

Reproductive Justice and Sacred Choices

Rev. Peggy Clarke

In 1936, my grandmother, Dorothy Scherr, opened the phone book in the hopes of finding someone who could help her with a problem. She was getting married and had witnessed her mother and her mother's friends struggle with too many children and not enough money to feed them all. These women found a way to help each other and passed on to their daughters the unfortunate but necessary practice they called kitchen abortions. My grandmother was hoping for a different fate as she faced a new married life.

She was 20 years old and in love. She was thrilled to be getting married, but she wasn't ready for children. In 1936, birth control was illegal, so her options were limited. She told me once that she would either have to refuse sex to her new husband, or give birth to children she would watch starve.

She turned to the phone book for help. She'd read about a nurse who had found alternatives for women, so she opened up the white pages and called Margaret Sanger at home.

Ms. Sanger had reliable options, allowing my grandmother not to have children until she was ready.

That family story has always seemed sweet. It sets the stage for a continuing narrative of women's empowerment that defines my family and points to a simpler time with quaint accents like a phone book.

My family has other stories that are less Pollyanna ending up with pregnant single women in cold water flats or shipped out of town to give birth alone in shame.

Artificial contraception was made legal for married women in 1965 by the Supreme Court and by 1972 it was available regardless of marital status. Questions about the morality of using it have persisted, but rarely have we considered limiting access in any systematic way again. Unlike abortion which has been hotly debated since it's legalization almost 40 years ago, most people recognized the rationale behind making birth control accessible and a recent study revealed that 99% of all sexually active adults have used it.

The Roman Catholic Church has taken the strongest and most public stand against artificial birth control, but most of the leaders are celibate men which has reduced their credibility around this issue as evidenced by the 98.2% of sexually active Catholic adults who report to having used birth control.

Expanding the debate, in an almost unexpected move, the House of Representatives in the state of Virginia voted in a bill that declared every fertilized egg be given the same rights as a full human being. It was pitched to Democrats as a way for a pregnant woman to sue after a car accident resulted in miscarriage, but the ramifications are dramatic and were uncovered when the House rejected an amendment to the bill that would ensure that it could not be used to outlaw contraception since some forms prevent a fertilized egg from attaching to the uterine wall rather than preventing fertilization in the first place. Denial of that clarification exposed undeclared intentions and implications for this bill that could echo in labs working on stem cell research and fertility for decades to come.

This new definition is extreme and might even be a ploy to win on other fronts where the right is currently losing. Abortion, also legalized 40 years ago, has been a hot button issue ever since.

Women choose abortions for all kinds of reasons.

Emily was a 17 year old girl, still in high school. She lived in a trailer park with her depressed father. She was lonely in school with the exception of a boyfriend she was afraid of losing. When she discovered she was pregnant the summer after she graduated, she was stunned into a new reality. She claims that over the next few weeks, she could see clearly that she was either going to stay in that trailer park, likely as a single mother, poor and stuck or she was going to end the pregnancy and start September in a community college, hoping for something better for herself. She had an abortion and went to a local school for two semesters and then transferred to a 4 year school where she got a degree in nursing.

That's one way these things happen. Emily was terrified, but she was more afraid of what would happen if she did nothing. She aborted that pregnancy and chose life for herself.

There are some who might say it was a selfish move, but I think it was courageous. Something died, but something was born. There was a profound letting go of who Emily might have become and an embracing of a hope she carried for herself. She had to let go of the life she knew. Abortion meant ending the only relationship she had, yet another death. But in those deaths, she found life.

Justin, a man I know, has confided in me that he wishes his mother had aborted him. She suffered from severe mental illness and abused Justin and his brother terribly. At the age of 3, he was removed from her home and entered the foster care system where he spent the rest of his childhood. He speaks of it as a living nightmare from which he was unable to wake, each home worse than the last. His ongoing fantasy was that his mother would allow him to be adopted, but she refused. He has been damaged, by his own assessment, beyond repair.

Justin's is a difficult story to hear. While I embrace the right to decide, a part of me assumes that once someone has been born, all will be well. Justin holds up the reality of our brokenness, of a world in which things aren't always resolved.

It would seem that, all of a sudden, debates put to rest 40 years ago have taken central stage. One of the legal rights being reconsidered is a woman's right to choose, even when her life is at stake. Terminating a pregnancy in the case of immanent death of the mother has come under attack. Most of you don't know that in mid-December, 2005, Graham and I were in that position. I had a circulatory disorder that was not diagnosable until I was 6 months pregnant at which point, it was fatal. I had been pregnant 7 times. This time, it was under the care of a miscarriage specialist who we'd gone to in an attempt to ascertain what was happening. As usual, I got pregnant within a few weeks of trying, but this time I was able to carry for 24 weeks. But, over the course of a few days, my health declined dramatically and I found myself in ICU. (My blood was unable to carry oxygen, so I was suffocating.) At first I was told I'd be there for the remainder of the pregnancy, but once my tests came back, the prognosis was bleak.

I was in ICU for a week and it was determined that I would not survive continued pregnancy. My liver was shutting down and my platelets had dropped terribly. It didn't feel like much of a decision. Our daughter was going to die either way. The question was whether or not I would too. I delivered a child who was too small and sick to survive and I lived.

When the doctors came to tell me I was going to die without terminating this pregnancy, and possibly even if we did, we all agreed it was a good thing that this decision was up to us, not a politician. At the time, we thought this was one of those obvious, albeit horribly sad, decisions. One doctor assured me that this wasn't a case that would ever be debated since this child was going to die regardless of whether we took action or not. The question was only if I would die with her.

And yet, I've recently heard from the far right that not even under those circumstances should a pregnancy be terminated.

At the core, the issue around reproductive rights is about authority. Who has the authority? Do I determine what I do with my body or is there a moral code that over-rides that choice? When Fundamentalism was founded in the 1920s, the primary stand was that morality is unchanging. If something was unethical a thousand years ago, it remains unethical and we determine that through the bible. Once that's determined, the only thing left to do is enforce the moral code. Fundamentalists have generally been on the margins of American culture, but from time to time, usually in response to great change or social upheaval, they have become more central. We see their perspective today moving into mainstream culture, likely as a result of the uncertainty of our time. In the 20s, when the movement was founded, women were voting and looking for a voice in the public sphere, science was gaining in popularity with incorporation of evolution into public consciousness, biblical literalism had been replaced by the social gospel, the industrial revolution had transformed the way business was done and materials were manufactured and technological progress was moving at a rate unheard of in centuries past.

Today, we're expanding our definition of marriage, white people are losing majority status, technology is moving faster than most of us can comprehend, our standard of living has serious ramifications for our planet's ability to maintain human life and our economic stability is endangered. It's no wonder some folks want to make things easy and obvious. In that case, the authority folks are looking to is the bible and the morality of a time before all these questions were being asked.

Or, we can say that authority is in the hands of the individual. That's the pro-choice stand. Each person is allowed to choose for herself what she needs and how she will move forward.

One more story. Her name is Lisa. At 22, Lisa found herself pregnant, homeless, unmarried. She worked 39 hours a week at a Subway. The franchise required health care at 40 hours, so the owner kept Lisa

at 39, leaving her without coverage. She discovered she was pregnant and wanted to abort, but she couldn't afford it. More than that, she says the procedure terrified her and she was afraid that if she found the money and went through with it, she might go to hell. Lisa didn't do anything one way or the other, until her 9th month when she called an adoption agency. She was afraid of birth and afraid of how sad she'd be when she let her child go, but she made up her mind. She knew the best thing for herself and this child would be to find him a home she couldn't provide.

I happen to know things went well for Lisa and her son who I adopted at birth a little over two years ago. Lisa and her boyfriend, not the father of the baby, got themselves an apartment and a few months ago, they had a baby girl. Lisa is applying to night school. She and I text often.

Lisa also made a choice. She also faced conflict and struggle and a broken heart.

We live in a world that offers the potential for pain and for great beauty. Out of Lisa's crisis came a new family- mine. More than that, Lisa discovered a new part of herself. She told me she didn't know she could be so courageous and that never before had she done something so perfectly right. A lot of things came together as a result of her choice.

We live in a broken world, one in which dreams shatter and hopes don't come to pass. Sometimes a woman is joyfully partnered and ready to bear children, but sometimes a woman finds herself alone and unable to raise a child, unable to birth a child to be adopted, unable to go one more day pregnant. We protect each other by protecting the right for each woman to make her own choices, to be entrusted with knowing what's right. Women seeking abortions are seeking to live as well as they can, to let go of something fractured and move into a new way of being alive. They are looking to find a life in the midst of a death.

We protect the right to choose, because we protect the right to hope. We protect the right to choose because we protect the right to change course. We protect the right to choose because it is the end of defeatism and allows us to embrace the spiritual responsibility of self-determination.

Rev. Debra Haffner is a UU minister and a national leader on issues of religious sexual ethics. Many of you know her because she interned here 10 or 12 years ago. She founded the Religious Institute designed to bring the liberal voice into the conversation around sexual ethics and she's been quite successful. Two weeks ago, Rev. Haffner learned that her fiscal sponsor had stolen every penny the Religious Institute had and she's facing the possibility of having to close her doors for good.

Today's responsive reading was written by the Religious Institute. They are engaged in an international fight for maternal health. They've also created Rachel's Sabbath as a way for houses of worship to respectfully bring questions of abortion and contraception into their congregations and to get the voice of the religious liberal onto the national stage. They also work to end sexual violence, and to set standards that create safe congregations for children. Her work is at the heart of Safe and Sacred committees around the nation.

And, as Debra has put it herself, they are in the a fight for their lives. The UU church in Westport immediately housed them, giving them some protection and now they are begging liberal houses of worship around the nation to take collections to help them keep their doors open. They need nearly half a million dollars in the next three months if they are going to survive.

We are going to pass the basket after this sermon, giving everyone a chance, if you'd like, to support the Religious Institute.

We've come a long way from when my grandmother called Margaret Sanger at home looking for advice on her wedding night, but we haven't arrived yet. There's still work to be done.