

March 10, 2013

Fifty years ago – in May 1963 – the Unitarian Universalist Association passed its first resolution on choice. Ours was the first religious tradition to officially endorse a woman's right to reproductive choice.

Forty years ago – in January 1973 – the Supreme Court handed down its ruling on *Roe v. Wade*. The ruling decriminalized abortion based on the right to privacy. That right, the High Court determined, extended to the choices a woman makes about her own body, even in the case of pregnancy.

Last Tuesday, the Arkansas State Senate voted to override Gov. Mike Beebe's veto of the most restrictive abortion law in the country (to date). The new Arkansas law bans abortion at 12 weeks of pregnancy, when the fetal heartbeat can be detected via ultrasound. The first version of that bill would have banned abortions at 6 weeks of pregnancy, but the Arkansas legislature modified the bill to avoid having to require using a vaginal probe to detect a heartbeat.

The law conflicts with the United States Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* determination that life begins when a fetus is viable outside the womb – typically at 24 weeks. And although the new Arkansas law is unlikely to survive a legal challenge, it is indicative of a turning in our country. For, indeed, the statistics about access to safe, legal abortion are grim. One of Friday's *New York Times* editorials summarized our current climate this way:

...Last year, 19 states enacted 43 new provisions seeking to curb access to abortion services... . In 2011, 92 such measures were

passed. So far this year, 278 such provisions have been introduced in state legislatures that would narrow abortion rights in a host of ways. Another 18 measures would limit access to contraception. Not all of these will get enacted, of course, but undoubtedly some of them will. At this point, three states are down to just a single abortion provider, including Mississippi, where a medically unnecessary rule requiring that doctors have visiting privileges at local hospitals is threatening to close down the state's last clinic. (3/8/13 NYT)

I was 19 when *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal. Just by virtue of my age, I felt the ruling in a very personal way: My cohort was directly affected. In my high school, girls who got pregnant either got married, or they put on weight and then disappeared for several months, eventually returning to school much lighter. The ones who were able to obtain abortions somehow, somewhere, didn't talk about it. I was lucky not to have known, personally, anyone who died from a back alley abortion, but I certainly was aware of the risks. So, like many, I was very relieved and heartened by the *Roe v. Wade* ruling.

But, for the last forty years, I have witnessed our country become deeply polarized over the issue. Both sides tend to frame their arguments strictly in terms of right: The baby has a right to life, or the mother has a right to choose. Anxieties rise, hearts break, tempers flare, and we continue to lob our firmly held positions from one side of the great divide to the other.

As Margaret Olivia Little puts it: “... *the public discussion of abortion's moral status is disappointingly crude. The positions staked out and the reasoning proffered seem to reflect little of the subtlety and nuance – not to mention ambivalence – that mark more private reflections on the subject. Despite attempts by various parties to find middle ground, the debate remains largely polarized –*

at it most dramatic, with extreme conservatives claiming abortion is the moral equivalent of murder even as extreme liberals think it devoid of moral impact.¹

In my view, both sides need to find their way to ambiguity before we can ever have a meaningful discussion of this topic. For Unitarian Universalists, the opportunity to work *together* on a more nuanced approach to reproductive rights is upon us. Last June, at General Assembly, the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the delegates chose Reproductive Rights as their next social justice topic to study in depth. For the next couple of years, our congregations will study, discuss, share, and ponder, with the hope of coming to agreement on a statement that reflects our position as Unitarian Universalists. Can we use this opportunity to listen, see, and understand more deeply? Can we help to break open the polarization in our country?

I have always supported a woman's right to legal and safe abortion. It's hard for me to imagine my position changing. But as I have gained life experience, my need for a more nuanced position has increased. When *Roe v. Wade* was handed down, I was at the liberal fringe – feeling abortion was devoid of moral impact. I still recognize and honor abortion as the best choice in many situations, but I feel that to deny its moral impact is to minimize the struggle many (though not all) women have in making their decisions. It is to ignore the emotional ramifications many women (though not all) experience in the aftermath of an abortion.

And, for me, there's more.

Last week I was with a group of UU clergy as we pondered this

¹ Margaret Olivia Little. "The Morality of Abortion." *Ethical Issues in Modern Medicine*. Steinbock et al., eds. 2003. (Boston: McGraw Hill.) 492.

question: Has your faith helped you through difficult times? I could think of many instances when my church and my UU faith were there for me, a rock on which to rest and regain strength in tough times. But there was one period of my life when that wasn't so. After our son was born, we tried to have a second child. In the process, we lost three pregnancies – two of them life-threatening to me.

For me, to lose a pregnancy was to lose a child. Those were very real babies, housed for too short a time in my very real body. But my church was dismissive of my loss – greeting it with a “better luck next time” shrug. When other people's joys and sorrows were printed in the newsletter, the loss of my babies never appeared. The minister never called. My heart was broken, and I really needed my church.

Part of that heartache propelled me into seminary and the ministry, so that's a good outcome. But part of that heartache has also caused me to wonder if my faith community might have seen my babies as more “real” and understood my loss as devastating if they weren't so firm on defining life as beginning when the baby is viable.

Then I wondered: Would my faith community be equally dismissive of a woman who chose to abort her baby? They would have supported her decision. But would they have comforted her if she grieved? Understood her confusion or fear? Recognized the ambivalence her choice may have stirred in her? In our very real need to defend safe, legal abortions, have we cut ourselves off from feeling very deeply their ramifications?

What if the woman had decided not to abort, despite genetic testing that revealed abnormalities? Has legalizing abortion in any way brought on a new kind of eugenics movement – or an expectation

that women should birth only “normal,” healthy babies?

What if the woman had been mentally or physically handicapped herself? Would she be expected to abort her baby because it was legal to do so?

Those kinds of questions haunted me in the wake of my pregnancy losses.

The topic is vast and difficult. Today I want to focus on the question, “Whose body?” Whose body is important? I base my thoughts on my faith, which marvels at mystery, cultivates a sense of awe, and holds life to be sacred. I want to look at four bodies – four perspectives – though, of course, many are affected by any choices a woman will make.

Whose body?

As a proponent of legal and safe abortion, I have asked many times through the years, “whose body is it, anyway?” whenever it seemed as though anyone wanted to invade a woman's privacy and tamper with her choices. So let's start there, with the woman trying to decide whether or not to terminate a pregnancy she never wanted or one where something has gone terribly wrong.

Given the opportunity, many (the whole country, it seems) would weigh in on her choice, but only one body – the mother's – carries the actual child. One body – the mother's – incurs all the risks involved. One body – the mother's – will give birth and take the baby to her breast, or abort, or give the child away for adoption while experiencing the aftermath of birth – leaking breast milk, rapidly changing hormones, and even post-partum depression for

some.

Whatever the outcome of the pregnancy, the mother's experience of it is more intense and more personal than anyone else's, because it happens in her body. Of all those many people clamoring for her to submit to their particular viewpoint, none will bear responsibility for the outcome in the same way the mother does. In a society that regards child rearing as a private enterprise, the mother will be responsible for raising the child if she keeps it. The father may be, too, but a father can abandon a pregnant woman, whereas no woman can abandon her own body.

A poor woman who carries the pregnancy to term will have difficulty supporting her child, feeding and clothing it adequately, helping it get a good education, providing it with opportunities it will need to flourish. A poor woman will have a hard time even caring for herself adequately during pregnancy – eating properly and getting good medical care.

A poor woman may have a hard time aborting, too, in these draconian days when she may have to travel hundreds of miles to find a clinic. Losing pay from missed work and coughing up travel costs may make the journey financially prohibitive. For a poor woman, choice may be only a market concept – not something that is really available to her.

If the woman's life deviates in any way from what society determines as normative – if she is single, if she is a lesbian, if she is non-white – her choices, too, may be compromised.

To be “pro-choice” I need to support a society and culture that gives all women real choices, not one that offers choices only to women

who have the privilege and ability to access them.

Whose body?

There is, of course, the baby. In the aftermath of my pregnancy losses, I kept asking the question: When is a fetus a baby? Is it only when the mother desires the baby, as I desired mine? Or is there some greater miracle of life to be recognized?

I love Kahlil Gibran's words, "Your children are not your children: They come through you but not from you. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself."

As I see it, every pregnancy is the result of life's longing for itself. That is true of wanted and unwanted pregnancies, planned pregnancies and surprises, pregnancies resulting from loving relationships and pregnancies resulting from brutality. It's simple biology: Life longs for itself.

Whatever the context of the pregnancy, the fact of it finds its source in the deepest mystery of life. How ordinary, pregnancy. How miraculous, too. And, sometimes, how infuriating. Sometimes, how heartbreakingly sad.

We can argue – we *do* argue – about when life begins. The Catholic Church says it begins at conception. The Supreme Court says it begins when the fetus is viable outside the womb. The State of Arkansas says it begins at the 12th week in utero. Regardless of where we draw the line, I believe a more nuanced approach to reproductive rights remembers that life longs for itself. The power of that longing can trap a woman and cause her terrible anguish, or it can bring her great joy. But not to recognize or honor life's longing

for itself can cut us off from wonder and awe. Not to recognize life's longing for itself makes it easy to forget that the very real bodies of children need adequate care after they are born, too.

Whose body?

Perhaps you have seen the men holding protest signs just over the bridge in Topsham. The signs talk about the father's loss when a pregnancy is aborted. In a more nuanced approach to reproductive rights, I'm curious about the father.

When pregnancy is the result of a loving relationship between mother and father, I want to make room for the father's complex feelings, too. But, to give the father *power* in the decision is to run the risk of turning women into baby-making machines. It is to force her to use her body for purposes she may not choose, and that I cannot abide.

Whose body?

Many others are affected in decisions about reproduction: the baby's siblings, grandparents, and other family and community members. But there is one body oft overlooked – the Great Mother, Mother Earth. The earth is dying under the strain of the burgeoning human population. There are too many people in the world. Several decades ago, we used to talk about zero population growth. But it has been ages since I have heard a serious discussion about limiting human births.

I feel the body of our mother earth, which carries all of us, needs to be considered when we talk about reproductive justice. To what end do we pursue bringing any children into the world who are unwanted, when the earth is groaning under the burden of carrying

all of us? It is hubris to think human life takes precedence over all other life forms; It is mindlessness, carelessness, thoughtlessness not to think through all the ramifications of adding more people to our planet.

Whose body?

The question is difficult and complex.

The mother, the child, the father, the earth. We are woven together, our individual strands making one vast web.

Forty years ago, I never could have imagined I would ever have to hear another sermon on reproductive rights, much less preach one. But times have changed. Perhaps those changes issue an invitation to us – to go deeper into a problem that is complex, a problem that does not have one easy answer.

In my view, honoring life requires recognizing we are small in the face of all we don't know, that we walk in thickets of ambiguity, subtlety, and nuance. Out of that ambiguity, subtlety, and nuance, anguish can arise. But so, too, can creativity, and, with time, deeper understanding. And those are the building blocks we use to create and re-create our world.