

Solidarity and Choice: What We Need to Say (and Do) about Abortion Rights

A sermon by Rev Steven Epperson

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Katha Pollitt, the feminist writer/activist recently wrote the following words: “Women have sex, have abortions, are at peace with themselves and move on with their lives. We need to say that is their right, and more, it’s good for everyone that they have this right: The whole society benefits when motherhood is voluntary. When we gloss over these truths we unintentionally promote the very stigma we’re trying to combat.”

Twenty years ago, I wouldn’t have guessed I’d be saying that from the pulpit. It wouldn’t have occurred to me, as well, if it weren’t for Pollitt also asking: “where are the voices of men in support of a woman’s right to have an abortion?” I’ve not spoken up before now for several reasons, thinking: well, abortion is legal in this country; it’s performed by medical professionals and its costs covered by national health insurance.

Going further, Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists in North America have publicly advocated for legal, safe, accessible and publicly funded abortions since 1963. I have counted at least eleven Resolutions and Statements of Conscience on abortion and reproductive rights formally adopted by the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association and nine such Resolutions adopted by the Canadian Unitarian Council—the last as recently as May 2015 on “Reproductive Justice.”

And as an old white guy, I didn’t feel I had the right to talk about this issue—better that a woman address you from this pulpit about the subject at hand. All that changed for me last August; and my desire to speak with you has only deepened over the past two months.

It began with Katha Pollitt's op-ed column written by in *New York Times* on August 5th and, then by a spooky co-incidence, in a news article published the very next day in the *Globe and Mail*.

Pollitt began her column with the following question: "*Why does the pro-choice movement so often find itself in a defensive crouch?*" While her question immediately referenced the current controversy plaguing the Planned Parenthood organization in the States, the question and her response apply here and to us.

In sum, Pollitt said there are two reasons abortion rights activists get themselves boxed into an advocacy predicament. First, she tells us that *we're reactive rather than proactive*. That is, in response to attacks by abortion opponents, "we fall in with the messaging that unconsciously encodes the vision of the other side." For example: abortion opponents say women seek abortions in haste and confusion. Advocates respond by saying that abortion is the most difficult, agonizing decision a woman ever makes. Opponents say: women have abortions because they have irresponsible sex. Abortion advocates say: look, there's rape, incest, fatal fetal abnormalities and life risking pregnancies.

While these responses aren't altogether false—some women are ambivalent, some become pregnant as a result of violence, some pregnancies are dangerous. But deflecting attacks in this way leaves out the vast majority of women seeking abortions: women who had sex willingly, made thoughtful, mature decisions to end a pregnancy and didn't face life threatening medical conditions; women who envision their future lives and the lives of their families. Indeed, according to the journal *Psychological Medicine*, 95% of women felt having an abortion

was the right decision, both immediately after the procedure and in follow-up interviews years later.

If we echo mantras like: “safe, legal and *rare*,” or qualify abortion as “the most difficult decision a woman will ever make,” in effect, we promote a stigma we would otherwise want to combat. Because if we say in somber tones that we want as little of it as possible, we can, in fact, imply there’s something wrong about terminating a pregnancy. Emphasizing the difficulty of a decision may forestall accusations that those who make this decision are careless or just seeking a convenient exit out of responsibility ignores the fact that it is far more often a practical, positive, responsible and moral choice; a choice sensitively attuned to the ethics of each situation and not to some externally imposed abstract principle. And it must be said, that for many this is a visionary, insightful and deeply spiritual decision.

The phenomenon of a falling into what Pollitt calls the reactive, defensive crouch was brought home to me recently, when I saw the movie “Grandma.” The movie features Lily Tomlin as a tough talking, feminist, lesbian poet whose teenage granddaughter shows up one morning unannounced, declares she’s pregnant, and needs \$600 to pay for an abortion scheduled to take place late that afternoon. Strapped for cash, the Tomlin character sets out with her granddaughter in order to round up enough money to pay for the procedure. That odyssey takes us across Los Angeles, into the aging poet’s past and the mysterious depths of love, family and duty.

But there’s one scene that brought me up short: grandma and grand-daughter are sitting side-by-side in the front seat of the older woman’s ancient car having just set out on their journey together, when the Tomlin character sagely tells the young woman: “this is the most difficult decision you will ever make, perhaps the most difficult thing you’ll ever do; and *you’ll remember*

this every day for the rest of your life.” There it was, nearly word-for-word, and even stronger: it’s the well-intentioned, but defensive, stigma-stoking, liberal minded abortion mantra that plays right into the hands of reactionary framing of this issue.

After the movie, and for a reality check, I asked my spouse—a grandmother with sisters, a daughter, nieces, grandmothers, and women friends—I asked her: “do you *really* believe that young woman will think about the abortion every day for the rest of her life?” “No,” she replied. So why did the screenwriter feel compelled to write those lines?

Which brings me to the second reason Katha Pollitt says we’re stuck in the defensive mode: *we’re way too quiet—and it’s a silence abortion opponents are delighted to fill with moralizing campaigns, lobbying and legislating.* They are more than willing to spend their days humiliating, harassing and threatening women trying to access services and those people serving them.

Nearly half of all women in the States and Canada will have at least one abortion by the time they reach menopause. (from a conversation October 11, 2015, with a Planned Parenthood obstetrician who also noted that the official number of abortions performed each year are seriously under-reported.) Many others will have spontaneous abortions, or miscarriages—which is one of several ways that the body may help support or limit fertility. And many of those women will have a friend, boyfriend, spouse or parent helping and supporting them. Where are those people? Where are we? And again, Pollitt asks, *where are the men?* The husbands, male friends, dads, boyfriends and grandfathers supportive of their spouses, friends, daughters, lovers and grand-daughters voluntarily decision to end a pregnancy for a host of thoughtful, practical, wise, loving and responsible reasons; and because it was her right, her insight to do so. These decisions, I might add, often take into serious consideration the

lives and future of these men. And speaking of men, one of the reasons it's difficult for men to talk on this subject from the pulpit or elsewhere is the fact that so many men who have sex with women are *not* present and supportive—they're out of there, missing in action, when a lover, girlfriend and spouse becomes pregnant.

That question: where are the men and their voices?... When I read that on a hot summer day in August in New York City, and subsequently learned that only one in six UU ministers have preached on reproductive justice, and one on three haven't preached on *any* sexuality issue, well...I knew it was my turn to try and talk about this today. (for the Pollitt column, see "What Abortion Rights Advocates Need to Say," *NYT*, August 5, 2015; on UU ministers and preaching, see <http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/washingtonoffice/reproductivejustice/curriculum/uuacurriculumrjcombined.pdf>)

But then I had this nagging thought: all this really only applies to the US and other countries, no? Not Canada. If I talked about this in Vancouver, BC, wouldn't we end up just tut-tutting about those messed up Yanks, those Irish, or Kenyans, or Filipinos and others?

Well, this is where it gets Canadian. The very day after Pollitt's essay appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Globe and Mail* ran an article under the following title: "Saskatoon letter carriers told to deliver anti-abortion flyers targeting Trudeau." Turns out an anti-abortion group, hiding behind the euphemistic title: "The Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform," printed up thousands of campaign flyers, stamped on the outside with the statement: "Important Election Information Enclosed." Opening the envelope, you're confronted with a graphic photo of a late-term aborted fetus right next to a photo of Justin Trudeau over a screaming headline: "A Vote for Trudeau is a Vote for This!"

Saskatoon letter carriers balked at delivering the flyers; citing concerns about "violent, graphic material that they are delivering" and worried about who in the house would first open

up the flyer and see—well, let's call it what it is: anti-abortion pornography. The letter carriers' union local released a statement in "support of our members who feel that Canada Post should work to preserve family values." (Do you see the irony here?) Well, seeing matters differently, CP told the union that the corporation is not responsible for the content of the mail, and that letter carriers who refuse to deliver the flyers would face disciplinary action. The flyers were mailed.

Maybe just an isolated incident, I thought. That got me reading up on the history of reproductive rights and abortion in this nation. It's an extraordinary story of courage, determination, protest, and the sure, if unsteady evolution of a nation and its people from outright patriarchy, prohibition, and de facto religious establishment to one of only a handful of nations in the world where there are no legal restrictions on abortion, where they are provided on request and funded by national health insurance. There are many here who lived this story, spoke up, acted out and struggled to achieve reproductive choice and rights. I am grateful to you and to our Unitarian denominations in the States and in Canada for their vanguard and enduring advocacy in word and deed over the past half century and more.

And then I kept looking and listening. Why, in the recent French language debate, did a candidate demand of our Prime Minister to state whether he is pro-choice or against? And why, to my reading, did he evade answering?

That got me reading some Parliamentary records from the past ten years. I counted at least five separate bills introduced in Parliament, one as recently as five years ago, which, if they had been enacted, would have limited a woman's access to abortion and her decision to end a pregnancy, and criminalized women, doctors, and others who assisted them. Though far from explicit, and in spite of statements to the contrary that the debate and this issue is closed, that's

the incremental, step-wise intent of these bills. (Bills, C-338, 484, 510, 537, and 543; see www.parl.gc.ca/content/LOP/ResearchPublications/prb0822-e.htm)

And they're not coming out of nowhere; and not from the States. Polls taken in Canada in 2008 and 2010 indicated that nearly half of those polled believe that abortion should be restricted in one form or another (with an additional 52% describing themselves as pro-choice). In response to the question: "at what point in human development should the law protect human life?" 20% said after three months of pregnancy and 30% of respondents said "from conception on." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abortion_in_Canada)

As well, it's still the case that there are no hospitals in PEI that permit abortions, forcing women to seek them elsewhere without any travel assistance from Provincial health services, and in neighbouring New Brunswick, virtually the only source of abortions—the Morgentaler Clinic—closed down just last year.

In this Province, access to abortion is dwindling in rural BC. According to Dr Wendy Norman of UBC, the number of rural abortion providers has declined more than 60% in last decade; 90% of all abortions take place in our three largest urban centres, despite the fact that only 57% of reproductive-age women live there, forcing thousands of women to travel hundreds of kilometers to access services; and according to this study, several rural abortion providers reported that physicians and nurses have resigned due to harassment and stigma. (Sunny Dhillon, "Access to abortion...", *The Globe and Mail*, July 25, 2013)

In the past couple of weeks, I've talked with a number of women from two generations in my immediate and extended family. And last Sunday, under beautiful morning skies, I interviewed an obstetrician—a mother herself of two daughters—who works for Planned

Parenthood and has performed abortions for the last twenty years. Here's some of what I heard and learned from them:

I was grateful to be reminded that it is within the deep wisdom of Mother Nature that she aborts across the whole spectrum of the living things ceaselessly and beyond number; abortion is a normal part of life itself, and always has been.

I appreciated the story of one couple who, in the end, chose to have their daughter, knowing she would be a Downs baby. (“We had to fight for her in the face of widespread medical and social pressure to terminate, and that was our choice,” they said.) “If this couple hadn't had the option of terminating the pregnancy,” observed a young family member, “they would never have been able to *own* the decision to have her; it would have been something *forced upon them by fate*.” Isn't the option of choice far better?

“If you haven't been through it, you can't really understand it,” remarked another voice from the family. “Each situation is different. So you have to listen; don't judge. Be a sounding board. I guess it's all right if you ask: ‘Are you OK?’ But what *really* would have helped is if someone had asked: ‘*What do you need?* Can I do some shopping for you; make you dinner; do your laundry?’”

“You know, a lot of people assume it's murder,” she said; and sometimes, you just can't help wondering: ‘am I going to be judged for this?’” “Well, if there's a God,” she mused, “I think he knows you're doing what's best and that you're making a loving choice.”

And I heard this: “Fact is, it always comes down to the woman, doesn't it? She has to make the decision; and *what you're doing is preventing a future you don't want*. Perhaps, if you

arrive at a certain age and you have support lined up, *then* you choose to have a child if you want —on your own or with an intentional partner.”

“It’s very satisfying work and worthwhile,” Doctor Kate, the obstetrician told me. “You’re there to relieve a crisis; and people are thankful that you’re there for them.” “Each situation is different? Well true enough, but over the years I see three broad themes: First, even if they’re very clear it’s the right thing to do, almost every woman has strong emotions. There is an emotional bond with a pregnancy. Women do go through some grief and loss, while simultaneously, there’s relief and happiness; and it helps being prepared for that.”

“Second, and I’m hearing this a lot: poverty’s getting worse, substance abuse is increasing, and because of it, there also seem to be less men around deemed to be good future fathers and partners. Women are telling me that if they could make a decent income, they would keep the pregnancy and raise the child. There are strong social issues at work here; there’s not enough financial support, and women may already have a child or two and are caring for aging parents. So what I see is that they’re making a rational and loving choice.”

“And finally,” Dr. Kate said, “there’s mass incarceration. Do you have *any idea* how many women and men are going to prison, are in prison, or have come out of prison? It’s mind blowing; and can you imagine what impacts this is having on reproductive issues, child bearing and raising families? We’re in a crisis, and if we don’t make women’s health and access to the full range of reproductive rights policy priorities, we’re going to be in big trouble.”

So, I’m coming to the end of this sermon: What we need to say (and do) about abortion rights? The struggle’s far from over.

I think it begins by saying that abortion has long been a normal part of nature and of a woman's life; normal as well, for the men who know, love and want to be there in support and solidarity.

It begins quietly with a listening ear and with compassion for the deep emotions that often accompany the decision to end a pregnancy, or to see the pregnancy through to birth.

Gratitude comes to mind—gratitude that we don't have to be subject to fate; and how fortunate we are that the choice is there, guaranteed by law, and supported by the taxes we pay.

Practical words. What do you need? Can I bring over some food? Can I do your laundry? I'm here for you.

And here I want to repeat Katha Pollitt's words: "We need to say that women have sex, have abortions, are at peace with themselves and move on with their lives. We need to say that is their right, and more, it's good for everyone that they have this right: The whole society benefits when motherhood is voluntary." And I want to say "Amen, and Amen" to that.

Finally, there is the question of justice. It is one thing to have a right guaranteed by law, another altogether to have it achieved and lived. Justice is denied, rights hollowed out and made a mockery if we substitute the fate of nature—an unwanted pregnancy—with an intentionally created, punitive fate we impose on countless women and families.

Reproductive justice means ensuring that abortions are fully accessible and fully funded by provincial health plans no matter where they are performed in Canada and that governments assume all costs, including travel, for women who have to travel for abortion services.

Reproductive justice means justice for everyone, and not just for those who live in large cities, and have the privilege of money and other resources.

Reproductive justice means raising children in safe and healthy environments—where rights are secured to decent affordable housing, a living wage, and a meaningful education and job opportunities.

It means the right to self-determination regarding bodies and sexuality free from oppression, violence, exploitation and shame.

These are the kinds of words we need to say—from the quiet, personal and intimate to the public and political—words and deeds where we will continue as sisters and brothers, allies with the wisdom of nature, with generations of Unitarians, with the wisdom of women—our friends, mothers, daughters and sisters—and with each other, in this enduring story of rights, love, justice and solidarity. And may it be so.

(For more on Reproductive Justice, see the Statement of Conscience formally adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association, June 2015 <http://www.uua.org/statements/reproductive-justice>; and the Study Action Resolution adopted by the Canadian Unitarian Council, May 2105, http://www.cuuwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/CUC_Abortion_Rights_ProposedAction.2015.pdf)

(I want to thank the women who spoke with me and shared their experiences, insight and wisdom; and to thank my partner Diana for her invaluable contribution to the writing of this sermon.)