



Dear Friend,

She was way off, but she was right on.

The JFA Team and I were working hard to train the students at the Focus Leadership Institute (FLI) in April. During a break, one of my stellar trainers, Rebecca Haschke, came over to me looking worried. "I haven't gotten any of the sections done. My group is asking a lot of good questions and I've been trying to help them work through each one. We're way behind. Is that okay?"

A little background: During the JFA training seminar, different JFA speakers present short lectures and then I rely on each JFA staff person to mentor a small group in practicing the new dialogue skills we've just discussed. Rebecca was confessing that she had completely failed in this task.

"The seminar structure is here to serve the people," I reassured her. "The people aren't here to serve the structure."

It was good that Rebecca took the time she did, especially because of one of the young women in her group named Lizzie. Like the Bereans two millennia ago (see [Acts 17:10-12](#)), Lizzie was determined to test every word we said in that seminar.

Lizzie wasn't alone. Many of the students we were training had deep misgivings about showing graphic pictures in public. When we got to the University of Northern Colorado for outreach, a few decided not to participate at all. They played Frisbee instead.

Lizzie didn't like our method either, but she approached the outreach very differently. She decided to jump in and talk to as many people as she could during the two days at UNC. A bit like the rescue worker who wades through knee-deep mud to find hurricane victims, Lizzie decided to tolerate the negatives for the good she could accomplish. She was determined to use an Exhibit she didn't particularly like to reach out to the lost people God loves.

It wasn't easy. In Lizzie's last conversation, she talked to a woman who said she had an abortion at eight weeks. The Exhibit pictures reminded her of the experience, and she unloaded her pain on Lizzie. Lizzie listened to this woman share her raw emotion, and when the time was right, Lizzie reminded her to remember Christ in the process. (The woman came from a Christian family.) Lizzie said, "After praying with [her], we embraced like we had been friends for years." As the woman went to class, Lizzie broke down sobbing. A few minutes later, as the group gathered to debrief the day, she left the room and broke down again. She was overwhelmed with concern for this hurting person she had grown to love. *(See the reverse. →)*



Above, early in the day at the University of Northern Colorado, Lizzie and I conference about the reasons women have abortions. Below, Lizzie listens to a UNC student.



The FLI students came with two very different approaches to ministry on campus that day. One approach said, “Until we have a perfect tool and can be sure we won’t unnecessarily offend anyone, I’m not going to do anything to help women hurting from abortion.” Lizzie’s alternative said, “I can’t wait for the perfect tool to come along. I’m going to go and comfort some people now.”

When I preached at Providence Community Church on Mother’s Day, I examined the story of Jesus telling the Good Samaritan parable. (You can hear my message by searching “[Providence Community Church of Houston](#)” on iTunes. Find the May 9, 2010 sermon.) The parable exposes those two same approaches to the man left for dead on the road to Jericho. As my colleague Gregg Cunningham has pointed out, two very pious people in the parable probably *felt* pity. Only one, the Samaritan, *took* pity on the man forgotten and left for dead.

The woman Lizzie went out to meet is one of the forgotten mothers on the road to Jericho. Some of these mothers had abortions when they really would have preferred not to. Some live now in a persistent aching pain because the experience is unresolved – they haven’t processed it. As my counselor once said, “They haven’t metabolized the experience.”

In the debate we often have about whether it’s right to put up graphic pictures, I point out that if someone can give me an alternative that draws as many people who need to dialogue about abortion but offends fewer, I’ll gladly abandon the graphic Exhibit. The truth is, when I make this genuine offer, I rarely get any alternative ideas at all. Yes, using pictures that offend is a messy process. Sometimes people you want to help walk by in disgust. Sometimes they avoid you and cry uncontrollably in private. But sometimes a woman who needs to be comforted by Christ stands motionless in front of this wall of bad news and begins to process the horror of her past. She’s finally sharing her secret, but only when someone like Lizzie decides to listen.

Lizzie’s eager efforts at the Justice For All Exhibit force us to ask ourselves, “Am I willing to get my hands dirty to bring Christ’s comfort to these forgotten women who are hurting?” The Exhibit with its controversial pictures is only a metaphor for all of the messy circumstances in which we find ourselves each week when we can have a conversation about abortion...or not.

The conversation about abortion isn’t convenient, and the truth about abortion can stir up complex emotions. There are risks. Will I fail to help this person? What if I make her feel bad?

Imagine that the hurricane rescue worker decides to wait until he can do his rescuing without getting dirty. We would think he was not a very good rescuer, to say the least. Imagine the dad who is crippled from joining his mirth-making daughter in the mud because he’s worried about his clothes. We would think he needs to loosen up. We know that a good rescuer tolerates the negatives because saving people is so important. And the good dad sits in the mud with his daughter because she is worth it.

I think God has the same set of priorities in mind when he looks at the forgotten mothers on the road to Jericho – the women struggling with past abortions. He won’t wait for the perfect Exhibit to seek to reach them. We can’t wait either. Each one is worth our best attempts to reach them now.

In Search of...
The Perfect Dialogue Tool

The perfect tool turns out not to be a sign or book or free speech board or poll table. It’s a *person* – a person with intellectual and relational skills that help others rethink and process. A person who can adapt to the exact needs of each unique human being.

That’s why we haven’t created a new Exhibit in ten years. We’ve been focusing on creating a training program to produce better humans – people like Lizzie.

While we think it’s important to use the Exhibit and other tools we have right now, though, we *are* constantly seeking better ways to draw people to dialogue. That’s why we are creating many new tools before the end of the year. We’re starting this summer with new panel designs. We’ll print them in smaller versions that will allow us to print them more cheaply and test them on campus.

In Christ,
Stephen

PS: To learn to start a dialogue about abortion with a friend, contact me: [facebook.com/steve.wagner](https://www.facebook.com/steve.wagner).

Help Steve train pro-life advocates to meet the needs of each student!
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