

Disabled Life is Worthwhile Life

by Irene R. Walsh

A Review of *Past Due: A Story of Disability, Pregnancy and Birth*

By Anne Finger (Seattle: The Seal Press, 1990)

In *Past Due*, Anne Finger shares the intimacy of her own experience of disability, pregnancy, and the birth of her critically ill son. In this personal tale, she uses the events of her life to focus a variety of health-related ethical issues, particularly those involving advocacy of abortion rights and disability rights and the relationship between them.

She introduces the reader to her world with direct descriptions of her work in an abortion clinic and the beginning of her activities as a disability rights advocate. The first section of the book is the most reflective in tone, allowing her to identify many of the ethical concerns illustrated in the events of her childbearing and the infancy of her son, Max.

How do technological advances shape our understanding of what it means to be "normal," or our expectations for "perfect" children?

Because of the disabilities she has following childhood polio, her pregnancy is difficult. A home birth is carefully planned. Her description of home labor and subsequent hospital cesarean birth is vivid and gritty. Ms. Finger doesn't hide behind euphemisms. Her incision is a "slash." Her extremely ill newborn son is not merely meconium-stained but "shit-stained." Other parents of sick newborns can recognize the surreal numbness, elastic sense of time, and fantasies she endures while her son is ill. Thoughtful parents have shared the redefinition of self and values she experiences with motherhood.

For Anne Finger, the argument for abortion rights is based on a woman's right to control her own body rather than

an understanding of the start of life. Her thoughts about a perfectly formed little hand floating in bloody fluid following an abortion acknowledge the arbitrariness of any decision about when life begins.

Descriptions of the smells and the women make abortion real, not a theory. Wording is very direct — abortion and fetus, not pregnancy termination and uterine contents. She regards the decision to abort as an individual one. Even though she would not promote abortion for fetal defect, since she believes that disabled life is worthwhile life, she does not challenge the decision of a colleague to abort a fetus with Down syndrome.

Ms. Finger strongly believes that the lives of disabled newborns must be protected. When her son is seriously ill and she is told that it's likely he will be brain-damaged, she is forced to reconsider how she regards disability and "normalcy." She deeply wanted a "normal" child, although she is skeptical about the concept of "normalcy" itself. She examines the idea of "health" as the measure of "good" in our society. According to Finger, technological advances shape not only our cultural definition of normalcy and our expectations of perfection, but also the arbitrary distinction between "natural" medical measures and "playing God."

Anne Finger reveals herself as an intense, multifaceted woman with a deep commitment to live her beliefs. She is tolerant of those with whom she identifies (abortion-rights activists, disability-rights activists, feminists) when they make choices other than what she would choose. The intolerance with which she glibly dismisses others with a negative caricature (people who wear gold chains or drive BMWs) is a disappointment.

Since the main theme of this book is the connection between abortion rights and disability rights, it is important to consider how they coincide and conflict. Abortion rights and disability rights may both be promoted with the goal of fostering individual autonomy. Conflict can arise when a pregnant woman

wishes to abort a fetus likely to become a disabled child. A real ethical dilemma may exist in the case of a pregnant woman whose child will suffer major disability because of her negligent conduct. A weakness of this book is that Ms. Finger does not squarely address these conflicts.

There is no easy-to-follow ethical map to guide us when a pregnant woman wishes to abort a fetus likely to become a disabled child.

When does the child (potentially disabled child) have significant interests? Only after birth or before? In order to safeguard the health of the child to whom she would give birth, Anne Finger pumped no gasoline and used no pain-killers for her broken bones while she was pregnant. By taking these measures, she tacitly acknowledged that the child-to-be has protectable interests prior to birth. This is an extremely uncomfortable position for an abortion-rights advocate to adopt formally. If a woman voluntarily becomes pregnant, should it be her ethical responsibility (as distinguished from her legal obligation) to act in the child's best interests? The child should not figure in these discussions simply as chattel to the woman.

Those who seek an ethical system which comes full circle, neatly packaged to offer conclusive answers to ethical dilemmas, will find *Past Due* dissatisfying. She makes no attempt to resolve all the conflicts. Indeed, this is her point: in the territory where abortion rights, disability rights, and medical care intersect, there are no easy answers.

Read this book if you want to be stimulated. It is thoughtful, thought-provoking, heartfelt, and vivid. It makes abstractions real and demonstrates the greater political, social, and ethical meaning of personal, daily life events.

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