

Persecution from Within

“Stand on the line if you’ve lost a friend to gang violence. ... Stay on the line if you’ve lost more than one friend. ... Three. ... Four or more.”

Those were the instructions from a teacher being *taught*, from a woman getting a glimpse into the life of students considered “unteachables.” Her name is Erin Gruwell, and her true story is dramatized in the inspiring film Freedom Writers that I watched a few weeks ago.

As a first-year teacher at an inner city school in Long Beach, California, Gruwell inspired a group of students—many of whom were involved with gangs, drugs, and other criminal activity—to abandon racism, to respect their fellow human beings, and to embrace education; in short, to transform their lives for the better.

It is a remarkable film and while many aspects struck me, one in particular stood out as it relates to recent CCBR experiences: Gruwell was having a positive impact on her students’ lives, yet received resistance from some fellow educators who had never given the troubled students the attention they deserved.

Gruwell took the time to understand the plight of these students: where they were coming from, what they had experienced. She got to *know* them. The educators critical of Gruwell, on the contrary, did no such thing. They did not understand the students’ experiences and thus failed to address the students’ needs; beyond that, they even worked *against* Gruwell’s laudable—and effective—efforts.

CCBR also encounters opposition, in our case from some pro-life and religious leaders. Recently, individuals have not only been critical of our well-researched strategy, particularly our use of graphic visuals, but at least one has gone so far as to make and spread the erroneous claim that what we are doing is wrong.

As I reflect on the persecution we’re experiencing from those who *should be* supportive, I realize that none of this is new. It is a cross that must be borne by all who would fight the good fight against injustice. The most obvious example is that of Jesus Christ who was opposed by the religious leaders of His day, by scribes and Pharisees who

should have recognized the truth of His teachings. Instead, the Pharisees plotted how they might kill Jesus when He cured a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath (Mark 3:6). They even considered Him guilty of blasphemy (Luke 5:21), a charge reiterated by the high priest Caiaphas at the trial prior to Christ’s crucifixion (Matthew 26:65).

Jesus made it clear that those who choose to follow Him will also face persecution: “A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you” (John 15:18, 20).

And indeed they do. In April 1963, a group of clergymen, including Catholic and Methodist bishops, criticized Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s peaceful civil rights demonstrations as being not only “unwise and untimely” but even “extreme.” Although today Dr. King is credited as playing a significant role in transforming the culture for the better, these religious leaders of the time argued that the local black community should not support his demonstrations nor press their cause in the streets.

Not only did Dr. King eloquently defend his tactics in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (www.kingpapers.org), he also expressed his heartfelt disappointments:

“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’; ...Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

“...I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church, who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will

***“If they persecuted
me, they will
persecute you.”
—Jesus Christ***

remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

“When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.

“In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

“...In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities...

“I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi, and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South’s beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious-education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: ‘What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?’...

“...In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church...”

We at CCBP share Dr. King’s concerns about the indifference and even persecution from within. That is not to say a religious belief should be abandoned because of some of its leadership. Nor is it to say that if a strategy is being criticized

that the critics are always wrong; there are certainly *inappropriate* methods and approaches just as there are appropriate ones. The point is this: when individuals endorse or oppose a strategy, people must carefully examine the reasons behind that position and then test its merits by examining the other side of the argument. This is the due diligence which CCBP takes in adopting the use of graphic images.

We know that what we are doing is effective (www.unmaskingchoice.ca/evidence.html); furthermore, we have well-reasoned responses to our detractors’ claims (www.unmaskingchoice.ca/gap-faq.html). We find it bewildering, then, that our critics continue to object to CCBP’s use of graphic visuals.

But, once more, Dr. King’s response to the clergymen who opposed him provides insight we can apply to our present-day struggle:

“There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.”
—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, ‘Wait.’ But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; ...when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: ‘Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?’; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; ...when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next...—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

“...I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action.”

As I grieved over the opposition we have faced from within, I realized that perhaps there is another reason for grieving: could it be that our detractors don’t really understand abortion, don’t really comprehend the oppression of the unborn? Just as it is possible for someone to hear but not

listen, it is possible for someone to know yet not understand.

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never been aborted to say graphic abortion photos should not be shown. Perhaps it is easy when you are not the one being dismissed as a “blob of tissue” and disdainfully viewed as a “clump of cells”; it is easy when you are not subjected to dismemberment, disembowelment, and decapitation; it is easy when you aren’t the one to endure poisoning by saline that will burn your skin; it is easy when potassium chloride isn’t injected into your heart to induce cardiac arrest.

But when you imagine that baby being attacked but unable to escape; when you comprehend a baby being in a safe place only to have it invaded by a stranger who will kill her; when that baby cannot defend herself; when you catch a glimpse of her body parts being ripped off piece by piece; when you realize that what you know about this baby’s plight, most people do not—then you will understand why we use pictures.

This is the story of the aborted unborn. This is the story that must be told. Their cries cannot be heard—their screams are silent. But their victimization *can* be seen. It is the images of their terrible suffering that give voice to their cries and pierce the heart of anyone with a functioning conscience.

The story of the unborn, while unique in many respects, is a story that bears far deeper similarities to that of any group that has suffered brutality and mistreatment:

“[t]he real story is the universal one of men who destroy the souls and bodies of other men... It is the story of the persecuted, the defrauded, the feared and detested.”

These words were penned in 1960 by John Howard Griffin not regarding abortion but describing the evil of segregation in the United States. But, for those with eyes to see, his words readily apply to the story of the unborn.

Recognizing that it is now the unborn who are the persecuted and defrauded, we at CCBP carefully study historical injustices and learn from the brave men and women who responded to them.

The aforementioned writer, Griffin, authored a compelling book, [Black Like Me](#), which recounts first-hand how he underwent treatments in 1959 to darken his white skin and experience “what it is like to be a Negro in a land where we keep the Negro down”. Through his subsequent experience, he gained critical insight into the universality of persecution and oppression: “The Negro. The South. These are details. ... I could have been a Jew in Germany, a Mexican in a number of states, or a member of any ‘inferior’ group. Only the details would have differed. The story would be the same.”

We are moved by [The White Rose](#), a book about university students who were killed for resisting the Nazis and for encouraging others to do the same. One of the students perceptively asked the following:

“...Isn’t it preposterous that we sit in our rooms and study how to heal mankind when on the outside the state every day sends countless young people to their death? What in the world are we waiting for? Until one day the war is over and all nations point to us and say that we accepted this government without resisting?”

The book also reports about the cover-up of injustice by German newspapers:

“They made no mention of the fact that day after day not one but dozens of executions took place. God knows the newsreel cameras never got inside the prisons which were crowded to bursting, though the inmates resembled ghosts and skeletons rather than human bodies. They did not film the pale, drawn faces behind the bars...”

One of the students, Christl, had conviction and insight that all people of good will should heed:

“Then it is our duty by our behavior and by our dedication to demonstrate that man’s freedom still exists. Sooner or later the cause of humanity must be upheld, and then one day it will again prevail. We must gamble our ‘No’ against this power which has arrogantly placed itself above the essential human values and which is determined to root out all protest. We must do it for the sake of life itself—no one can absolve us of this responsibility.”

“...it is easy when you are not subjected to dismemberment, disembowelment, and decapitation...”

We are inspired by the film Hotel Rwanda, which tells the story of one man who risked his life many times to save over a thousand refugees from the Rwandan genocide. We are emboldened by the efforts of Oskar Schindler, who saved more than twelve hundred Jews from the Holocaust, and by the example of Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the Indian Independence movement who confronted British colonialists regarding their mistreatment of Indians. We draw strength from the determination of those who fought to free the slaves of the British Empire and from the courageousness of Lewis Hine, who photographically exposed the plight of child labourers in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Our studies have taught us unmistakably clear lessons: victims *always* want their sufferings to be known. And the people who respond to their plight do so because they have become intimately aware of the injustice. They know about good and they know about evil. Their knowledge of evil convicts them; their knowledge of good motivates them. Having seen both life *and* death (Deuteronomy 30:19), they fight for the lives of the oppressed. It is through the exposure of injustice that they and others are convicted to respond. Dr. King expressed this very point as well:

“...we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.”

Today there is no debate about the use of graphic imagery to convey *injustices from the past*; it is a “no-brainer.” People pore through history textbooks that contain graphic images; they flock to museums that show images of yesterday’s injustices; they line up to watch movies that convey the mistreatment of peoples by previous generations.

Why, then, is there a debate today about the use of *abortion* imagery? For the simple reason that such imagery shows a *present* atrocity not a *past* one. The guilt of historical crimes lies with our ancestors, not us. The guilt of present-day crimes lies with no one *but* ourselves. It is easy to say, “Shame on them.” It is difficult to admit, “Shame on us.”

It has been eleven years since I was in grade 10, yet I remember a poignant story one of my teachers told: when he himself was in high school, an outcast student was grabbed by a group of bullies. They stripped him naked, put him in a net, and hoisted him up the school’s flag pole. Another student, outraged at the injustice, stood up in defense of the frightened, victimized teen, only to have the same degradation inflicted upon him. A crowd of other students watched this evil play out; my teacher was one of them.

“Whenever an injustice occurs, we have one of four roles to play: the victim, the persecutor, the bystander, or the defender.”

As he told us this story, he asked, “Looking back, if I could have taken the place of anyone there, who do you think I wish I would have been?” He answered himself, “The student who was mistreated for standing in defense of the victimized boy.”

Whenever an injustice occurs, we have one of four roles to play: the victim, the persecutor, the bystander, or the defender. We may not have a choice about the first role, but we certainly do about the latter three. We can be guaranteed that if we follow our consciences and become defenders of the weak and vulnerable, we too will face mistreatment, not only from persecutors but even from bystanders who are being put to shame. Enduring this we must contemplate, “Am I now seeking the favour of men, or of God?” (Galatians 1:10).

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