

REMEMBERING THOMAS

Phil McCombs

This year's March for Life, in which 45,000 abortion opponents picketed the Supreme Court, didn't have the emotional impact on me that these events often do. I was on my way out of town on business and scarcely noticed.

Looking at news reports later, it seemed that everyone had been on his or her best behavior. The abortion opponents were making it plain that they oppose the use of violence to close clinics. The counter-demonstrations by abortion rights advocates, as we're careful to call them, were rare.

It's all a little confusing to me. I don't know anyone who—in his or her heart—doesn't hate abortion. And it seems odd to see Christian conservatives so eager to force their will through the armed authority of the state when they already have at hand the far more powerful weapon of prayer.

Anyway, I like prayer. It's all I have left.
And pain.

When the abortion was performed, I was out of town on business too. I made sure of that. Whatever physical, emotional and spiritual agony the woman suffered, I was not by her side to support her. I turned my face away. My behavior was in all respects craven, immoral.

For some instinctual reason, or just imaginatively, I've come to believe that it was a boy, a son whom I wanted killed because, at the time, his existence would have inconvenienced me. I'd had my fun. He didn't fit into my plans.

His name, which is carved on my heart, was Thomas.

My feelings of responsibility and guilt are undiminished by the fact that the woman had full legal authority to make the decision on her own, either way, without consulting me or even informing me. In fact, she consulted in an open fashion reflecting our shared responsibility, and I could have made a strong case for having the child. Instead, I urged her along the path of death.

And skipped town.

It's not a lot of help, either—emotionally or spiritually—that the high priests of the American judiciary have put their A-OK on this particular form of what I personally have come to regard as the slaughter of innocents. After all, it's the task of government to decide whom we may or must kill, and not necessarily to provide therapeutic services afterward. In the Army I remember being trained at public expense in the "spirit of the bayonet," which is, simply put, "to kill." The spirit of abortion is the same, in my view, though the enemy isn't shooting back.

I feel like a murderer—which isn't to say that I blame anyone else, or think anyone else is a murderer.

It's just the way I feel, and all the rationalizations in the world haven't changed this. I still grieve for little Thomas. It is an ocean of grief. From somewhere in the distant past I remember the phrase from Shakespeare, "the multitudinous seas incarnadine."

When I go up to the river on vacation this summer, he won't be going boating with me on the lovely old wooden runabout that I can't really afford to put in the water but can't bring myself to discard, either.

He won't be lying on the grass by the tent at night, looking at the starry sky and saying, "What's that one called, Dad?"

Because there was no room on the Earth for Thomas.
He's dead.

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The latest numbers show abortions in America have been running at about 1.5 million annually. That's a lot of pain.

Secular men's groups have tended to be focused on the "no say, no pay" issue. "These men feel raped," says Mel Feit of the National Center for Men. "They lose everything they worked for all their lives. In many cases they had an agreement with the woman not to have a baby and when she changes her mind they call me up and say, 'How can she do this to me? How can she get away with it?'" Feit plans to bring suit in federal court.

I'm more interested in the traumatic pain that many men, as well as women, often feel after an abortion. A healing process of recognition, grieving and ultimately forgiveness is needed.

"There's a lot of ambivalence for men when they get in touch with their pain," says Eileen C. Marx, formerly communications director for Cardinal James A. Hickey of Washington and now a columnist for Catholic publications. "They didn't have the physical pregnancy, so often they feel they're not entitled to the feelings of sadness and anger and guilt and loss that women often feel."

She tells of one man, a friend, whose wife had an abortion. "He pleaded with her not to have it. He said his parents would raise the child, or they could put it up for adoption. The marriage broke up as a result of the abortion and other issues. He was really devastated by the experience."

Marx has recently written about a post-abortion healing ministry called Project Rachel, in which more men are becoming involved—husbands, boyfriends and even grandfathers. There are 100 Project Rachel branches, including one in Washington.

I found it helpful just talking to Marx, a caring person, on the phone, though it was a little tough when she mentioned being pregnant and hearing the heartbeat and feeling "this wonderful celebration of life inside you."

She said not to be too hard on myself, that healing is about forgiveness and God forgives me.

I said sure, that's right, but some things are still hard.

Like looking in the mirror.

Phil McCombs is a Washington Post staff writer. ©1995, The Washington Post. Reprinted with permission.



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