



Perspective/Opinion

An Embryologist Looks at Human Life

By David L. Bolender, PhD

Dr. Bolender, who has taught embryology and human anatomy to thousands of MCW students over the decades, shares his beliefs regarding both the study and the sanctity of life ...

In 1965, Life Magazine published a photo-essay “[Drama of Life Before Birth](#)” by the Swedish photographer Lennart Nilsson. I was fascinated by those photos. As a biology major in college, my favorite class was Dr. Wiemer’s embryology course where he often used modeling clay to explain how the embryo formed. In graduate school I was exposed to the Dodd’s collection of human embryos and infant donors. It was my first real introduction to birth defects and the impact they had on development. My fascination with those photos of prenatal human development was a spark that led to a career focused on the study and teaching of embryology.

For most of my tenure at MCW, I have had the pleasure of teaching our students about human prenatal development. How can you not be amazed by the intricate choreography of the whole process - how two haploid cells are yoked together to form a zygote that begins a new human life, and how from this single cell all the tissues and organs of the body are formed as the developing human passes through the stages of prenatal development? Development continues after birth, at least in some systems, perhaps into young adulthood. We have all been on this amazing, multi-staged journey from conception through prenatal development, birth, postnatal development, childhood, adolescence and continuing through adulthood.

One could say it is the appreciation of this continuum of life that would identify me as being pro-life. But there is a more profound reason for my pro-life viewpoint. You see I am a disciple of Jesus who is cleverly disguised as an embryology and anatomy teacher. It is this worldview that more deeply informs what it means to me to be pro-life. The Psalms speak of this when we read that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” and that God created our inmost being and knit us together in our mother’s womb, that our form was not hidden from God when we were made in the secret place (the womb) where He wove us together and His eyes saw our unformed bodies. So, no matter where we are on the continuum of life; zygote, neurula, embryo, fetus, neonate, toddler, adolescent, or old guy (like me) we are image bearers of God.

Bearing the image of God gives human life a dignity that I believe commands honor and respect.

To me, being pro-life is honoring and respecting human life from conception to physical death because we each bear the image of God. How different might our world be if when we looked at each other we saw that image of a loving God? To quote Dr. Al Weir, “Why are we wonderfully made? We are made because we are loved, and we are made to love the God who created us and to love the people He created in very active ways.”

For further reading:

[CMDA Standards 4 Life](#)

[The Endowment for Human Development](#)

David L. Bolender, PhD, is a Professor in the Department of Cell Biology, Neurobiology, & Anatomy at MCW. He is a member of the MCW Society of Teaching Scholars.