

Bill Rea ? Hoy is entitled to his opinion too

?I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.?

Evelyn Beatrice Hall

?You shouldn't be able to print anything like that.?

J.D.



The first of these two quotes I learned, somewhat to my surprise, was not spoken by the French philosopher Voltaire, although it is commonly attributed to him. Hall was a biographer of Voltaire.

But no matter who came up with this famous quote, I've found myself thinking a lot about it since Saturday morning. And as a newspaper editor, I consider it part of my job to remember it. Be well assured, I have believed in the concept it represents since I first read it in my high school days, and I hope I will believe it until the day of my death.

I arrived in the office shortly before 10 a.m. Saturday and found a voice mail message from J.D. The woman left her name, but for these purposes, I'm going to use her initials to refer to her.

She was reacting to last week's column in the Citizen by Claire Hoy. The headline was ?He devoted his life to killing unborn babies.? Not surprisingly, Hoy was referring to the recent death of Dr. Henry Morgentaler, and he made it clear in his writing that he was not a fan, either of the man or the abortions he championed.

Although we haven't seen each other in some 20 years (if memory serves, the last time I spoke to him was at the 1993 federal Progressive Conservative leadership convention in Ottawa, and since we were both busy, our conversation was brief), I have known Hoy since my days as a journalism student at Humber College. Hoy was a part-time instructor at the time, with his full-time job being to keep track of the doings at Queen's Park. Those were the days when Bob Rae was leader of the NDP (a couple of years before he became Premier), and I had to endure some good-natured razzing in class when Hoy would refer to ?your cousin who can't spell his last name.?

Kidding aside, Hoy was (and I assume still is) a perfectionist. He had no use for sloppy journalism and made no bones about it.

I once met the late Dr. Morgentaler. I attended a talk (not work related) he gave about 20 years ago. I came away with two lasting impressions of the man. There was absolutely no doubt that he sincerely believed in the rightness of what he was doing. But what also came through, loud and clear, was a certain sanctimony. He left me with the feeling that he thought anyone who disagreed with him when it came to abortion was somehow evil.

For the purposes of this column, my position on abortion is irrelevant. I'm only interested in opinions, and which ones should be expressed.

I am not a stupid man. I know the issue of abortion is a highly charged one.

There is one side, which argues that a woman should have the right to do as she chooses with her body. The other side states that right should not extend to ending the lives of unborn children. And in between are a lot of other issues, like rape, incest, mother's health, etc. Of late, we have been hearing of gender-specific abortions ? another issue to toss into the mix. The matter is also charged because there is so much emotion involved. I have had conversations with people who are pro-choice who will rudely shout down anyone who tries to put forth a counter argument. They are intolerant of opposing opinions. I expect there are pro-lifers who are just

as ignorant, although I have never personally encountered any. It's been my experience that ignoramuses are well represented at all points of any spectrum.

When I read Hoy's column last week, I knew we were going to hear angry responses. Thus I was not too surprised when I heard J.D.'s message Saturday morning.

Since it was on my personal voice mail, she addressed me by name, calling me 'Mr. Rea,' and telling me she was 'very upset.' What follows are portions of the message; not an actual transcript. But I believe I am being faithful in airing the substance of her concerns.

'I find it disgusting and repulsive that you should actually produce this material,' she said. 'It is terrible. It is so pro-life. You shouldn't be able to print anything like that.'

'You are going to hear from me,' she added. 'I will not stand for something like this.'

I will confess that my initial reaction when I heard this message was one of amusement. And when I sat down to write this column (Saturday evening), I had planned to taunt J.D. But as I reflected on this immediate matter, I realized J.D. was just like Hoy. She was expressing her honestly-held opinion. How could I defend Hoy's right while laughing at hers?

But there are some realities here.

J.D. said she 'will not stand for something like this.'

What precisely she plans to do is beyond me. The day that action can be taken against a newspaper for allowing honourable people to express their honest opinions will be a very sad day indeed.

J.D. also said I would be hearing from her. Frankly, I hope I do.

But I have been in this business a long time and I have dealt with plenty of messages like the one J.D. left for me. I would be delighted if I could hear from her so we can discuss our concerns, but my experience tells me I'll never hear from her again.

Issues need to be discussed in order for them to be resolved. And they sometimes have to be revisited.

We live in what is supposed to be a free society. That means we have the right and obligation to make our views known. But there is another end to it. We have to make sure the other side gets equal time, or equal ink. And we have to be prepared to make sure the people whose words make our blood boil are heard. If we're not, then we have no business calling this a free society.

I try to do that, partly because it's my job, but really because I believe in those words wrongly attributed to Voltaire. Hoy does it, and has been doing it for many years. The late Dr. Morgentaler spent most of his life defending a position, and the only way to effectively do that is to listen to and know where the other side stands.

The only person in this discussion who doesn't seem to get it is J.D., and that's upsetting.

It upsets me because I know she's not the only one. And I don't think the people like J.D. realize that they are the real problem.