

PEARL S. BUCK

by Cat Clark

Pearl S. Buck, renowned author of *The Good Earth*, believed “herstory” was worth repeating. In her 1941 collection of feminist essays, *Of Men and Women*, she wrote:

The truth has never been told about women in history: that everywhere man has gone woman has gone too, and what he has done she has done also. Women are ignorant of their own past and ignorant of their own importance in that past. In curiosity a few months ago I asked a haphazard score of women of my acquaintance if they had heard of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Only one had even heard her name, and she had no recollection of more. Yet only a generation ago Elizabeth Cady Stanton was called the greatest woman in the United States, and by some the greatest in the world... [I]f the aim of education is to be enlightening of men and women about each other, of course history must be taught truthfully about both, and truthfully rewritten.

Many people know Pearl S. Buck as a prolific writer of bestselling and award-winning books, especially novels. The author of more than seventy books in a variety of genres, Buck was one of the most popular novelists of the 20th century. She was the first woman to win both the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes for literature and the first of only two American women to win the Nobel. She broke new ground in American fiction, especially in her sympathetic and honest portrayals of Asian people, cultures, and societies.

Others know Pearl S. Buck as an ardent humanitarian activist and promoter of intercultural and interracial harmony. Because she believed “the test of a civilization is the way that it cares for its helpless members,” Buck founded several organizations devoted to improving the quality of life and opportunities available to children – particularly refugees and those displaced by war or famine, orphans and impoverished children, the disabled and the ill – as well as other marginalized and

disadvantaged people. One of the organizations she established, Welcome House, was the first international, interracial adoption agency.



Buck was a devoted civil rights activist, a lifetime member of the NAACP who served on the board of the National Urban League and an active trustee of Howard University. She was a passionate advocate for Asian immigrants, publisher of *Asia* magazine, and founder of the East and West Association. A pacifist and an outspoken campaigner for disarmament, Buck was also a member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

Today few people may recognize Pearl S. Buck, who was both a mother of eight and an independent public figure and leader among women, as a pro-life feminist. “Press steadily for human equality, not only for yourselves, but for all those groups who are not given equality,” she told Howard University students in her 1942 commencement address. Buck’s tireless efforts as a champion for people in need extended to both women and their unborn children.

Though she was not inclined to label herself a “feminist,” Buck was a vocal supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment during a time when most organized women’s groups opposed it. As a novelist she gave voice to the experiences of women in different cultures, as a pacifist she critiqued the devastating effects of war on women, and as an advocate for children she showed particular concern for young girls, who were often among the most vulnerable.

Pearl S. Buck’s firm belief in the equal dignity and value of all human beings and her commitment to empower and aid the most vulnerable members of every society inspired her pro-life stance. The following essay, “Every Life Is a Gift,” was written near the end of her life as a foreword to Robert E. Cooke’s 1968 book *Terrible Choice: The Abortion Dilemma*. •

Every Life is a Gift, 1968

Editor's note: Language and words used to respectfully describe people with disabilities have changed since 1968, when this essay was first published.

As the mother of a child retarded from phenylketonuria, I can ask myself, at this reflective moment, if I had rather she had never been born. No, let me ask the question fully. Could it have been possible for me to have foreknowledge of her thwarted life, would I have wanted abortion?

Now with full knowledge of anguish and despair, the answer is No, I would not. Even in full knowledge I would have chosen life, and this for two reasons: First, I fear the power of choice over life or death at human hands, I see no human being whom I could ever trust with such power—not myself, not any other.

Human wisdom, human integrity are not great enough. Since the fetus is a creature already alive and in the process of development, to kill it is to choose death over life. At what point shall we allow this choice? For me the answer is—at no point, once life has begun.

At no point, I repeat, either as life begins or as life ends, for we who are human beings cannot, for our own safety, be allowed to choose death, life being all we know. Beyond life lie only faith and surmise, but not knowledge. Where there is no knowledge except for life, decision for death is not safe for the human race.

The principle thus established, I go to my second reason for rejection of abortion, in my own case. My child's life has not been meaningless. She has indeed brought comfort and practical help to many people who are parents of retarded children or are themselves handicapped.

True, she has done it through me, yet without her I would not have had the means of learning how to accept the inevitable sorrow, and how to make that acceptance useful to others.

Would I be so heartless as to say that it has been worthwhile for my child to be born retarded? Certainly not, but I am saying that even though gravely retarded it has been worthwhile for her to have lived.

It can be summed up, perhaps, by saying that in this world, where cruelty prevails in so many aspects of our life I would not add the weight of choice to kill rather than to let live.

A retarded child, a handicapped person, brings its own gift to life, even to the life of normal human beings. That gift is comprehended in the lessons of patience, understanding, and mercy, lessons which we all need to receive and to practice with one another, whatever we are.

For this gift bestowed upon me by a helpless child, I give my thanks. ●



Like Susan B. Anthony and other early American feminists, today's pro-life feminists envision a better world, where no woman would be driven by desperation to abortion.

If you have been wondering where you fit in, please consider this your invitation to

join Feminists for Life.

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