

# Personal Experience

*If We Don't Have It, Do We Have Authority to Speak?*



STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

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Dear Friend,

He began by asking forgiveness for not being well-spoken. Then he proceeded to speak eloquently anyway.

*You all see me. You all see the apparatus on my legs. I was born with something called...myelomeningocele, also known as spina bifida... Let me give you something to think about. There are a lot of cases where an unborn child happens to be disabled – they [have] some kind of a congenital deformity like spina bifida, Down syndrome, [and] other kinds of disabilities. These parents are looking for, basically, perfection. They want a perfect child. I hate to burst your bubble, but there is no such thing as perfection...and there never will be. So, why expect that from an unborn child? I mean, look at me: I'm 20 years old. I have an I.Q. of 145. I live a great life. I was adopted, but that was probably the best thing my biological mother could ever do for me.*

For some people, this gentleman did more in two minutes to persuade than I can do in two hours. Why? He has a personal experience. He has authority to speak on the topic because he appears to have “been there,” a man who knows the stakes in the abortion debate first-hand. After all, [some kids](#) diagnosed with spina bifida *in utero* are killed by abortion. It could have been him.



This is unfortunate in one sense. Personal experience doesn't guarantee clear thinking. In many cases, it clouds it. Our personal experiences may contribute nothing to our understanding of the facts (Is the unborn a human being? Is the pregnant woman a mother?), our assessment of how we should act regarding those facts (morality), or how we should structure society based on those facts (law). Still, personal experience carries a lot of weight with people. And even if it's unfortunate that it gives some people more authority to speak on a topic than their *ideas or arguments* warrant, we're stuck with this state of affairs. We might as well recognize the power of personal stories and find ways to harness their power that complement (and don't compromise) our argument.

As we tell stories, we need to be aware that our audience may take more from them than we intend. With the story above, the audience may have concluded that this is a compelling argument against legal abortion. The fact that abortion takes a person's good future away from him may be an additional reason not to keep abortion legal, but the future happiness of the child is not essential to our argument. In contrast to this gentleman, consider the unborn children (with or without spina bifida) who are destined to live an unhappy life. They still deserve human rights. On the most basic level, then, abortion is wrong because it kills a human being, not because it kills a *happy, functionally worthwhile* human being.

It's undeniable, though, that personal stories help people move arguments from the head to the heart. That's the proper function of stories. Instead of using them *in place of* an argument, we should use them *to illustrate or help people see the practical value of* our arguments. (Continued →)



My friend Lori Navrodtzke shares her story of how abortion was very damaging to her life. (Read Lori's story in [my March newsletter](#).) Lori is careful not to communicate that the negative effect abortion had on her life is the primary reason abortion is wrong or should be illegal. (If it were, then what would we say to the thousands of women with personal stories of how their abortions had no negative effects on them?) But Lori's story helps people connect emotionally to the truth of the pro-life position in a way that solid arguments never could on their own.

Perhaps you're like me, though, and you say, "I don't have a personal story. I haven't had an abortion, helped someone get an abortion, been an unwanted child at risk for abortion, or been a victim of rape. My mother didn't abort my sibling, I'm not adopted, and I'm not disabled." That's how I feel. I was born into a family with two loving parents and six siblings, and I watched the births of some of my brothers and sisters. I don't have a dramatic story.

Or do I? I read somewhere in G.K. Chesterton's works recently (I can't find where) something like, "People think that it's news that someone killed someone or had an accident or that there was an incident in the street, but the real news is that for so many people things went on yesterday *completely without incident*." In other words, our non-story is actually a story of the work of a providential God giving us mercy – mercy from the stories other people have had to endure creating. So, you and I might look to some of the ways we've avoided abortion, experienced freedom from the sins that lead to unwanted pregnancy, and watched God's plan for family unfold as it was intended, and we might begin using those stories in our conversations to awaken in our listener a desire for God.

**Stories from personal experience carry a lot of weight. But even if we just carefully re-tell personal stories we can help people see we're not merely theorizing from an "ivory tower."**

It's undeniable, though, that the experience of being personally affected is powerful in a different way than the story of not-being-personally-affected. For those of us without personal stories related to abortion, then, I have two pieces of counsel: First, become a listener. Second, become a good story *re*-teller.

I became a listener when I forced myself to start talking to people who disagree with me. There's no easier way for you to do this than to [join us for a JFA outreach missions trip](#) (JFA can help you fundraise). It's tailor-made for you to be able to start dialogue on abortion. I guarantee that after one day of outreach with us, you *will* have your own personal story relating to abortion.

You'll also hear other people's personal stories – stories you can *re*-tell. Those stories, rightly situated in your pro-life apologetic, can sometimes help people see that you're willing to find common ground and understand the opposing perspective. Those stories, like the story at the beginning of this letter, can illustrate the personal impact of the issue. In some cases, they can also help illustrate your argument, moving it from the arena of the head to the arena of the heart.

Perhaps you can't come to a campus outreach. But you *can* hear the dialogue and stories from a JFA outreach. I've just posted the audio for over eighty minutes of open mic dialogue between me and students from UTSA, recorded on March 30, 2011. Some of those students shared personal stories. See [the June 7 post at www.hbmm.net](#) for the complete dialogue in one audio file, sixteen shorter audio files for easier listening, and a few notes. Thanks for partnering with me to make my work creating dialogue like this possible. And thanks for helping me create stories worth telling.

In Christ,

Stephen

See [www.hbmm.net \(June 7 post\)](#) to hear the gentlemen's moving comment and the rest of the UTSA Open Mic session (over 80 minutes of interactive discussion divided into short segments).