

November 1981

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Recommended Citation

De Marco, Donald (1981) "The Child in the Silent Walk," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 48: No. 4, Article 9.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lmq/vol48/iss4/9>

The Child in the Silent Walk

Donald De Marco

This article was the basis of the keynote address delivered by Professor DeMarco at the 4th Annual Ecumenical Prayer Breakfast held in Chicago Oct. 24, 1981. A columnist and feature writer for the Toronto Catholic Register and associate editor of Child and Family Quarterly, he is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of St. Jerome's College in Ontario.



On Mother's Day, during the International Year of the Child, 1,300 people walked in silence around the municipal hospital of Kitchener-Waterloo (Ont.) in protest to the rising number of abortions being performed there. It was a style of protest paradigmatic for pro-lifers, for on that same day and for similar reasons, they were circumambulating hospitals in other North American cities: modern Joshuas leading their bands around modern Jerichos, not to shake the ground so that the walls would come tumbling down, but to shake consciences so that protection for the unborn might start tightening up. But to onlookers, this spectacle must certainly have offered an ambiguous message: people giving witness to their concern for the unborn, or people making a spectacle of themselves. Event is one thing, but evaluation is another, and viewers can evaluate the same event in any number of contradictory ways. How, we might ask, does one evaluate a silent walk around an abortion-performing hospital?

The journalist reporting for the local newspaper saw this pro-life procession as constituting a public nuisance rather than as marshalling a moral force. He therefore sought to discredit the walk, but in so

doing, was careful not to falsify any of the facts and thereby discredit himself. He began by centering on one of the 1,300 marchers, a boy about 10 years old, carrying a sign which read (or to use the journalist's more rhetorical term, "screamed"): "We protest the killing of unborn babies." He enlarged upon this opening ploy by emphasizing that in addition to this young lad there were about 300 other children. To carry his discreditation a degree further, he noted the presence of one more dubious protester — a proud and perky canine. He awarded the more articulate members of the demonstration — the political leaders, the doctors, the clergymen, the teachers, and so on — less journalistic space and significance than the 300 children and a dog.

The tactic proved at least partially successful, moving one reader to express her outrage in a letter to the editor: "How on earth can a boy of that age even start to understand what abortion is and means? I'd like to see the day when I can sit down and have an intelligent conversation about abortion with a 10-year-old."

"Children should be seen and not heard," we have long been told. Yet, during what was called "The Year of the Child," children who walked in silence in defense of other children's lives were subject to public ridicule. One might well suppose that the most eloquent tribute to life is life itself. Arguments in defense of life, no matter how cogent or compelling, are still arguments — thin abstractions infinitely removed from life in the flesh. If we cannot defend life with life, what more moving testimony can we possibly provide? The child is not so much an adroit conversationalist as a presence who both expresses and affirms life by the natural act of being alive.

Nonetheless, a child did speak out. In another letter to the editor, a 10-year-old Waterloo youth stated: "It angers me that you would think a 10-year-old is not intelligent enough to understand abortion. . . . I think of abortion as murder. . . ." But the more telling letter, appearing in the same edition, belonged to a Kitchener mother who wrote: "The child mentioned in the letter was our son. . . . While he may not know the different methods used in aborting, he does know that abortion is terminating the pregnancy and killing the child that might have been. What he can't understand is why someone would want to do something like that. Why, he asks, wouldn't someone else take the baby and love it? Why does our son know about abortion? I'm sure our son and many other sons and daughters know about abortion because their parents are askable and answerable parents. When I was questioned about the walk . . . that was my opportunity to be answerable. I discussed abortion with him. My explanation led to his reply: 'I'm glad you wanted all of us and didn't kill us and I'm happy to be in this family.' "

We find ourselves in an embarrassing moral contradiction. We give our children life and then disparage them when they hold it dear. It is safe to acknowledge that time and experience do not guarantee the

attainment of moral consistency, let alone moral wisdom. The value of life is something that has to be explained to adults, not to children, whereas the advantages of killing must be explained to children, and not to adults. Whether or not a child knows about abortion, he does know what life "is and means" and what killing "is and means."

The image of the unapproving child who cannot comprehend why people have abortions should stop us short and oblige us to rethink and re-evaluate our moral stance. Consider how the child's presence in the walk impressed itself so forcefully on the minds of the journalist and his complaining reader that they seemed almost oblivious to the thousand adults who dominated the procession. How do we understand this peculiarity? The adult is nature's appointed guardian of the child. When a child appeals to the adult to protect the lives of unborn children, he reminds the adult of his obligations to assume this natural role. But in the case where the adult wants no part of such a role, any reminder, especially from a child, is too ego-threatening for him to take seriously. Thus, he reacts against the child, dismissing him as insubordinate, unintelligent, or irrelevant, in an attempt to deny that he is delinquent as an adult and accountable to a child. But the truth remains — stark and unendurable.

The very presence of a child makes life plain and palpable. The adult, however, often so estranged from life, commonly applies artificial forms of stimulation to be reassured that it still throbs in him. The child's protest against abortion, therefore, is most disturbing because his bond with life makes him relatively immune to adult rationalizations. The child cannot readily be talked out of his allegiance to life and the adult fears that all he learned in growing up was how to be more indifferent to life and less indifferent to death.

Linda Bird Francke, who in her words, "touched a national nerve" when she described her own abortion in the *New York Times*, defended her decision in a subsequent book she called *The Ambivalence of Abortion*. She had written about her abortion under the pseudonym "Jane Doe" in order not to reveal her deed to members of her family, particularly her children whom she regarded as too young to understand what an abortion is.

In her book, published two years after her abortion, she relates her attempt to discuss the subject with her 12-year-old son, Andrew. "Suppose I had an abortion?" she hypothesized. "You're married, and there is no reason for you not to have another baby," he replied. "How could you kill something — no matter how little it is — that's going to grow and have legs and wiggle its fingers? I would be furious with you if you had an abortion. I'd lose all respect for you for being so selfish."

Mrs. Francke decided to wait until Andrew was older before they discussed the subject again. For the moment, as she said, her son was "deeply moralistic, as many children are at that age."

The prejudice against the unborn must pass to the prejudice against children. For it is unlikely that children will countenance abortion. Children, especially the very young, who draw their daily breath in an atmosphere of family love and who are sheltered from the unmet menaces of the outside world, have an uncompromising attachment to life. Theirs is a world, much like the Eden of their ancestral parents, where death is yet unknown. The decision to kill, then, does not correspond to anything with which they are familiar, any impulse they have felt, any idea they could endorse. In order to justify abortion fully, we must either discredit children or change them. If adult attitudes are to remain sovereign in the moral universe, children must have no voice. Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung, however, offers an admonition which, in the context of contemporary abortion ethics, might appear as one of searing impertinence: "If there is anything that we wish to change in the child, we should first examine it and see whether it is not something that could better be changed in us."

The adults's assessment of the child is either realistic or imperialistic. It is realistic when he sees the positive as well as the negative characteristics of the child, that is, when he sees the child as he is constituted by nature. If he sees the child as simply not being an adult, then he sees the child solely in terms of deficiencies, and his attitude tends to be imperialistic. This habit of viewing children as deficient adults or as mere fractions of adults is well established among grown-ups. The commonness of the expression "When are you going to grow up?" attests to the commonness of a single standard for human conduct — the adult standard. Hence, the child is understood negatively from the viewpoint of what he is not, what he cannot do, and what he does not have; and is judged impulsively as inexperienced, immature, ignorant, and unaccomplished, thereby placing him in a most unfair predicament in which his only hope is to hurry up and become an adult. Thus, all the while he is misjudged, misunderstood and criticized for his bad manners, clumsiness, forgetfulness, general unappreciativeness, and lack of awareness of the worth of a dollar, his real and unique value as a child is at peril.

The renowned fetologist, Sir William Liley, has remarked that because the medicine of adults preceded the medicine of the infant, neonate, and fetus, the tendency has developed in various fields from surgery to psychiatry, to start with the adult and work backward. "The net effect," according to Dr. Liley, "has been to consider the fetus and neonate as a poorly functioning adult rather than as a splendidly functioning baby." The baby's asymmetric kidney function, for example, should not be seen as "immature" or "inferior" to adult kidney functioning, but as something entirely appropriate to his particular circumstances.

The imperialistic view of the child is unenlightened because it fails to see the child as he is. Moreover, it rests on a false analogy which

depicts the broad age spectrum of human life as a mountain where the adult stands at the summit, fulfilled and complete, while everyone else's position is evaluated negatively by its distance from that point. Each stage of life, however, has a value and dignity of its own and should not be evaluated solely in terms of a single age category. And it is sobering to recall that this same adult standard unjustly identifies the elderly as "adults in decline," as "people past their prime," as "has beens."

Psychiatrists point out that it is extremely rare for children to suffer that peculiar estrangement from life called "schizophrenia," before puberty. The young child, generally speaking, is integrated and realistic. He is not prone, as adults are, to becoming a prisoner of his own desires. And this at least partially explains why, as philosopher Karl Jaspers states, "It is not uncommon to hear from the mouths of children words which penetrate to the very depths of philosophy."

What values, then, does the child embody? We think of innocence and simplicity. But children are not innocent for very long, and they can be quite crafty when they desire something very strongly. We also think of cuteness and childish charm. But these, too, fail to pass the test. They are momentary; the child can just as easily be unpleasant and disagreeable.

Positive characteristics are often born of inherent deficiencies. The congenitally blind often develop an acute sensitivity to sound; the disabled learn patience; the poor, how to dream. One is strong as a Christian because he acknowledges his infirmity as a man. This is also true of the child. By nature he is dependent; therefore, he must trust. Because he does not have a developed ego, he must be open to things outside himself. The child's spontaneous acts of trust and openness constitute the essence of childlikeness, and are the very qualities that give him faith — not necessarily religious faith, but faith in life, in love, in parents, and in the adult world. And when these qualities are affirmed in the child, they are more likely to be preserved in the adult.

The child, of course, has no innate sympathy for popular convention. Closely allied with his childlikeness is a candor which, on the right occasion, can be as welcome as a gossip columnist at a wedding. The story of "The Emperor's New Clothes" draws attention to the child's role as anti-social "brat." The adults, having vested interests, agreed the emperor was beautifully appointed; only the child was willing to proclaim the naked truth.

Theologian Romano Guardini states that what is most precious in the child is his "clarity of vision: the ability to look up and out, to feel and accept reality without ulterior motives." We might say that the child instinctively sees the world in nature's terms; the adult, quite often, through the artificial lens of custom, convention, and socio-economics. Thus, the child, in accepting the natural order of things, especially the order of protecting life that obtains between parent and

child, cannot believe that the destruction of pre-natal human life is necessary. Abortion is incomprehensible to him — as are war, tyranny, and lust — and it frightens him.

Several years ago a group of doctors reported in the journal of *Psychosomatic Medicine* the reactions of 87 children whose mothers had abortions. These reactions were categorized as of an immediate type, characterized by anxiety attacks, nightmares, stuttering, running away, death phobias, increased separation anxiety, sudden outbursts of fear or hatred against the mother, and even suicide attempts; and a late type including a range of effects from isolated fantasies to crucial disabling illnesses.

Childlikeness belongs to the child because it is natural to him. But as the child grows, he may lose this quality and enter into an adult world in which he measures the value of things in more arbitrary terms. At this time he sees things less in their own right and more in terms of the expressed wishes of society. In this perspective, he becomes more sensitive to sins against custom than against nature. Things must now “prove” themselves to him in order to be validated and accepted. The unwanted child has failed to prove himself to his parents and may be considered a poor investment, whereas an active stock may have proved itself very well.

But it is precisely the nature of the unborn and the newly born not to be able to prove themselves. How, then, can they be accepted by the adult world? Only, it would seem, if the adults have preserved in themselves a sufficient measure of childlikeness to enable them to accept those who are incapable of proving themselves. In a certain sense, Antoine de Saint Exupéry’s remark in *The Little Prince* is not an exaggeration: “Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.” The child must re-explain through his presence the order of creation to the adult who has nearly forgotten it.

“Genius,” wrote Baudelaire, “is the rediscovery of childhood.” Andre Maurois added, “To become a poet is to remain a child.” For William Wordsworth, “Heaven lies about us in our infancy!”

We do not, of course, want to romanticize or sentimentalize either children or childhood. The refusal to grow out of childhood is childish and is an expression of fear of responsibility. Michael Novak complains that he knows “50-year-olds who are still kids. They’re in the playground of the world: single, unattached, self-fulfilling, self-centered . . . trying to make little Disney Worlds of detachment for themselves.”

Still, the importance of children cannot be over-estimated. A world without children soon becomes jaded and devoid of spirit. The *Playboy* empire is such a world and in order for its own peculiar cultishness to be preserved, it must promote violence against the unborn. *Playboy*’s obsessive interest in sexual pleasure necessitates

that sex not be interrupted by the burden of children. Consequently, it was logical for the Playboy Foundation to subsidize the *Doe v. Wade* case that led to the United States Supreme Court's landmark abortion decision in 1973.

Disneyland, on the other hand, is a world without adults, or at least without legitimate adult attitudes. Inevitably, its childlike element must be marred by its context, which is essentially childish. Although they are temporary havens from adult priorities, rules, and regulations, the Disney environments are lacking in paternity. Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck are not parents, nor are they married, or even gainfully employed. It would be too incongruous for these animals to appear as anything more than children's playmates. The illusion of perpetual childhood would be lost with the arrival of fully sexualized, responsible adults.

The child and the adult are morally interdependent. The unaffirmed child means a poorly developed adult who will add more confusion to an already confused world. We begin to heal the world by affirming the child so as to develop responsible adults whose vision extends beyond self-interest to include the world.

We now return to our initial question: "How does one evaluate a silent walk around an abortion-performing hospital?" If we cannot see the value of the unborn lives, we most likely cannot see the value of a walk in their behalf. But the presence of the child does not reduce this demonstration to a travesty. In fact, it suggests the very way in which the walk must be understood. The child reminds us of our need for trust and openness — the virtue of childlikeness — and the unnaturalness of violent resolutions to human problems. At the same time, he reminds us that there is always more to life than what we can see, and that vision built on faith is an indispensable antidote to narrowing adult preoccupations with security and self-interest. And whether this faith is in life or in the Author of life, it is nonetheless a vital force and a principal source of illumination.

The way of the contemporary world is assuredly not the way of faith but one of power and technique. The child and the modern world stand in perfect opposition to each other. But it would be foolhardy to try to resolve the world's problems solely in the world's terms: fighting power with more power, technique with more advanced technique, financial resources with greater financial resources. The Space Age and Atomic Age are also the Age of Anxiety. The great power modern man has at his disposal frightens him and can offer no real hope for his beleaguered spirit. His hope, then, must include forces which are exactly the opposite of the world's. Thus, the modern age which aspires to be the Age of Peace must also be the Age of the Child.