

## Neuhaus on the Singer debate:

The following is an excerpt from "A Curious Encounter with a Philosopher from Nowhere" by Fr. Richard John Neuhaus (*First Things* v.120, February 2002) reflecting on his debate with Peter Singer:

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In the question and answer session, an undergraduate sharply challenged Singer, asking why, if Singer's argument is right, his parents could not kill him or have him killed. Singer replied that the rule would not apply to the student because he was a conscious and responsible moral agent, or at least presumably so. This elicited appreciative chuckles from some in the audience. I was less than satisfied with his answer and asked Prof. Singer what, then, should be the cut-off age at which parents would no longer be free to kill their children. One year? "Oh," he said, "I should think it would be somewhat short of one year. But my point is that it's not for me or anyone else to say. It should be up to the parents." He added that it is a decision that parents should make in consultation with their doctor.

Perhaps you have experienced such moments. In the middle of a conversation, a person says something so striking that time seems to stop and an entire scenario unfolds in your mind. That is what happened to me at that point. It went something like this:

Mike and Elizabeth had one child, three-year-old Elizabeth, and had really hoped for a boy this time, but decided to go ahead with the pregnancy when the tests indicated another girl. They named her Anne, and they loved her very much. Their best friends, Bob and Debby, lived only a few houses away, and they all agreed that such an adorable and happy baby had never before been seen.

It was not until about the seventh month that Elizabeth and Mike noticed the odd twitching in Anne's left leg and arm, and the way she refused to look them in the eye. She spent hours in the corner twirling her little yellow plastic duck, increasingly oblivious to everything and everyone around her. The doctor referred them to a specialist who spoke of a neurological problem and exploratory surgery. Even more troubling were the early signs of autism. They were told that there are wonderful programs now, most of them paid for by the state. With the help of therapists ten hours a day, there was a better than 50-50 chance that at age five or so Anne would be almost like other children. Although the neurological problem might leave her with the odd quirk and apparent vacancy of mind from time to time.

That's when Elizabeth began to think, very tentatively at first, that they should send her back. When she finally got up nerve enough to suggest it to Mike, he was appalled. What do you mean send her back? You mean we should kill her? Not at all, Elizabeth explained, the law is very clear. You just sign some papers saying that you have decided it is the best thing for her, and then they gently put her to sleep. It's the merciful thing to do, Mike. She would have never had a really normal life. (By this time, she was beginning to talk about Anne in the past tense.) Anyway, there is my job to think about. I couldn't have been supervising all that therapy for five years, and you're on the road half the time. And next time we can have the boy that we wanted. Knowing that the burden of

caring for Anne would fall unequally on Elizabeth, and loving Elizabeth very much, Mike finally relented.

When she told Debby that they had decided to send Anne back, Debby was horrified. But you can't do that, she said. She's your baby, Elizabeth. You can't kill your own baby. It's one thing to have an abortion, but she's been part of your family, part of your life, for seven months. You can't just kill her. Elizabeth protested that they would not be doing it, that it's done in the hospital, and anyway their doctor agreed with them. The doctor also explained how her body parts could save the lives of other children, so it isn't as though she had lived for nothing. Moreover, Anne wasn't really part of the family. She didn't really relate to anybody, and her autism would probably have gotten worse. It would be cruel to have forced her to live a life that was not worth living. Debby noted the past tense and knew the decision had been made. It was a painful conversation. That night Debby and Bob talked for a long time. They agreed they had lost their best friends; they would not be able to have Elizabeth and Mike over any more.

Elizabeth's mother, Mary, told her she would never speak to her again. Grandmothers often are that way. Henry said, Listen, honey, you'll get over it. Anne is their baby, after all, not ours. We have four other grandchildren, and Elizabeth and Mike can have another one who doesn't have all those problems. It's not as though they're doing something criminal. It's legal, and more and more people are doing it. Remember the Schmidt baby, and he was almost two years old. I know how you feel, honey, and I don't like it either, but I don't see how we can impose our judgment on Elizabeth and Mike. It's their baby, after all. And you know she wouldn't have had a happy life. Maybe this is the best thing.

Mary was not convinced; not then, not ever. After a while, she did speak to Elizabeth again, but it was never the same. She remembered how Anne, then less than a month old, had giggled and let out that funny yelp when Father Rittle baptized her, and how they used to recall that, and laugh again. Mary took down from the mantle the Christmas photo of Elizabeth and Mike with little Elizabeth and littler Anne, and put it away in a drawer. Every once in a while, when she was alone, she would open the drawer to look at it, and to remember. She remembered Anne, and she remembered the day that Henry told her that they had sent her back. Elizabeth explained to her father that it wasn't so bad after all. The doctor was waiting for them at the hospital, and there was this really nice room where she and Mike could say their goodbyes, and then a very understanding nurse took Anne from her arms. Don't be embarrassed to cry, she said. Sometimes things just don't work out the way we hoped. Then Elizabeth knew that they had decided to do the right thing. It was with a smile of regret, but mainly of enormous relief, that she watched the nurse carry the poor thing off to another part of the hospital where they put down the babies.