



# Life Matters Journal

V. 5, ISSUE 1 — APRIL 2016

## Reflections on the Consistent Ethic of Life

How should supporters of the Ethic understand it?  
What concerns should the Ethic include—and not include?

## Prison Escapes Do Not Justify Our Legal Russian Roulette

An issue that death penalty opponents must grapple with is the possibility of a murderer escaping from prison while serving a life term.

## Community and Belonging A Place for People with Intellectual Disabilities

People with intellectual disabilities want what all people want: safety, some choice in where they live, secure employment, respect, friendship, and love. They want to belong.

# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

The Life Matters Journal team is proud to present two initiatives this April that showcase our commitment to education and discourse. In addition to our Life/Peace/Justice Conference at Villanova University, we're kicking off a new format for our publication.



As you can see, we now have a much shorter issue. With the slimming down, we will be able to publish eight issues each year, with more articles that address current events in our ever-changing world. And now, as many have been requesting, we're able to provide a print subscription! Visit our website to learn more.

Finally, if you're looking for the next big event to attend, we encourage you to join us at the Pro-Life Women's Conference, to be held June 24-26 in Dallas, Texas. Hope to see you there!

For peace and all life,

*Mary Stroka*

This journal is dedicated to the aborted, the bombed, the executed, the euthanized, the abused, the raped, and all other victims of violence, whether legal or illegal.

We have been told by our society and our culture wars that those of us who oppose these acts of violence must be divided. We have been told to take a lukewarm, halfway attitude toward the victims of violence. We have been told to embrace some with love while endorsing the killing of others.

We reject that conventional attitude, whether it's called Left or Right, and instead embrace a consistent ethic of life toward all victims of violence. We are *Life Matters Journal*, and we are here because politics kills.

Disclaimer: The views presented in this journal do not necessarily represent the views of all members, contributors, or donors. We exist to present a forum for discussion within the consistent life ethic, to promote discourse and present an opportunity for peer-review and dialogue.

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# Life Matters Journal

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# Prison Escapes Do Not Justify Our Legal Russian Roulette

By Nicholas Neal

**A**n issue that death penalty opponents must grapple with is the possibility of a murderer escaping from prison while serving a life term. Such an event occurred in January 2016, when three prisoners—two on trial for murder, the other on trial for torture and attempted murder—escaped from a Southern California maximum security jail using tied linens to rappel down the prison walls and escape.<sup>1</sup> Thankfully, they were recaptured a week later, but the possibility of prison escape and repeat offenses are often used to justify the death penalty. Still, due to other risks and the nature of the death penalty itself, these instances are not good grounds for continuing capital punishment.

For one thing, prison escapes are incredibly rare. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2013 there were roughly 13 escapes per 10,000 prisoners, and this number itself is inflated due to defining “Absent Without Leave” incidents as “escapes.”<sup>2</sup> Maximum security prisons—for good or for ill—have done an effective job of keeping violent criminals away from society at large. The rare occasion of a prison escape does not justify killing unarmed people in confinement.

Granted, executions obviously reduce the risk of prison escapes for murderers. However, the death penalty carries its own risk: the execution of the innocent. Since 1973, there have been 156 exonerations for those inmates placed on death row.<sup>3</sup> Of course, this number does not take into account the number of cases in which we unknowingly executed an innocent man or woman.

It’s also important to remember that while the death penalty does reduce the risk of prisoners escaping, it does not totally eliminate it. The appeals process for capital cases is understandably lengthy, sometimes taking 20 years or even more.<sup>4</sup> This is necessary due

to the permanent damage done by the death penalty. While the appeals process takes place, the defendant must be incarcerated, and the possibility of him or her escaping is just as real during that time as it would be if the individual was sentenced to life in prison.

I don’t want to make statistics the crux of this argument, however. If I were to do that, then this wouldn’t be a matter of principle but of numbers, which are very malleable. Therefore, my central argument against the death penalty is that the *causes* of the two risks considered here—a murderer escaping and executing an innocent—are very different. The risk of a murderer escaping is the result of the state failing to prevent something. The direct cause of the risk is the murderer. The risk of executing an innocent person, however, is caused by the direct action of the state. In other words, one risk creates new murders, the other risk creates new murders and new *murderers* (the state). Unlike private murderers, we can’t lock up the state when it kills the innocent. There is only one action that will deter its bloodshed: abolition of the death penalty.

**Unlike private murderers, we can’t lock up the state when it kills the innocent.**

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> “Escaped California Inmates Recaptured in San Francisco after Weeklong Hunt,” *The Guardian*, January 30, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jan/30/california-prison-break-escaped-inmates-recaptured-santa-ana>.

<sup>2</sup> Story Hinckley, “California Jail Break: How Rare Are US Prison Escapes?” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 25, 2016, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Justice/2016/0125/California-jail-break-How-rare-are-US-prison-escapes-video>

<sup>3</sup> “Innocence: List of Those Freed from Death Row,” Death Penalty Information Center, <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/innocence-list-those-freed-death-row>

<sup>4</sup> “Death Sentence Appeals Take Time for a Reason,” Lawyers.com, <http://criminal.lawyers.com/criminal-law-basics/death-sentence-appeals-take-time-for-a-reason.html>



# Reflections on the Consistent Ethic of Life

By John Whitehead

**H**aving worked for several years to advance the Consistent Ethic of Life as an editor for *Life Matters Journal* and a member of the organization Consistent Life, I wanted to offer some thoughts on this principle. How should supporters of the Ethic understand it? What concerns should the Ethic include—and not include?

I acknowledge at the outset that these questions do not have “right” answers. Those who support the Consistent Ethic of Life are a diverse and loosely organized community that has no central authority or official set of convictions. We do not have a Consistent Ethic of Life Central Committee or Party Chair capable of settling philosophical disputes.

Nevertheless, the Ethic has over time prompted reflection among its supporters—and some strong criticism from its opponents—and I think I can draw on some of this history of reflection, as well as my own experiences, to identify ways of understanding the Ethic that will be helpful to activists seeking to promote it.

A good working definition of the Consistent Ethic of Life would be *the principle that human life should be protected by ending the major socially accepted forms of killing*. To be an effective means of social change, this principle should be understood and applied in a way that will attract a broad, diverse constituency yet remain clear and specific enough to be meaningful. The Consistent Ethic of Life should become the basis for a powerful new movement that influences people across the political and other spectrums. With these goals in mind, I propose for consideration the following guidelines for understanding and promoting the Ethic:

*The Consistent Ethic of Life should focus primarily on opposition to four types of socially approved killing: abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia/assisted suicide, and war.* An understanding of the Ethic that focuses on opposition to these four practices has three advantages.

First, the four practices have common characteristics that make

opposition to all four more than a random assembly of disconnected beliefs. All four practices involve the direct, intentional taking of human life; all are legal, socially accepted, or both in many parts of the world; and all four have significant forces working on their behalf that need to be met by opposition.

Second (as the writer and activist Mary Meehan pointed out to me), this understanding of the Ethic is ideologically balanced: two of the practices opposed (abortion and euthanasia/assisted suicide) tend to be associated with the political Left while the other two (death penalty and war) tend to be associated with the political Right. This kind of balanced approach works against the notion that the Consistent Ethic of Life is “really” a disguised form of either liberalism or conservatism.

Third, opposing these four practices is a sufficiently limited and specific mission to prevent the Ethic from becoming overly broad and vague.

In contrast to the focus on these four practices, I think the Ethic should not focus on issues that, however serious they might be, do not involve socially approved killing of human beings. Concentration on issues such as reducing poverty or protecting the environment would not be appropriate for advocates of the Ethic as such.

To exclude such issues is not to deny their importance but merely their suitability for inclusion as part of the Consistent Ethic of Life. Almost any social injustice or problem can be presented or contrived as harming or diminishing life in some way, and once the Ethic is defined so as to encompass issues other than the direct taking of human life it becomes nearly impossible to say what the Ethic does not encompass. To expand the Ethic in this way risks broadening the ethic to such an extent that it becomes meaningless.

*The Consistent Ethic of Life should cut across ideological lines and not be confined or identical to a particular religion, philosophy, or political party—or to a particular rationale for supporting the Ethic.* People who support the Ethic, as defined above, may come from

any number of different backgrounds and have any number of belief systems. People of different faiths or none at all; conservatives, liberals, libertarians, and radicals; Democrats, Greens, Libertarians, and Republicans alike should be welcomed into the community of those who support the Consistent Ethic of Life.

Moreover, this community should allow for a diversity of views as to why the Ethic is worth supporting. Some who adhere to the Ethic do so out of an absolute rejection of all violence. They regard all killing of humans, or in some cases any kind of animal, as wrong and therefore reject all four types of socially approved killing as equally unacceptable. Other adherents to the Ethic might take a different view, viewing the different kinds of killing as wrong for different reasons, and might regard these different kinds of killing as having different moral weights. As long as all adherents agree that these four types of killing should be ended, however, their differing reasons for reaching this conclusion should not be an obstacle to working together.

*The Consistent Ethic of Life should embrace a variety of strategies and approaches to ending socially approved killing.* The diversity of views mentioned in the previous point will inevitably lead to a diversity of views about how to end the four types of killing opposed by the Ethic. Some people will favor various types of direct action, such as helping pregnant women to carry their children to term; ensuring sound care for the sick, disabled, or dying; or challenging various lethal practices through nonviolent civil disobedience. Others might favor political action such as lobbying for legislation or trying to elect candidates to public office. Still others might favor educating the public about the different life issues.

Perhaps most significantly, different adherents to the Consistent Ethic of Life will take different views about legal prohibitions of the socially approved forms of killing. Some might hold that, say, abortion must be made illegal or the death penalty formally abolished; others might hold that keeping these types of killing formally legal while ending their actual practice is acceptable. An analogous divide might arise in regard to war and international conflict: liberal adherents to the Ethic might desire a stronger United Nations and more effectively enforced international law, while libertarian or conservative adherents might prefer alternatives to war that do not affect national sovereignty and autonomy.

The Consistent Ethic of Life should allow for all these different strategies. While absolute statements are hard to make, the general rule for the community that supports the Ethic should be to be open to any strategy for ending the four major types of killing as long as the strategy is nonviolent.

*The Consistent Ethic of Life should challenge dominant political ideologies and parties.* Side by side with the Ethic's openness to a diversity of beliefs and strategies should be the recognition that the Ethic is not easily compatible with the political ideologies that are currently dominant, at least in the United States. While members

of the different ideologies and political parties mentioned above can all legitimately support the Consistent Ethic of Life, all of them should also acknowledge that they are atypical members of those ideologies and parties—and should challenge their fellow members to support the Ethic.

This kind of challenge is essential because without it the Ethic can too easily be lost or watered down amid the desire to support a larger political ideology or party. The legitimate variety of strategies and approaches to ending socially approved killing should not become an excuse to strain or twist the Ethic until it fits an existing party platform or until any distance between supporters of the Ethic and those with more conventional political views disappears. To take two specific examples, opposition to abortion should to some degree challenge the preferred agenda of Planned Parenthood and opposition to war should to some degree challenge the preferred agenda of the U.S. Department of Defense. An interpretation of the Consistent Ethic of Life that loses this element of challenge is one that robs the Ethic of its integrity and power.

*The Consistent Ethic of Life should allow for focusing on a particular issue.* While the Ethic links together four different issues, supporters of the Ethic are not obligated to work on all four simultaneously with equal commitments of time and energy. No one can do everything and some people's talents, concerns, or backgrounds

will draw them to focusing on one issue over another. This kind of division of labor is entirely legitimate, and different adherents to the Ethic should respect and support each other as they focus on whichever issue they are drawn to.

The Consistent Ethic of Life can be a force for great good and major social transformation. Realizing the Ethic's potential requires balancing the

various guidelines I have outlined above so the Ethic becomes neither narrowly sectarian nor vague and meaningless. Instead, the Ethic should retain its ability to challenge and inspire many different people and groups to work to defend life.

## Differing reasons for reaching this conclusion should not be an obstacle to working together.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Earlier reflections on the Consistent Ethic of Life that have influenced my thinking in this essay are Mary Meehan, "Let's Revisit the Consistency Ethic," Meehan Reports, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://www.meehanreports.com/> and Nicholas Neal, "No Aggression, No Homicide: Being Libertarian & Consistent Life," *Life Matters Journal* 1, no. 2 (2012): 26-27. A reflection on the Ethic by Julianne Wiley that Mary Meehan shared with me was also helpful.





# Bodily Rights: Concept and Concrete Application

By C.J. Williams

*A commentary on Acyutananda's "Bodily Rights"*

**"I DO NOT WANT TO BE PREGNANT,"** said one commenter in an online discussion, "And that is all the justification I need for an abortion." In light of the concept of bodily rights, this is a perfect justification for abortion—or is it?

What is it that makes bodily rights such a magnetic argument in the human life debate? The writer Acyutananda explores the logical grounds for the assumed premises behind a right to bodily ownership—and comes to a perhaps surprising conclusion: this idea of bodily rights may, in fact, be meaningless.

The concept of rights must always be framed in terms of a societal convention supported by our moral intuitions. These moral intuitions are correct, Acyutananda clarifies, because they—as a matter of natural law—reside "deep within" every human person. Societal convention and moral intuition inform our sense of justice and ultimately our conception of when we—or others—need to be protected from violation. Life is one such right overwhelmingly affirmed both by convention and intuition. Human life is valuable. Taking it is a violation. Thus, rights, notes Acyutananda, also correspond to real harms. Now obviously, using someone's body against their will is a violation. Or is it?

Society already "does hold the concept of a 'right not to be unjustly harmed physically or mentally'" writes Acyutananda. Do "bodily rights" add to this?

Many on the pro-choice side of this debate claim that, "Using another's body without their consent is *always* wrong, and a victim of such use is *free to take any steps necessary* to put an end to such use"; or "at least they want it to be defined such that *if there are any exceptions*," the preborn's presence in the womb shouldn't count as one.

But if using another's body is always wrong, why is it right to require someone to use the brake pedal at a stop sign? Or, why are compulsory vaccines supported while undesired pregnancies are considered a violation by the same people?

Why, after all, do we see "bodily rights" appear solely in the debate over abortion? This itself, Acyutananda notes, should be grounds for suspicion if we are approaching it from a place of intellectual honesty. Yet a woman may, indeed, suffer deep psychological upset over an unintended pregnancy, and this is a valid, or "real" harm. There are valid grounds for raising the issue, Acyutananda writes—"there are certainly examples of violations of bodily rights that, even without causing significant physical suffering, cause mental suffering." However, using an example of a theoretical alternate form of pregnancy (in which a child is lodged behind a woman's shoulder blade for 10 days, then naturally detaches, and will survive and grow if put in a pail of milk for X time), Acyutananda shows that the common unspoken assumption beneath the argument of bodily rights is not bodily rights so much as the level of

harm done or perceived to have been done. Ultimately, this means "the concept [of bodily rights]" will remain "vague and confusing because degrees of trespass are hard to define, and for that or other reasons the degree of harm" may be "inconsistently related to the degree of trespass." And in light of all of this, Acyutananda reasonably concludes that society "should expect anyone to tolerate an offense whose *nature* is a violation of bodily rights, if the offense is low in *degree*, before taking innocent life."

Also, our laws already protect us from so-called infringements of bodily rights in reasonable circumstances. "If society holds and sustains a 'right not to be unjustly harmed physically or mentally,' [...] that will serve all purposes, and society can dispense with the idea of bodily rights."

To follow the argument of bodily rights consistently, Acyutananda also confronts the way in which the conflict is usually framed: as the right to bodily ownership of the mother versus the right to life of the preborn child. If bodily rights, however, are the issue, the real question is: Who is likely to suffer the greatest harm?

Acyutananda does not argue for or against abortion. But the questions he raises reveal the troubling logical confusion in the bodily rights approach to abortion that misplaces the foundation for the idea of bodily rights in the first place: Who will suffer the greatest harm to their ownership of body and mind? And at the same time, he neatly exposes the redundancy in the concept, which in a society that protects one from physical and mental assault, has already addressed violations against bodily ownership.

So if society and our legal system do contain the laws explicitly and implicitly guaranteeing persons protection from physical and mental harm, and if those laws are based both rationally and intuitively on the implicit grounds of who will suffer greatest harm, the argument for bodily rights becomes redundant and needlessly complicates an already complex issue.

Is the concept of body ownership, and mental suffering, valid? Yes, Acyutananda concludes. Using another person against their will is a violation. That violation, however, is covered by laws which guarantee freedom from harm. Acyutananda explores this quagmire with admirable exhaustiveness, and while affirming its value, clearly shows the illogic of applying it in one bold stroke with the statement: "You never have the right to use my body against my will."

So is the concept itself, in fact, "meaningless"? No, perhaps not. But, as Acyutananda demonstrates, the concept as it stands applied to the abortion debate—although it addresses a valid ethical need—badly misses the target.

*Acyutananda has a pro-life blog at [NoTerminationWithoutRepresentation.org](http://NoTerminationWithoutRepresentation.org).  
Emphasis in quoted passages are in the original.*



# True Life: People Are More Than Their Circumstances

By Lisa Stiller

I recently had the wonderful opportunity to attend the Religious Education Congress, an annual gathering of about 40,000 Catholics who come from all over the country and descend upon Anaheim, California. The event has grown from a conference aimed at religious education instructors to one that has something for everyone: social justice, meditation, spiritual practice, theology, and dance and song.

It was at this conference last month that my commitment to Catholic Social Teaching (CST) became more than just an abstract, general notion of “respecting the dignity of all people”—something that sounds good and makes you feel good when you talk about it. I realized the values that underlie CST are meant to be lived out in practical terms: we must see the inherent goodness and inherent dignity in everyone.

That is a life-changing realization, as it now compels me to do more than I have in the past. It compels me to go beyond attending conferences, monthly diocesan social justice meetings, and Mass on Sundays; in other words, to go beyond being just a passive receptor of information and inspiration.

I am a convert to Catholicism; one of its main attractions was CST, which some adherents call the church’s best-kept secret. CST’s core teaching is that the human person, being made in the image of God, has an inherent dignity and therefore a right to life at all stages, from conception to natural death. In support of this core teaching, CST also teaches us that every person is entitled to certain basic goods that work to uphold his or her dignity and support his or her right to life. These goods include (but are not limited to) food, health care, housing, employment, fair pay, and clean water.

Therefore, providing for the common good, for the well-being of

all—especially the poor and vulnerable—is also at the heart of CST. Politically this means supporting policies that ensure people have those basic goods that uphold their dignity and right to life. Further, policies that promote peace and a chance for all to participate in the community also uphold the inherent dignity of the human person and the right to life.

This all makes perfect sense, on both an intellectual and intuitive level. I did my RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, aka the one to two years of classes and Masses that adults have to go through to become Catholic) 20 years ago at that rare church in Las Vegas with a priest who lived and breathed social justice. CST was at the center of most of our weekly discussions. Last month, however, the teachings took on real substance, real meaning. Several speakers at the Anaheim conference opened my eyes to the true meaning of the truths behind the social teachings of the church.

One of these speakers was Sister Helen Prejean. I’ve heard Sister Helen speak many times; she is an incredibly human, compassionate, and dedicated person. She is a gifted storyteller, so hearing the same stories over and over ends up being a different experience each time she tells them. She also has the ability to inject humor into her talks, even while discussing horrible crimes; the horrible conditions that death row inmates and all other prisoners endure; and the horrible court procedures that condemn innocent people to death.

After recounting stories about death row inmates that she has counseled right up until their executions, including details about their crimes, Sister Helen reminded us that, despite their crimes, these were still “children of God,” and, as such, each had inherent human dignity.

She posed the question, “Where is the dignity in the death of Patrick?” (the death row inmate on whom her book *Dead Man Walking* is based). Even those who have “committed a horrible crime should not have their dignity taken from them.” When we concentrate on the crime of the death row defendant, we make it easier to put to death “a monster” rather than a human being. It is this defining of a person by his or her crime, the dehumanization of those incarcerated, that allows us to turn our back on the humanity of the imprisoned. Those in prison are more than their crimes, Sister Helen said, and they want to be seen as more than their crimes.

Two other crucial speakers were Javier Stauring, a former gang member who is now working to create peace in areas dominated by gangs, and Father Greg Boyle, who started Homeboy Ministries in Los Angeles to provide gang members with positive alternatives to crime. Stauring spoke of seeing each person’s humanity regardless of their background. “I don’t believe that people are their worst mistakes,” Stauring said. He encouraged listeners to “be there for someone going through a challenge”; to look beyond their crime, their addiction, or their appearance, and give them “space to tell the stories of their pain.” In other words, to speak of who they really are.

Father Greg spoke on a similar theme, telling us how the young men and women he works with are so much more than their past. Quoting from South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Father Greg commented that there are “monstrous acts, not monsters.” He added, in his own words, “There are no evil doers....only human beings who carry more than the rest of us.”



The final crucial speaker was Sister Kathleen Bryant, who works with women who have lived through the experience of sex trafficking. Sister Kathleen reminded her audience that sex trafficking survivors want desperately to be seen as more than victims of this terrible trade. At the conference, two survivors told stories of how they fell victim to sex traffickers, how long it took for them to make it out, how people never saw or heard them, and how they suffered the bias and rejection commonly experienced by many sex trafficked survivors. They were unseen, and when they finally got out, they struggled—even in churches—for acceptance as someone other than a person defined by a painful past. “Survivors are more than survivors,” said one.


Walking out of that session with Sister Kathleen, I realized that over the period of a couple of days I had listened to three different presentations that had all spoken with one voice. CST focuses on the inherent dignity of the individual. Human dignity remains intact in spite of people’s decisions, actions, and the tragedies they fall victim to; it transcends all these things.

To protect everyone’s human dignity, the church calls for us to advocate for the common good and especially for the poor and vulnerable. Sister Helen, Javier Stauring, Father Greg, and Sister Kathleen and the women who spoke along with her all reminded us that the Gospel preaches care for the poor and the oppressed—a message that Pope Francis has taken up. I thought of how the “victims,” or “survivors” of incarceration, gangs, and sex trafficking all called for the same things: education, jobs, and a way out of the poverty that works to suck them back into their former situations. Those are things that we are called to advocate for, as they are essential to human dignity.

The central need is to see the human person, not the crime, the action, or the victim. We can so easily assign a person an adjective, as opposed to assigning the adjective merely to their actions. This is misguided, though. People are so much more than their circumstances. If I can do the hard work of seeing this about people, then it follows that all people, no matter what they have done or where they have been, have the same right to life that human dignity dictates, from conception to natural death.

I am still trying to discern my path to living out CST in more practical terms. But whether I am called to speaking out publicly wherever and whenever the need arises, to write about the systemic problems that result in so many torn lives, or to work directly with survivors, I know the way forward is no longer as a bystander.

*A version of this piece previously appeared on the blog of Consistent Life (<http://www.consistent-life.org/blog>).*



To protect everyone’s human dignity, the church calls for us to advocate for the common good and especially for the poor and vulnerable.

Photo credit: Bhavesh Kothari, Flickr Creative Commons





# Community and Belonging: A Place for People with Intellectual Disabilities

By Sarah Burkey

**M**y friend Vincent [a pseudonym] lived in a state-run institution called Forest Haven outside of Washington, DC, from early adulthood until his mid-50s. Vincent had a mild intellectual disability. In the early 1980s, he was welcomed into a fledgling L'Arche community in Northwest DC, a place where people with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities shared life together.

I met him when I joined L'Arche as an Assistant (the L'Arche term for "staff") in 2005. Vincent and I didn't talk a lot about his time at Forest Haven, but he told me that he was a frequent pallbearer for burials on the grounds with no one in attendance.

At L'Arche, Vincent had his own bedroom, a local church community that loved him, neighborhood friends, and a beloved cat that he named Joseph. Vincent loved Elvis and walking to McDonald's for coffee in the evenings. He was a good-natured soul with a beautiful smile and a subtle but goofy sense of humor.

When Vincent was terminally ill, he chose hospice care. He passed away in his sleep in his studio apartment in the L'Arche townhome, with a dear friend at his side. Vincent's memorial service was a sight to behold. Hundreds of loved ones came. There were many beautiful testimonials and fond memories shared. Perhaps if he had lived out his days at Forest Haven, he would have had a graveside service attended only by the fellow residents asked to carry his coffin.

While Vincent's early life was far too common in his day, the story of Vincent's later years is sadly rare. In a culture where a person's worth is measured by his or her autonomy and material contribution to society, people with disabilities experience discrimination and loneliness. People with intellectual disabilities don't want to be

defined by what they can't do, though. They want what all people want: safety, some choice in where they live, secure employment, respect, friendship, and love. They don't just want to be included. They want to belong.

Providing the intellectually disabled with these fundamental goods has been a major struggle. Up until the mid-20th century, obstetricians who delivered infants with visible disabilities routinely informed parents that their children were not suited to be raised in a family home and required professional care in an institution.

Anyone who has seen the film *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* has an image of the medical model of care for people with disabilities: a sterile, colorless, remote building designed to conceal and calm those with developmental differences. The atmosphere is one of alienation and repressed discontent as patients stand in line for medication, huddle listlessly in the TV room, and take care not to react too strongly to anything or anyone for fear of physical and chemical restraint. Common occurrences in state-run facilities for the disabled that were not fully depicted in this film were the use of humiliating procedures such as outdoor group hose-downs in place of bathing and injuries from physical and sexual abuse.

During the 1950s and 1960s, de-institutionalization began to take place as disability advocates pushed for community care. The group homes that then sprang up all over the country were not necessarily much better, however. They were often plagued with abuse and neglect allegations and with mysterious deaths. Caring for the disabled in a group residence, even in smaller settings, still served to isolate people with disabilities from their communities. Sheltered workshops came into being to provide daytime employment alternatives for those with fewer skills, too often acting as a

catch-all solution for those receiving developmental disability services, regardless of skills and potential.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 mandated the “least restrictive environment” as the standard of services. The medical model went out of fashion, and people with disabilities became more visible in the community. Today, the central value of care for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities is person-centered practice. The individual is the focus of care, with his or her own team consisting of family members, direct support professionals, therapists, and a case manager. This team gathers to advise and assist the person with a disability as she or he creates a plan of care containing annual goals.

Innovative service providers are developing new models to promote the maximum level of independence and choice for the individuals they serve. A growing trend in residential services is to separate housing from services, enabling people to change service providers if they choose without having to leave their homes, routines, roommates, and neighborhoods. Day programs are changing as well. Many people with disabilities want to have access to competitive employment and are capable of achieving that goal with reasonable support. There are others for whom a recreational program would be more suitable, and these programs are moving toward community-based models, meeting at libraries, dance studios, parks, senior centers, and other non-segregated community centers.

This person-centered practice can accomplish a lot toward giving people more choices and freedom. Just as important as freedom, however, is belonging—the understanding of one’s own meaningful place in the world. Nothing can take the place of belonging. We can’t calculate it. We can’t legislate it. We can’t hire for it. It takes real transformation of the heart, and it takes everyone.

One of the most common barriers to belonging for people with disabilities is a lack of natural relationships. Their friends tend to be the peers in their programs and people who are paid to spend time with them. Filling this need by being a friend to those with disabilities is a perfect calling for those who believe in a consistent ethic of life.

A consistent ethic of life proclaims that all human beings have inherent dignity and worth at every stage, in every situation. It is more than a philosophy to be debated in online comment threads. It’s more than public demonstrations and courtroom battles for a legal end to abortion, capital punishment, and assisted suicide. This ethic requires us to embrace those whose lives are most devalued.

There are many ways you can help someone in need. People with disabilities may need rides, meals, companionship, someone to read to them, help with housecleaning, and so much more. They also have so much to give—as Vincent did and as any person does when given the chance. So don’t just serve. Be served. Be open to transformation and love.



One of the most common barriers to belonging for people with disabilities is a lack of natural relationships.

Photo credit: Rebecca Wilson, Flickr Creative Commons





# Don't Kill, and Don't Be Killed

By Joey Garrity

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Undertale is an independently developed video game created and written by Toby Fox that was released this past September. It has since done what few indie games have ever done by taking the world by storm in a short amount of time, becoming a cult hit for a new generation. But the true accomplishment of Undertale is not just its underdog status. Undertale's biggest selling point is that it is an old-school role-playing game where nonviolence is an option and no one has to die. It is possible to play through the entire game without killing a single person, and in fact the game actively encourages you to do so.

Undertale tells the story of a world where, in ancient times, Earth was inhabited not only by humans, but also by a species of magical beings commonly referred to as monsters. They lived in peace for a time until one day the humans attacked the monsters out of fear. A war followed that is implied to be a one-sided slaying of monsters by humans, who were the more powerful side. After the humans' victory, their greatest wizards sealed every last monster into a system of caves underneath Mount Ebott. Many years later, a young child named Frisk—who is gender-neutral so anyone can identify with the character—while exploring the peak of Mount Ebott, falls into a hole and finds himself/herself in the world the monsters have created for themselves beneath the Earth in the years since the war. How the story unfolds depends on the actions of the player, but for the sake of this article I will discuss the story as it would unfold if the player does not kill anyone.

Upon finding himself/herself in the network of caves beneath Mount Ebott referred to as “the Underground” by its inhabitants, Frisk begins his/her journey with at first the sole objective of just finding the way home. He/she is rescued from the murderous flower Flowey by a kind, old female monster named Toriel, who brings Frisk into her home. While Toriel initially tries to stop Frisk from venturing onward from the house out of fear Frisk will be killed, eventually they come to an understanding and Frisk goes out into the unknown underground world under the known world. Soon, he/she learns a terrible truth: leaving the Underground and returning to the human world requires passing through the Barrier, the magic seal trapping everyone underground. To pass through the barrier, Frisk's only option appears to be killing King Asgore Dreemurr, ruler of the monsters.

One of the most powerful moments in the game is when the player, as Frisk, first enters Asgore's castle New Home. Frisk finds a beautiful house nearly identical in blueprint to Toriel's house where their journey started. Asgore has left a note behind saying he is in

his garden and welcomes any visitors to stop by. In one room, later revealed to be the room of his deceased children, there are family pictures and a drawing Asgore's adopted human son Chara drew. In his own room, Asgore's dresser has a sweater with “Mr. Dad Guy” on it, and his journal entry for the day comments on what a nice day it is. The entire house gives the vibe that Asgore is a kind family man, making the thought of having to kill him to leave the Underground unbearable. Even Asgore himself shows a reluctance to fight when Frisk meets him in Asgore's throne room, but Asgore believes he must kill humans because he has no other choice.

Both Frisk's and Asgore's dilemmas echo the sentiment of many in today's world who believe that, while they don't like the idea of taking life, it is what must be done for the greater good. We hear that no one likes abortion but that it is required to escape poverty and other evils. We hear that no one likes collateral damage but that it is required to defeat the “bad guys.” But as Frisk and Toriel show us in the True Pacifist Route through Undertale, and as Feminists for Life memorably put it, in the face of a violent option we must “refuse to choose.” There is nearly always a nonviolent option where no one has to die.

As it turns out, even Flowey, who initially tried to kill Frisk and is trying to pull the strings in the Underground, was once a good person and does find redemption in a nonviolent way. Flowey was once Asriel, the son of Asgore and Toriel. His nonviolent ways ultimately cost him his life at the hands of a human mob. Later resurrected in a laboratory experiment that brought him back in the form of a flower, Asriel started going by Flowey. Being revived without a soul caused the formerly nonviolent child to start killing out of boredom and an inability to love.

In the end, however, Frisk's refusal to kill makes Flowey realize that he was right all those years ago and that nonviolence does work. From the player's perspective, sparing Flowey after the first battle with him—despite his repeated threats—feels empowering; your refusal to kill means that you are better than him and won't stoop to his level. Flowey, temporarily restored to his original body, finally destroys the Barrier himself.

One of the last things he says to Frisk before everyone leaves the Underground is, “Don't kill, and don't be killed, alright? That's the best you can strive for.” The world is a dangerous place. But we can make it a world where aggressive violence is never an answer to a problem.



# Arguing on the Internet: How Anonymity Dehumanizes Our Opponents

By Aimee Murphy

As a millennial, my life is inundated with social media. Whether it's Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, or a myriad of other social sites dedicated to sharing (or oversharing) our lives, I have dozens and dozens of new notifications every day promising to keep me abreast of every little detail of my friends' lives or, conversely, their opinions of my own life. And though social media has made great strides in enhancing the connectedness between social movements and their grassroots constituents, there is a dreadful downfall that could render these platforms moot in our own movement: the anonymity that is made possible by screen-names and nondescript profile pictures creates a ripe environment for dehumanization.

I'm sure most of you reading this (especially young people) have experienced it at some point: you're expressing your opinion, or you've shared an educational story on a social media site, and you are lambasted by someone of the opposing opinion. Your ideas might be skewered, or maybe it's your own character that is attacked. Ad hominem attacks go flying, the argument gets tense and heated, and we start flinging our own decorum out the window. Soon it's all we can do to just walk away from the argument with our pride intact.

This problem of dehumanization in our arguments is multiplied by the distance with which we might regard our online adversaries. In person, I would never think of using biting sarcasm with someone who is working through an argument with me. But online, my weariness of a culture that condones violence comes out in a sarcastic comment towards someone whom I've never met. Many times on Twitter, I find myself working tirelessly to help some anonymous screen-name see the truth of science or basic common-sense ethics, and I'll feel the conversation get dragged down (sometimes little by little, sometimes all at once) into epithets, sarcasm, and a total inability to see the humanity of the other side. When we lose sight of the humanity of the other—when we forget empathy and we leave “sonder” behind—we make our opposition into a bogeyman, someone we cannot hope to reach and convert but can only hope to pummel into submission.

The problem with this perspective is that it views winning arguments as the end-all, be-all of our work, when in fact it is changing hearts and minds that will create the massive cultural shift needed

to create a culture of life. So, as people who stand for the respect for the life and dignity of each and every human being, how do we elevate the discussion and thereby enable conversion to the cause of life?

We must effect a paradigm shift: our goal is not to win the argument or trample our opponents; our goal is to convert hearts and minds. What we are fighting is an ideology that says that humans are disposable objects, so let us not act in such a way that treads over our online adversaries in the name of a winning argument. Let us, instead, respect them as human beings worthy of dignity. For if we degrade their dignity, do we not then cut ourselves off from the goal of a culture where every human is respected, valued, and protected?

So the next time you get into a heated debate in an online forum, consider a few of these tips to elevate the conversation and remind yourself of the humanity of the person with whom you are conversing. If this person is someone with whom you're already acquainted, try reaching out by personal message. Work on building up a relationship with people who are different from you—not for any utilitarian reason, but because as humans, we are geared toward relationship, and relationship has the power to elevate conversation and remind us of the humanity of the other. But if you aren't friends with the person with whom you are tempted to argue online, there are a few ways forward. First, you could step away from the argument and either befriend them or remain anonymous and private. Second, if you want to continue with the discussion, do your honest utmost to get the opinion, backstory, and full perspective of the person on the other end of the screen-name. Don't make them into straw men, belittle their experience, or engage in biting sarcasm; treat them with the same respect with which you would like to be treated. Sure, educate on the basics and discuss ethics, but first: love and “sonder.”

The next time you get into a debate, whether online or in person, remember that we're all human and we're (presumably) all trying really hard to do right by ourselves and by others. Unless you want a culture full of victims of Stockholm Syndrome, you can't abuse people into a culture of love. Remember, instead, what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”