

Commentary: Too many good people put their head in the sand

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(RNS)—Last week, in anticipation of Michigan's upcoming vote on abortion laws in that state, NPR aired [a story featuring interviews of abortion patients](#) inside a Detroit abortion clinic.

The report included an audio recording of one of the patients, who was 11 weeks pregnant, undergoing a suction abortion. The story was headed by a warning that some listeners would find the audio disturbing, and indeed many did. Among [the most vocal objections](#) were those by conservative news outlets and abortion opponents.

Yet, having been involved in the pro-life movement for years, I was thinking about how much we on the pro-life side have relied on letting people see the reality of abortion. In fact, my own conversion to the pro-life view was the direct result of watching a video of a first-trimester abortion procedure shown via ultrasound.

Pro-lifers have used this video widely over the years in an effort to educate people about abortion and to change their minds. It worked with me.

While the NPR reporter clearly had a different purpose in mind—at one point, she unironically compares the abortion procedure to childbirth—the ultimate effect the story will have on listeners remains to be seen.

Indeed, the facts of the report, particularly the controversial audio of the procedure, lay bare—whether intentionally or not—some very uncomfortable truths. Foremost among these is the woman undergoing the

procedure is clearly in distress, moaning throughout.

“I can’t,” she says at one point, in response to the pain. But one of the clinic staff assures her she can.

“[This is what hell sounds like](#),” one pro-life leader later observed. It’s hard to believe anyone who hears it could disagree. Women—and their unborn babies—really do deserve better.

As disturbing as this story is, along with so many others, we must not turn a deaf ear or a blind eye to any kind of suffering or injustice.

Reasons we look away

Hardly a day passes without the news communicating the sights and sounds of people being killed, whether it’s a recording of shots fired on children in the Uvalde classroom, images of bodies tortured and executed in Ukraine, video footage of men chasing down a jogger in a truck and shooting him like an animal, or police body camera footage showing what should have been an uneventful arrest turning into manslaughter—or worse.

In the face of horror after horror, it’s easy to go from overwhelmed to utterly numb.

Nevertheless, we must not look away.

I was asked recently, following a talk I gave on the need for reform in the church, to name a way in which pastors and leaders enable corruption and abuse. My answer was it happens most often simply when people put their heads in the sand.

Sometimes, people do this because the innocence that accompanies ignorance is much more pleasant than the pain that comes from facing ugly

truths. Truly, it's only human not to want to witness the worst in others.

On the other hand, some look away more strategically, as a way to maintain what some would term plausible deniability. Plausible deniability can be a way not to take responsibility for wrongdoing by claiming ignorance of it. Perhaps the most pervasive form of plausible deniability is one of the most subtle: casting doubt on the messenger, whether that messenger is a victim, a witness or a journalist.

I cannot count, for example, the number of times I've been told some report of abusive behavior was not believed, because it was made public by "the mainstream media" who are "out to destroy us." This is just a convenient excuse for looking away.

Sometimes people look away out of a mistaken understanding of what constitutes virtue, telling themselves it's better not to dwell on sin, or we aren't our brother's keeper and ought to mind our own business.

Certainly, there is no joy in glorying in evil, whether that takes the form of enjoying the experience of titillation or of amplifying the outrage.

Yet, putting our heads in the sand rather than confronting evil is negligence. And negligence is not only a vice—sometimes, it's a crime.

The virtuous course

The virtuous course is to face the truth soberly. Achieving this balance between indulgence and negligence is one we all must wrestle with.

Many people, for instance, have come to me about the new documentary "God Forbid," which details the sex scandal that led to the removal of Jerry Falwell Jr. as president of Liberty University.

Because I lived and worked in the midst of that controversy as it was

unfolding, people have asked me whether I have watched it (I have), or whether I've listened to this or that related podcast (I have) or read this news story or another on the situation (I have). I take no pleasure or joy in any of it. Yet, I do feel relief in having the truth revealed.

Along with that relief, however, I feel anger and frustration at those who simply looked away. I'm convinced now by hard experience that much, if not most, evil is protected and prolonged by good people who choose not to see or hear. I'm just as sure, truth be told, I have been one of them.

But we are each other's keepers, and by God's grace—as well as by the power of the internet, good journalism and truth tellers everywhere—it is harder and harder for us to look away.

What we do once we face suffering and injustice, of course, remains to be seen.

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