

## Open Minds, Open Hearts, Fair-Minded Words

Barb Yagley

A civil discussion regarding abortion has great appeal. In October, an adventuresome group of people organized a conference at Princeton University with the goal of finding common ground on abortion. The conference, “**Open Hearts, Open Minds – Fair-Minded Words**” drew its inspiration from a speech by President Obama at Notre Dame in 2009. The organizers (Charles Camosy, Peter Singer, Frances Kissling, and Jennifer Miller) represent both sides of the abortion issue. Over 400 people attended this two-day conference which included panel discussions about a variety of abortion-related topics<sup>1</sup> deemed conducive to dialogue by the organizers.

After the conference, pro-life bloggers<sup>2</sup> wrote that it was a “baby step” (no pun intended) toward common ground and mentioned areas of agreement such as help for pregnant women. Overall, they expressed disappointment that the stated intention of the conference went largely unrealized. David Gushee, summed it best when he tweeted, *“Princeton abortion conference largely a failure in finding common ground, and civility deeply strained, but it was an audacious attempt.”* Pro-choice bloggers<sup>3</sup> were more pessimistic. One stated that she had *“registered for this conference with neither an open heart nor an open mind. ... I cannot identify with a worldview that would protect fetal life at the expense of women’s autonomy, dignity, human rights and self-determination.”*

Perhaps organizer Charles Camosy’s post-conference op-ed in the Washington Post over-reached with his list of “shared concerns”<sup>4</sup>, which provoked a caustic rebuke from co-organizer, Frances Kissling. She objected that his statement placed her “*outside the circle of dialogue*”<sup>5</sup> since she did not share those concerns. She used his statement, “*many (but not all)*” conference participants agreed upon “*a default position against violence*” [including against a] “*fetus-especially when she can feel pain*” as one example of marginalization. If Frances Kissling and her pro-choice allies cannot “*characterize abortion as ... violence against the fetus*”, it could be the American education system

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### 1 Issues to be Explored:

- Emerging Opportunities to bridge the abortion divide
- Moral status of the fetus
- Whether some reasons for abortion exacerbate discrimination against person
- When might a fetus feel pain and what should we do about it
- How far the right of conscientious refusal extends
- Should abortion be a matter for the courts or the legislatures

[http://uchv.princeton.edu/Life\\_Choice/index.html](http://uchv.princeton.edu/Life_Choice/index.html) ; accessed November 13, 2010

2 Charles Camosy et al <http://www.consistent-life.org/princeton.html> accessed November 12, 2010;

Christine A. Scheller <http://www.bioethicsinternational.org/blog/2010/a11/02/the-abortion-debate-open-hearts-open-minds-and-tragedy-as-a-fair-minded-word/> Accessed November 12, 2010;

3 Aimee Thorne-Thomson <http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/blog/2010/10/21/take-open-hearts-open-minds-fairminded-words%E2%80%9D> accessed November 12, 2010;

4 “Is there common ground in abortion debate? By Charles Camosy. Accessed November 13,2010;

[http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2010/10/is\\_there\\_common\\_ground\\_on\\_abortion.html](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2010/10/is_there_common_ground_on_abortion.html)

5 “Walk the Walk: Honoring Common Ground on Abortion” by Frances Kissling, Accessed November 13, 2010

[http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/sexandgender/3613/walk\\_the\\_walk\\_honoring\\_common\\_ground\\_on\\_abortion/](http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/sexandgender/3613/walk_the_walk_honoring_common_ground_on_abortion/)

failed them. The causes of fetal “demise” in abortion; dismemberment, decapitation, lethal injection or poisoning seem pretty violent by most community standards; perhaps it could be covered as part of the anti-bullying programs in our schools.

Camosy may have believed that Kissling had removed herself from the “circle of dialogue” by her conference remarks, which were widely interpreted as pessimistic about the prospects of ever finding common ground<sup>6</sup>. Considering that the conference “pro-life” side tended to be anti-war, pro-healthcare reform progressives (no TEA partiers at Princeton), their observations about Kissling seem plausible and damning.

Those who insist that “women's autonomy, dignity, human rights or self-determination” are incomplete if there are any legal protections for “fetal life” do not act in good faith in a search for common ground. Let advocates for the unborn reach out to those who are less ideologically rigid, specifically to those who believe that abortion is tragic. We know they are out there. When I pray outside of abortion centers, the people who object don't lecture me about “women's autonomy”, etc. They tell me that my prayerful presence “hurts the women going in there who are already struggling with a difficult decision”. Because I, too, struggled with that “difficult decision”, I understand hurt and offer my prayers as hope.

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6 Kelly Vincent-Brunacini “Open Hearts, Open Minds and Fair Minded Words: A Conference of Life and Choice in the Abortion Debate – Impressions from a Variety of Perspectives” <http://www.consistent-life.org/princeton.html>, accessed November 13, 2010  
Robert K. Vischer, “Culture War Dispatch” <http://commonwealmagazine.org/culture-war-dispatch>, accessed November 13, 2010