

Thirty-five Years of Choice

Rev. Deborah Mero

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UFWC

It was Mother's Day in 1970 that I first found my way into a Unitarian Universalist church. Actually, it was a chapel. It was the Channing Murray Foundation Chapel on the campus of the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, one of only two on campus chapels that the Unitarian Universalist Association is affiliated with. A friend in my dorm had asked if I wanted to go out for Sunday Brunch and I thought sure, why not? As we were walking down the street on our way, she then said, "But first, if you don't mind, I'd like to go to a chapel service. Please come with me." I felt somewhat ambushed, but at that point there seemed to be no graceful way out. So I went with her. I had been in the building before, in the basement. The Red Herring Coffee House was sited there, the best coffee house on campus.

We walked into this dark sanctuary where the pews had been replaced by chairs and the chairs were in a circle. Each had a piece of paper on it—the order of service. I looked everywhere for clues, actually trying to find Jesus as a way of closing my mind to the whole thing. But it was all pretty neutral in an odd sort of way. The minister was African American. The subject of the service was "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." It hit me at a deeper level than I was able to deal with. Like many people of that age, my relationship with my mother was less than, shall we say, comforting? I found myself in tears—not necessarily outward tears, I tried to hide them, but there was an open wound inside that various elements in the service—the music, the words, the feeling—penetrated. That was my first UU experience, feeling like a motherless child on Mother's Day and having that feeling affirmed rather than shamed.

As you can probably imagine, being in college through the years of 1969 to 1973 was a heady time. The Vietnam War, the draft and protests were in full bore. The birth control pill was newly readily available and everything seemed like it was in the middle of major tectonic shifts. In the middle of it all as I was entering my last semester as an undergraduate, Roe v. Wade was decided declaring abortion to be legal throughout the country. Frankly, I didn't even notice it was happening nor did I read about it at the time. I was busy working long hours in the theater complex hardly emerging to see the light of day.

While I was experiencing my first UU service on that Mother's Day 38 years ago, a young attorney, Sarah Weddington was in Austin Texas preparing for a court case challenging the laws that prohibited a woman and her doctor from making a choice about whether or when to have children. The case had begun in Texas in 1970, was argued before the Supreme Court on December 13, 1971 and reargued October 11, 1972.

Almost any woman could have been Jane Roe. Across this country and across the breadth of the globe, women always have and probably always will find themselves pregnant and not want to have that child. Some are too poor to be able to provide for it. Some are in the midst of getting an education or building a career and having a child would put an end to that process. Some are the victims of rape or incest. Some are in their early teens with no concept of what motherhood requires. Some used birth control and it failed them. The reasons are many and personal.

Whatever the reasons, history has shown that women who have decided to end a pregnancy are willing to go to any ends and use any means to do so. Those who could afford it flew to Japan or Mexico or Europe to find safe and clean abortions. Those who couldn't were at the mercy of good doctors who quietly and carefully broke the law, or unscrupled back alley abortionists. Those who couldn't find even that resorted to coat hangers, knitting needles, acids, chemicals of all kinds.

Thousands of women suffered severe consequences short of death, including perforations of the uterus, cervical wounds, serious bleeding, infections, poisoning, shock, and gangrene. Those of you in the generations before me know the stories firsthand. You, or friends or relatives lived these stories.

I was not aware, at the time, that there was an organization called the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion operating out of New York City. Founded in 1967 by a Baptist minister, the Rev. Howard Moody, the organization of 26 ministers and a rabbi referred women in need to safe, clean clinics even though abortion was still illegal. They had seen enough anguished women to want to put their own careers in jeopardy to help. By the time *Roe v. Wade* legalized the procedure in 1973, there were over 1,400 clergy in 22 states working with this network, many of them my Unitarian Universalist colleagues. The Unitarian Universalist Association through the process of general resolutions adopted by the annual General Assembly had already passed resolutions supporting a woman's right to reproductive freedom as early as 1963. In 1970 I was not aware of the various laws in various states that ranged from outright bans on all abortions with prison sentences for doctors who would risk doing the procedure to the "more permissive" states that would allow it. But that permission would only come after several doctors and a hospital committee, each, in their turn had examined the woman or the case and made a judgement call based on their own criteria—whether those criteria were for the sake of the woman's health and well being, or not. I was not aware of the long history and battles even for the legalization of disseminating information about birth control, let alone for the legal distribution of birth control devices and prescriptions. As a college student studying for a career in theatrical design, I was not aware of any of these things.

I was aware of other factors. Things like the MRS. degree which at that time was still something that many female college students aspired to. I was aware that the prestige professions were mostly occupied by men. College ranks were not as yet filled with pre-med or pre-law students. Female ministers, while not unheard of, were rare. I was aware that the business world was one where they still anticipated that women would be risky hires because it was still assumed that our greatest goal was motherhood so we would not be sticking with jobs or professions for very long. I was vaguely aware that people would travel long distances to Mexico or New York if the need and money were there.

Now, I am aware of all of those things and lots lots more. Much more than I can begin to express in a single sermon. It has been almost twenty years now that I have been an activist for Choice—not an activist for abortion, an activist for Choice. The issue is one of choice, justice, and health. Becoming a mother is a lifetime commitment, one not to be entered into lightly. It is something that not everyone is suited for or ready for. One's "choice" can be determined by so many factors not having to do with the desire to be a mother. How can it be that such a commitment, such a decision is made by external factors or disinterested parties?

Choice—who decides? the Church? The Legislature? the Courts? The woman?

Contrary to popular belief, "the Church" has changed positions through the centuries. In April of 1994, I attended the national conference of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice in Washington DC. I was on a panel speaking to the assembled group on Saturday morning. Seated next to me was a minister from upstate New York who told of his early experiences in the ministry when he was the newly ordained chaplain at Skidmore College in 1966. After telling a specific story, he shared with us his observations at the time. He said:

"For other students we referred them to physicians in Schenectady or Albany. The infirmary would send them over. The physician would call our physician and say, 'with that person you sent to us, we found it necessary to do a D and C'. They always found it necessary to do a D and C. The doctors who did the abortions were Catholic, they were in good standing with their churches, and everyone knew about it. I can ask people of that era and they all say, 'Oh yea Dr. so and so, he was the one who did abortions. Which meant the Bishop knew about it. Everybody knew about it. And nobody cared. And the lesson was clear to me then, and remains the central focus of my organizing, this has nothing to do with abortion, this is sexism. Because when women in 1970 in April were given the right in the state of New York to decide for themselves, abortion instantly became the crime of the century, the greatest scourge the world has ever known. It wasn't the greatest scourge in 1969, why was it the greatest scourge in 1970? Only one thing had changed, that women had the choice."¹

The only thing that had changed was that women had the choice. Now the way we hear the issue talked about in the Catholic church today, we would be led to believe that abortion, from the very founding of the church, has always been a mortal sin and should be condemned at any opportunity. But it wasn't always the case within the Catholic church, and certainly not in other churches. Since then the religious arguments have been written and documented and shouted. And they will not abate. Beneath it all the question remains, who decides? In authoritarian churches, there is no choice, God has made it. In liberal churches, the individual conscience rules.

Living in a society governed by laws which are written by legislative bodies we are again limited in our choices. We have a long history of legislating morality. In 1873 the Comstock law was passed which

"made it illegal to send any "obscene, lewd, and/or lascivious" materials through the mail, including contraceptive devices and information. In addition to banning contraceptives, this act also banned the distribution of information on abortion for educational purposes .

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The consequences of breaking the law were fines and imprisonment "at hard labor." The first laws prohibiting abortion were written actually because it was considered a dangerous medical procedure well over a hundred years ago. The laws were thought to protect women. The next set of laws were advanced on behalf of the medical profession as it began organizing. Doctors were trying to shut down the practice of midwifery which competed with them. In all of these cases laws were being written to protect what we would call "special interests" but not necessarily the women whose lives would be most affected. It wasn't until *Griswold v. CT* in 1965 that the use of contraceptives by a married couple became legal in the United States. It was the first time that the right to privacy in intimate relations was established by the courts. This fundamental right to privacy has been both built upon and challenged ever since. Each state has taken upon itself the charge to write laws regarding reproductive choice. The pressure that has been put upon lawmakers by conservative church organizations has been enormous and lawmakers around the country, for the most part, have acquiesced. Though *Roe v. Wade* has been the law of the land for 35 years, obtaining a safe, legal abortion is something that is next to impossible in 87% of the counties in this country. Laws have been passed erecting hurdles for women to overcome requiring

¹ transcribed from a tape of the panel presentation

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comstock_laws

waiting periods, counseling, the required viewing of ultrasound pictures, parental consent for minors and multiple visits to clinics. And waiting in the wings of the anticipated end of Roe, 21 states have in place laws that will outright ban abortion. Twenty states have varying degrees of protections but look relatively safe, and the remaining nine states could go either way.

And then there are the courts. It has been by the remedies of the court thus far that women have been given the right to make their own decisions. Those same courts however can find ways of reversing themselves. From the 7-2 majority opinion in favor of Roe, we now have a very shaky 5-4 majority for preserving it. The next election will decide who makes nominations that will either maintain or overturn the rights of women to make their own decisions. Then there are the courts where minors are often directed. Young women, sometimes girls, who find themselves pregnant and in no position to raise a child and for whatever reason cannot tell their parents, are directed to stand before a judge to plead for their future. Their lives depend on the wisdom and compassion of a judge who may not be able to make that decision without prejudice. The girl leaves the courtroom, a decision made for her, never to see the judge who determined her fate again.

The most important issue for me is who decides, not what the ultimate decision is. It is an issue of Choice and justice. In a perfect world all women would have access to all that is needed to bring up a child in a healthy home. In the world in which we live, the disparity between those who have and those who have not is breathtaking. The ability and stability of everyone to be able to raise a child just is not real. In a perfect world, everyone would have the benefit of educational programs like Our Whole Lives, our sexuality curriculum. They would learn about sex as an expression of love and connection to be respected and cherished. There would be no rape or incest. In a perfect world, everyone would have easy access to a full range of safe birth control methods. In a perfect world, every woman who chooses to have a child would be given the health care, the nurturing and the support both for her and her child to thrive. But this is not a perfect world. Choices are made every day. They are made because of laws, courts, religion and health. One of the issues that is all too often left out of the discourse are the women who desperately want a child only to find out that something went very wrong. Should a mother's health be endangered because of a tragic pregnancy? Should a woman have to knowingly carry a fetus to term that is destined to die upon delivery? Again, who should make that decision?

Thirty-five years ago seven justices of the Supreme Court acknowledged their

*"awareness of the abortion controversy, of the vigorous opposing views, even among physicians, and of the deep and seemingly absolute convictions that the subject inspires. One's philosophy, one's experiences, one's exposure to the raw edges of human existence, one's religious training, one's attitudes toward life and family and their values, and the moral standards one establishes and seeks to observe . . ."*³

On this Mother's Day we come together. In this congregation we cherish and respect the choices each of us makes knowing that such decisions are weighty. To have a child, to adopt a child, to choose not to have a child, to have lost a child. We bring our joys of motherhood, our disappointments, our sadness, our yearning. After thirty-five years, the struggle continues. May we see the day when the struggle is over the choice itself and not who decides.

³ http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0410_0113_ZO.html