



Two KU Sisters Expose the Problem of Assumptions

STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

OCTOBER 5, 2012



Dear Friend,

Keisha was signing the “NO” side of our poll table, “Should Abortion Remain Legal?”

Across the table, Emi asked, “Hey, Sister, what did you write?” Emi looked at me and felt the need to confirm, “She actually is my sister.”

While Emi signed the “YES” side, I asked Keisha (on the “NO” side), “Do you think abortion should be illegal in every case?”

“Not in the case of rape,” she said confidently.

Emi seemed interested in the conversation, so I included her. “You signed the ‘YES’ side. Do you think abortion should remain legal through all nine months?”

For the next few minutes, I asked Emi a series of questions, and finally, Emi’s position was clear: she thought that *only* RU-486 abortion should be legal.

I clarified that the chemical abortion technique called RU-486 was only used from about four to nine weeks gestation (about two to seven weeks post-fertilization).



Cast of Characters: Emi (far right, with backpack), Keisha (green folder), and I (grey shirt) ponder the ramifications of my “Cabin in the Blizzard” story while two Benedictine College students from my mentor group, Chris (in black) and Clare (in yellow), listen in. Although the camera caught us all wincing at some portion of my philosophical example, we enjoyed a pleasant (albeit lively) exchange in front of the JFA Poll Table (“Should Abortion Remain Legal?”) at the University of Kansas (KU) in September.



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Now I knew at what time of the pregnancy Emi thought abortion should be legal, and I also knew she only approved of one type of abortion procedure – chemical abortion. I continued asking questions, though, until I understood in what circumstances Emi thought abortion should be legal.

Her clarification floored me. Emi thought abortion should only be legal in the case of rape and if the mother's life is in danger. In other words, she thought abortion should be legal only in two rare circumstances (comprising not much more than 5%, if that), and only with one procedure (RU-486) used only early in the pregnancy.

These two sisters appeared at first to have completely opposite positions. Yet, when I took the time to ask a few questions, their positions turned out to be very similar. Emi believed that about 95% of abortions should *not* be legal. This doesn't sound very "pro-choice" at all!

	Emi	Keisha
Should Abortion Remain Legal?	YES	NO
We Might Assume Their Responses Meant...	"I'm pro-choice. Abortion should generally be legal."	"I'm pro-life. Abortion should generally not be legal."
Using "Three Essential Skills," We Discovered Their Responses Actually Meant...	"Abortion should be legal only in two circumstances: <i>rape</i> and <i>life is in danger</i> ."	"Abortion should be legal only in the case of <i>rape</i> ."

Clare and Chris, students from Benedictine College, were among those listening in to my conversation with Emi and Keisha. When I was serving as their mentor in our seminar at Benedictine just two days prior, I led them in a role play activity to highlight the fact that all of us tend to assume too much and ask too few questions.

I began the role play by saying, "I'm pro-choice," but then I hid my position until they asked specific questions to uncover what "I'm pro-choice" meant. My hidden position was this: "Abortion should be legal only in the case of rape and the life of the mother for all nine months."

The experience surprises students. They see how much their assumptions are working under the surface. Clare, Chris, and I again experienced this moment of surprise two days later in real life. Our conversation with Emi and Keisha exposed assumptions for what they are: vexing menaces to good dialogue. Without thinking about it, many of us are in the habit of assuming we know what other people think, even if they share only a sound bite or quick statement regarding their views.

We should build a different habit of assuming: assume we *don't* know what someone means until we ask for lots of clarification. Because I was attempting to show this courtesy to Emi and Keisha, they were more ready to consider my challenge to their view that abortion should be legal in the case of rape. I shared a story a few of my colleagues and I have developed: "The Cabin in the Blizzard." I think especially Emi was able to consider my argument and rethink her view with me because I had taken the time to get to know her view before I attempted to change it.

**We should build a different habit of assuming:
Assume we *don't* know what someone means...**

Because of your support, students like Clare and Chris are learning to ask clarifying questions in order to listen with understanding. That's a good practice for all of us.

Thank you,
Stephen

P.S. I hope to share the "Cabin in the Blizzard" story in a future newsletter. If you can't wait, however, contact me (316-683-6426). I'd be happy to share it with you, along with some tips for using it in conversation. [April 2013 update: See www.jfaweb.org/DFG to read the story.]

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