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Among the Pro--Lifers

BY Paul Greenberg

Editor's note. This column appeared just after Mr. Greenberg spoke at the 2006 NRLC Convention.

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—The last time I was asked to talk at a Right to Life convention, I got to deliver the keynote on the opening day. Ho boy. Having grown up listening to various spellbinders on the lawn of the Caddo Parish courthouse in Shreveport, La., including the late great Uncle Earl K. Long, I always wanted to deliver a real stemwinder of a keynote to a responsive crowd.

And, believe me, these pro-lifers respond. But that was seven years ago in Milwaukee, and this year in Nashville, they've put me at the tail end of the convention—on the program for the final dinner. It's simpler being a keynoter at the beginning of the festivities, when everybody's still fresh.

But to speak on the last night of a convention, and offer some kind of summation of the past year, and a glimpse of what the future holds, that's a challenge. So I did what I do at work when that blank screen starts staring me down like a cobra. I try to conjure up the spirit of some writer I admire, and imagine how he—or she—would approach such an assignment. Somebody like Nat Hentoff, the renowned jazz critic and liberal columnist for the *Village Voice*.

Nat Hentoff must have scandalized the *Village Voice*'s usual readers when, early on, he came out on the pro-life side of this issue in his casual, unpretentious way—as if unaware that he was defying all the household gods of his particular slice of the political spectrum.

Maybe it was his devotion to civil rights that led Mr. Hentoff to defend the rights of the unborn. Or maybe he was just following his fascination with life and the creative process, which is probably what made him an aficionado of American jazz. He must be the only Jewish, atheist, jazz-loving, pro-life newspaper columnist in the country—to all of which I can only say: God bless him!

Mr. Hentoff not only saw what was at stake in each life-and-death case he covered, and began to seek out, but he could see where it was all leading. Sure enough, abortion on demand now is reflected on the other end of life's spectrum by an enthusiasm for euthanasia.

These days, somebody taking a good hard look at partial-birth abortion, or contemplating the prospect of using embryos to create body parts, can scarcely escape the feeling that we're no longer looking down that slippery slope but up. Yep, we've come a long way since *Roe v. Wade*.

A long way down.

It's all part of the same intellectual trajectory, or rather descent. And the temptation that has led us this far down is the oldest one in the book, and I mean *The Book*. As the serpent told Eve in the Garden, just taste of this one fruit, and ye shall be as gods! Now we can decide who shall live and who shall die. And soon we will be immortal, replenished by a constant supply of replacement parts from the vast embryo farms of the not-too-distant future.

In the end, I can only tell my listeners a story—a parable. It's a little jewel of a short story by Ursula K. Le Guin called "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." In her mythical city of Omelas, "bright-towered by the sea," all is perfection. There is accomplishment without effort, love without sacrifice, faith without clergy, victory without courage, art without labor, triumph with never a defeat

There is just one small catch: "In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window... ." And in this closed-off room, there is a neglected, abandoned, feeble-minded, starved child whom all must agree to leave so.

Those are the terms, and, when you think about it, they are the only terms on which a Utopia can be constructed by man: Absolute perfection—well, almost absolute—in exchange for paying no heed to the evil at its center. That's the price of any utopia, whether it's a Third Reich, worker's paradise, or Plato's Republic, in which all the decisions are made by a select group of guardians who will forever keep everything the absolutely perfect same.

Strangely enough, there are those who walk away from Ursula Le Guin's perfect city. To quote the author: "They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates . . . they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas."

Call them pilgrims, sojourners, striking out with nothing more than faith. But with nothing less. And this year they came together for a few days in Nashville, Tenn.

Paul Greenberg, editorial page editor of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, has won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing. Reprinted with permission.