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“In Support Of Life”

A speech given by Eunice Kennedy Shriver
at the Love of Life Ball, February 13, 1975
Minneapolis, Minnesota

"In Support Of Life"

by Eunice Kennedy Shriver

I am pleased to be with you this evening. I admire all that you are doing for the cause of life. For the unborn and the aged. The helpless and the handicapped.

Your help and encouragement remind us that life from its conception to its ending is worthy of our love and demanding of our respect.

As pioneers in the Birthright movement, you have refused to bow to the easy cynicism of the times. To you, human life is sacred, not disposable. It is an infinite mystery to be regarded with awe, not a scientific curiosity to be described in atoms and molecules or valued in dollars and cents.

It is difficult to urge respect for life on a society that seems to be preoccupied with death. And not only physical death, but moral death as well.

Once, a great poet wrote "Ah, love let us be true to one another." Now, the rock singer moans, "Let's get our kicks and split."

Once we went to the theatre to become immersed in life. Now we see the Tarring Inferno, Earthquake, and the Godfather, to get a quick fix of death.

Once we had a Marshall Plan and a Peace Corps to build a better world. Now we have billion dollar arms deals which can only tear our world apart.

Once we were taught by Saints to have faith in God, hope for the future, and love for all life. Now advertising is our great teacher and we learn that if we are to love anyone, it should be ourselves.

All the evidence points to the fact that our civilization is preoccupied

with death, not life, and self-centeredness, not service. From the "skidrow slasher" to the political terrorist. From torture in the jails of Chile, to starvation in the streets of Dacca—reverence for life is buried under the evidence of man's inhumanity to man.

George Orwell's 1984 seems to have arrived 9 years too soon. Consider these paradoxes:

In 1965 we gave 18 million tons of food away to feed the hungry. Yet today, we're bickering over the delivery of 4 million tons to feed starving families in Africa and Asia.

We see billions of dollars in programs for health, education, and the improvement of human life dropped or vetoed as inflationary while billions have been added to the war chest of the Department of Defense.

We buy millions of copies of a book that purports to instruct us in the joys of sex, without once mentioning the transcendent commitments of love.

In this mechanistic, egotistical, utilitarian environment, is it any wonder that huge numbers of people find abortion acceptable, ethically and morally?

Is it any surprise that sterilization, euthanasia, infanticide and "Death with Dignity" bills already introduced into 25 state legislatures are looked upon as giant aspirin tablets to quiet our social headaches?

We will not get a majority to vote for life as long as we are preoccupied with death. We will not pass legislation for child-saving programs as long as abortion can be viewed as more cost effective than child rearing.

We cannot hope to enforce a life time commitment of love when the promise of sex lasts no longer than 30 minutes, or, the first trimester of a fetus' life.

I often see the slogan "Promise her anything but give her Arpege." Is the modern sexual equivalent, "Promise her anything but give her an abortion?" The slogan may trap the gullible, but it sells a shoddy, deadly product that 900,000 young women bought last year alone.

If you go to Congressional and Senate hearings on abortion in Washington, as I do, you get a lot of numbers about mortality, morbidity, and statistics on infection, and so forth.

One of every 10 school age girls is a mother, 35,000 of these young mothers are under age 16.

In the Nation's Capital the number of abortions exceeds the number of live births.

Nearly 50 percent of all girls below 16 who have miscarriages or abortions later bear children far more susceptible to physical, mental, and learning problems.

We hear the fetus called "a blob of tissue", a "legal non person", a "meaningless form of life." Yet only a decade ago, when President Kennedy established the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, it was set up in behalf of children *from conception*. And from it flowed a mass of studies, all of which were designed to protect and improve the future of all unborn children—from their very beginnings, not from some arbitrary starting point.

Perhaps the problem is that we

have become capable of describing things only in numbers—dollars, weights, ages, costs, benefits, utilitarianism.

Yet most things that we truly value are impossible to describe in numbers. We know them as qualities rather than quantities. Beauty, love, loyalty, courage—these can't be described in technological language.

They come not from scientific studies, but from the influence of family—the example of our grandparents—the love of parents. Why, even modern child psychiatry is turning more and more to the helping hand of older generations. Unfortunately most of the younger generation have not had this influence. They don't know the real thing.

Many people say that women who spend their lives being parents are wasting their time. Yet with 45 percent of all married women spending their days away from home our youngsters are becoming increasingly involved in growing delinquency rates, learning problems, illegitimacy, abortion. Is our profession so unimportant?

I guess that most women who get aborted thought once, however briefly, that this time they "were **really** in love." They lived a hope. They may even have thought they had a promise. I do not mean a promise in the sense that banks talk of promissory notes. I mean they thought they had a promise of their own worth as persons. They thought they had a promise that it was "you and me against the world."

Nowadays, commitments, promises and trust, have become very temporary words. How long must a "meaningful interpersonal relationship" last in order to qualify as meaningful? A lifetime? Five years? One night? Thirty minutes?

Should we not perhaps in this "quick fix society" begin to reassert that such theological notions as "commitment" and "trust" and "meaningful interpersonal relationships" should last longer than 30 minutes? Or more than the first trimester of a fetus' life? Or more than the whole duration of a fetus's life? Or that of a child's existence as a child?

Can an abortion fulfill the expression of love, commitment, accountability, and trust? No, I submit that it cannot. Yet our laws and our institutions increasingly favor abortion.

Therefore, what we must now do is to equalize the rights and benefits of pregnant women.

One example is insurance practices which now favor abortion and discriminate against life. These practices must be outlawed. At the University of Maryland, for example, both married and unmarried students are covered for termination of pregnancy under their medical insurance. But what about the women who wants to keep her child? Only if she is married and only if she pays an extra \$100 premium can she get basic maternity benefits.

Is this freedom from coercion?

In addition, we must insist on standards that will eliminate abor-

tions on a viable fetus. Don't doctors believe in non-injury? Are doctors comfortable having to abort a viable fetus? Surely our doctors would welcome such standards. For, at least the physician will then know whether he's attending a birth or a funeral.

After all, abortion is the only medical decision made before consulting a doctor. Who, then, influences the pregnant young woman? Friends? Parents? Abortion propaganda? Are any alternatives presented? What are the external forces and the inner feelings that compel her to terminate life? Does she **really** have a free choice? Does she know the options to abortion?

If anyone complains that we are attempting to legislate morality, our answer must be that we value and respect human life. And we want to end discrimination against it. Indeed that is a universal value revered by cultures all over the world and throughout history.

I believe that for every abortion clinic supported by public funds, an equivalent "Life Support Center" must be established to offer comprehensive services to those who want to save life, to encourage motherhood, to support the family and the keeping of promises.

As I envision it, every Life Support Center would incorporate medical testing, psychological counselling, a small loan program, prenatal and postnatal care, and full access to needed community facilities and services, such as schools, job placement, vocational training,

adoption, housing, and day care agencies.

The need for these services is underlined by the fact that in America today one in every 3 pregnant single women is under 17. Abortion is **not** the answer for these youthful mothers. When they are given a free choice of life over death, a large percentage of these pregnant teenagers want to keep their babies. Counseling on health, prenatal care and employment services are enthusiastically accepted when offered, according to experiences at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

Each young mother who comes to the Life Support Center would be assigned an "Anchor Person" who might be someone of her own age or an older person who can talk the language of teenagers and perhaps come from their social or economic background. The Anchor Person could well create an important new profession in our society. She would work with the school. She would help with employment. She would help solve problems with the pregnant girl's own parents and the Anchor Person would know the physical, emotional and mental development of the infant and the role of the mother. She can help the adolescent learn the art of mothering so that the new generation does not repeat the cycle of the old.

The Life Support Centers are crucial to teenage mothers. It is the children of these youthful mothers who suffer a far greater risk of physical abuse, illness, school failure and anti-social behavior. These are

the children that we must seek to salvage. I hope you will continue your excellent programs here and join in a national effort to establish these Life Support Centers everywhere.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, let me commend your work. Society can follow your moral rearmament in asserting the right to life. I think that you have drawn the line of battle at the right place.

The infant and the fetus represent the most vulnerable, the weakest, the most powerless of all; and each of us, at some time, in some place, feels the same powerlessness and vulnerability. That is why we should draw the line of battle here and now.

I believe it is worthy of our devotion to life to retain the traditions that are common among all religious and ethnic groups in America—Jews and Christians—Mexicans, Irish, Blacks, Scandinavians, Puerto Ricans—all have brought to this country a great love for children. They wanted and produced strong and happy families. And they had the encouragement of doctors and nurses who believed that medicine should enhance life, not seek to destroy it.

This compelling tradition must be continued.

It is worthy of our devotion to life to make the unborn child an object of our compassion and our caring.

Only then can we find once again the meaning of faith, the reason for hope, and the great and abiding gift of love.

Eunice Kennedy Shriver is Executive Vice President of the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation and directs its day to day operations. The Foundation encourages better care and research in the field of mental retardation, and also supports new work in the field of bioethics. Mrs. Shriver delivered the address reprinted here on February 13, 1975, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.



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