to supporters in September 2004 while working at Stand to Reason ([www.str.org](http://www.str.org)).*

Dear Friend,

“When did you begin?” The question fell into the conversation like an avalanche on a mountain village, creating tension and calm all at once. I looked straight into her eyes and she reciprocated with a steady gaze, smiling but pondering. Silence.

I was sitting on a bench at Costco. Five hours earlier, I was told my tire rotation would be complete in three hours. I had been frustrated, but now that I was in a conversation about abortion with a total stranger (I'll call her Michelle), I would have paid Costco to stall my car for another hour. How did I have the opportunity to talk with this young professional woman? I created conversation like any normal person.

As I settled onto the bench inside Costco, I asked, “How long have you been waiting?” and followed up with a number of normal questions that established a common ground between us. This trust-building step through the mundane is critical if you want to earn an opportunity to talk about serious issues like abortion. Before ever discussing abortion, we discussed car mechanics, shopping, the detrimental effects of television and cell phones, the president, the war in Iraq, and Michelle's job working as a script supervisor for television commercials.

When talking with strangers, I follow a simple principle: *Agree whenever possible*. Here's why this is important: It shows I am a normal person who is not easily categorized and who is similar in many ways to the person I'm trying to win. It also makes things more comfortable for everyone. This allows me much more opportunity to present the pro-life position to receptive ears.

Another thing helped propel the conversation forward. I was holding *The Death of Innocence*, a book about the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955. When she asked about it, I described how Emmett's murder and his mother's open-casket display of his disfigured body sparked the civil rights movement. With wide eyes, Michelle responded that the murder represented “a lack of evolution.” We agreed that at least this human rights abuse was appalling. More common ground on an important matter.

Since Michelle worked in television but claimed she avoids watching, we discussed the effect that television has on the ability to focus. I mentioned a current book I am reading, *A Defense of Abortion* by David Boonin (a professor at Boulder), and joked that sometimes I feel like I have ADD when I have trouble holding his fine-grained distinctions in mind for many pages. This was just a passing reference to abortion, but it proved to be the key that opened a door to make the case for the unborn. After many questions from me, she asked one of her own: “You mentioned this professor from Boulder. Are you a student? What do you do?”

Broaching my view discreetly, I said, “I do lectures and training on abortion.” I continued, “I also speak on embryo research...Boonin's book is really the best defense of abortion to come out in 30 years, and it's really just an attempt to show that the pro-lifers' arguments don't hold up.” She asked, “What are their arguments?”



JUSTICE FOR ALL — TRAINING THOUSANDS TO MAKE ABORTION UNTHINKABLE FOR MILLIONS, ONE PERSON AT A TIME.

113 N. MARTINSON, WICHITA, KANSAS, 67203 316.683.6426 WEB: [WWW.JFAWEB.ORG](http://WWW.JFAWEB.ORG) BLOG: [WWW.HBMM.NET](http://WWW.HBMM.NET) [JFA@JFAWEB.ORG](mailto:JFA@JFAWEB.ORG)

I explained the pro-life position in the third-person, as if I were a pro-choice professor: “Pro-lifers would say, and even Boonin agrees, that the unborn from conception is a living whole human organism, a human being. Pro-lifers would point out further that the unborn shouldn’t be disqualified for reasons like it’s too small, or because it’s less developed, or because it is in the wrong environment or because it’s too dependent.” (Some of you recognize this as the SLED Test.) Then I used Michelle and me as examples: “If I’m taller than you, it doesn’t give me more value, does it? And if your two-year-old niece is less developed than you, we wouldn’t say she is less valuable, right? You and I may change locations, but it doesn’t change who we are, does it? And pro-lifers would say that even though the unborn is dependent only on the mother, that it is still valuable. After all, if a drowning toddler was dependent only on you to save it, what would you do?” She replied, “I would save him.” I continued, “So the unborn’s dependency, according to pro-lifers, doesn’t change its value.”

As I spoke she was engaged in each point, thinking through the questions I was raising, and she agreed with much of the pro-life position. And when I said, “And pro-choice philosophers would respond that it is self-awareness that makes humans valuable,” we both agreed that there are clear cases of people who lack self-awareness (infants, reversibly comatose) who would be excluded by that criterion.

But the agreement stopped there. The common ground I had carefully built now allowed her to be candid about some of her core beliefs and we had a fruitful dialogue. She finally said, “I think women should have a choice.” I asked her to explain this and she reiterated her belief that early embryos are not valuable human beings. So I asked another question, “Michelle, when did you begin?”

She stared directly at me, and after about 20 seconds said, “I don’t know what to say. I’ve never thought about it.” I pressed the point. “Does it make sense to think of yourself as once being a zygote?” She was silent. “That makes sense, doesn’t it? But does it make sense to think of yourself as a sperm cell?” She sat silently, thinking.

The conversation became more tense as she asked me to reveal other aspects of my pro-life views, but the way I listened to her first helped me earn Michelle’s trust to listen to me. As I was summoned to get my car, I asked a final question: “Since we disagree, would you at least say what I’ve said is reasonable? Or would you say I’m a right-wing bigot?” She replied, “Oh, I know you’re not that.” She took my card, smiled, and waved as I drove away. I pray that she’ll continue the conversation with me via email.

Even though parents warn children never to talk to strangers, this is one of the main purposes of the work you support each month: we train pro-lifers to be ready to engage anyone in any situation. But this story shows that anyone, *especially you* who support a pro-life trainer, can weave your pro-life views into everyday situations. With the topic of embryonic stem cell research dominating the political arena this fall, there’s no better time to speak up.

Do you feel prepared for the task? If not, contact me and I’ll make sure you have the tools you need to make a confident case when you strike up a conversation. Effective ambassadors for Christ can be prepared in season and out – and even at Costco.

Ready at all times,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steve Wagner'.

Steve Wagner