



The Obama Stem Cell Darkness

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President Obama, on March 9, 2009, signed an important executive order that vastly expanded federal funding for human embryonic stem cell research and crossed a significant and troubling ethical line. This decision, and the rhetoric during the signing, encouraged scientists and researchers to enter the moral quagmire of taking some human lives in order to benefit others. During his signing speech, in order to support his decision, the president invoked the name of Christopher Reeve and other patients desperate to find cures for their ailments.

Desperation, however, rarely makes for good ethics.

I once heard a true story that brought this point home for me in a dramatic way. The story involved a father and his two young sons. They had a favorite swimming hole out in the countryside which they would visit on hot summer days. The father, however, had never learned to swim, while the boys had learned when they were younger and could swim moderately well.

Their father would sit on the shore while the boys would swim inside a line of bright red buoys that marked where the shelf on the floor of the swimming hole would drop off steeply. Each year, the father would tell his sons not to cross that

line, because if they did, he would not be able to swim out and rescue them. Each year they would faithfully obey. This particular year, however, they decided to challenge their dad's authority and venture beyond the buoys.

As they swam beyond the line, their father saw them and called out to them to return, but they feigned they couldn't hear him and continued to swim out even further. Their dad got nervous, and began to walk out into the water, as it got deeper and deeper, and suddenly he moved into the drop-off section and began sinking.

From a distance, the boys spotted him flailing around in the water, gasping for breath, trying to keep his head above water, and slapping the water with his hands. They suddenly realized he was drowning, and swam towards him. As they got near him, he yelled at them not to come any closer. He cried out, "Get away! Don't touch me!" In fear, they kept their distance until he stopped struggling in the water, and began to sink beneath the surface, with gurgling and bubbling.

As he slipped into unconsciousness, the boys approached him and grabbed him as best they

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could and dragged him back to shore, where he sputtered and revived and finally coughed out the water he had taken in. Later, the boys asked him why he shouted at them to stay away. He said he was afraid if he put his hand on them, he would drag them under the water with him. He knew that a desperate person would reach for almost anything nearby in order to save himself, maybe even his own children, and he didn't want to do that.

We must be similarly concerned in our society when scientists and desperate patients are tempted to put their hand onto our embryonic children in a bid to alleviate suffering or even to save themselves. Sadly, the President's stem cell decision encourages this kind of unethical behavior by an emotional appeal to patient desperation. The President's ethical mistake is further compounded by the fact that remarkable and powerful scientific alternatives exist, such as cellular reprogramming on the one hand, or the use of adult/umbilical cord stem cells on the other, neither of which requires ever laying a hand on a human embryo.

His stem cell decision also manifests a troubling shift towards a more widespread and systemic form of op-

pression within our society. The President is offering Americans the prospect of using the powers of science to oppress, or more accurately, to suppress the youngest members of the human family to serve the interests of older and more wealthy members. He is offering Americans the prospect of reducing fellow human beings to cogs and commodities in the assembly line of the medico-business industrial complex.

Many Americans, however, seem only vaguely aware of what has transpired in the President's decision. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas once commented on the way that oppression can subtly arise in our midst:

"As nightfall does not come at once, neither does oppression. In both instances, there's a twilight where everything remains seemingly unchanged, and it is in such twilight that we must be aware of change in the air, however slight, lest we become unwitting victims of the darkness."

Some would suggest that perhaps the darkness is already upon us. But a few moments of twilight may still remain, in which Americans can

turn back the moral darkness that threatens our society and our future.

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