

"Dear Justice

Blackmun..."

Taking a lesson from history's pro-life letters

Imagine, for a moment, that you're a public official who supports legal abortion. You and your like-minded colleagues receive a huge volume of mail from pro-lifers. Much of it is angry, and some is abusive:

"The Butcher of Buchenwald had nothing on you";

"Hail to the fetus killers!";

"Permit me to express my contempt and disdain for you";

"Would that your mothers [had] killed you before you saw the light of day," etc.

Yet other people tell you that your position is right and courageous and has been a great benefit to women. A woman from Wisconsin assures you that "you will be remembered with esteem and affection long after the anti-abortion fanatics are footnotes in history." Your own United Methodist pastor says he thanks God "for the conscience and courage" you have shown. "In this house," a Virginia woman writes, "your name is blessed."

"Blackmun..."

By Mary Meehan

This is just what happened to the late Justice Harry A. Blackmun, author of *Roe v. Wade* and other Supreme Court opinions supporting abortion. The preceding quotes came from letters in Blackmun's papers at the Library of Congress, which were opened to researchers last year.

The general quality of the pro-life letters—from the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision until Blackmun's retirement in 1994—was not high. Some writers stated their position but gave no reason for it; others rambled on too long; still others signed form letters written by someone else. Many stressed religion, yet said nothing about the Constitution that the Supreme Court is supposed to interpret.

To be sure, some pro-life letters were polite but firm, thoughtful and well-written. Many of them will be quoted here. But they were a small percentage of the whole. The irony is that Justice Blackmun usually read his abortion mail, at least in the early years.

Another irony: Blackmun's first drafts of *Roe v. Wade* and its companion case, *Doe v. Bolton*, were far less radical than the final versions. Five other justices pushed him toward more extreme positions. If there had been less personal abuse from the pro-life side after the decisions were announced—and more evidence and better argument—Blackmun

might have had second thoughts.

Anger doesn't wear well

Anger often tempts us to self-indulgence, so that we're more concerned with expressing our feelings than with actually righting a great wrong. Anger can also be a

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major barrier to communication. That's the reason for a wise old rule: If you are angry when you write a letter, let it rest overnight, then look at it again the next day. Delete any personal attacks, shrillness or sarcasm; if you're still doubtful about it, ask a friend to look it over and make suggestions. This is especially critical in the rapid-fire age of e-mail.

"But wait a minute!" you may say. "*Roe v. Wade* was the worst court decision in our history! Blackmun and the other guys *deserved* personal attacks, shrillness and sarcasm!"

There are three problems with this approach. First, since we cannot know his interior state, we can't say Blackmun wrote the opinion in bad conscience (although the act itself was objectively and deeply wrong). Second, angry personal attacks on

Blackmun and the other justices apparently hardened their positions; instead of helping preborn children, the attacks hurt them. Third, people are capable of change, especially when they sense that their adversaries recognize their humanity and wish them well.

Thus a woman from Black-

mun's own Minnesota asked him to "open your heart and let these babies see the light of the world. They have life, let them know love." And a man from Ohio urged him: "Be a protector of the helpless and the innocent, a defender of the defenseless and of those who would be their defenders and rescuers."

Personal experience counts

Many women on the pro-abortion side told Blackmun about hard cases they had faced and their terrible experiences with illegal abortion. But surprisingly few pro-lifers told him about hard cases that turned out well—or about horrific experiences with legal abortion that they knew about.

There were exceptions: On Jan. 22, 1973—the day that *Roe v. Wade* was announced—a woman

wrote Blackmun that she had aborted twins and said this “has been the biggest tragedy of my life.” Years later, another woman told him that she had an abortion at age 18, stating, “I feel enormous grief and wish in vain that I had been taught that I was carrying a human being—not a ‘glob of tissue’... I had no right to make a life or death decision for this innocent child.”

A premedical student from Alabama said many women on her campus had abortions and that “most are plagued with guilt and they lie on their beds at night weeping because they killed their baby.” A post-abortion counselor from Minnesota wrote, “I am seeing women and young girls who are experiencing deep depression, guilt from murder, teenage suicide and attempts, broken relationships and broken marriages, broken lives.”

A couple from Arizona told Blackmun they had volunteered for a crisis pregnancy center. “So you can see that our pro-life stance is more than just words,” they added. Had many more such volunteers written *all* the justices—and explained how they helped women in hard cases—they might have had a major impact.

Some writers expressed deep anguish instead of anger. “I’m a widow, 65-years-old,” wrote a woman from Texas, “and this killing of innocent, defenseless babies is just about to drive me crazy. I cry and become so upset when I think about it.” She pleaded with Blackmun to “speak up and defend these little ones who cannot defend themselves.”

An Illinois doctor told him, “It just makes me cry, your honor, I can’t believe it... Our children are being killed before they see the light of day, and we are covering our

tracks with legal mumbo-jumbo.” He added that “the medical profession is no exception, but God knows, we should know better.”

Ask a good question

Sometimes a good question will be remembered long after the rest of a letter is forgotten. A Georgia woman wrote Blackmun and the other justices to ask, “How familiar are you with the medical procedures involved with abortion? Have you viewed an abortion?”

“As for the right of privacy,” an Ohio writer asked Blackmun, “has a human baby no right to privacy in a mother’s womb during those days, weeks, months [of] preparing to be born?” He added that “the womb is designed to be the human’s safest and most private sanctuary one will ever know in this life.”

Apparently referring to the *Roe v. Wade* statement that the law hadn’t recognized the preborn “as persons in the whole sense,” a woman from Nebraska asked Blackmun whether he would “have an older person suffering from senility put to death because he or she was not a person in the ‘whole sense?’”

A simple statement can also be effective. A New Jersey writer made a brief but striking reference to U.S. history. “If we never had the courage to admit that we were wrong,” he said, “then we would still be killing Indians, still have slavery and the women still couldn’t vote.” Referring to public funding of abortion, another man declared: “To force people to support what they consider to be immoral acts with their tax money is tyranny.” And a boy from a farm state commented: “You wouldn’t go out in the fields and plow up

the crop just before harvest. So we shouldn’t kill our babies.”

Follow Young Eagle’s example

In 1992, Bernard Young Eagle, an American Indian from Tennessee, addressed a letter to all of the justices. It was strong, but ended with an expression of good will. Of the many promises the Europeans made to the Indians, he remarked, most were broken. More recently, he said, *Roe v. Wade* broke the Constitution’s promises of due process. Abortion, he added, amounts to execution without charges, indictment, trial, conviction and appeal. Young Eagle closed with a blessing for the justices. Perhaps he realized that—whether right or wrong, competent or incompetent—all of them carried a crushing workload:

“May the Peace of the Eternal Great Spirit,

Like softly falling snowflakes
Bury all your worries, cares
and troubles...”

Making a difference

If all the letters to Blackmun had been as good as many quoted here, would he have changed his mind, or at least become less vocal in support of legal abortion? No one can know for certain. But a better approach by pro-lifers might have made a difference. A better approach can make a difference with other public officials today.

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