

"The Right To Be Well Received: Beyond Abortion and Right To Life"
by Rev. Lori Staubitz; 3/21/2010, The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the
Chesapeake, Southern Maryland

Today we are invited to come into "balance" –with the Earth and with each other-
here at the Vernal Equinox...when day is equal to night...

How wonderful if that were true. But there are many who live outside the possibility
of balance...outside the realm of choice and the hope that spring will ever come to
their lives.

It may seem odd or downright sinful that we would spend this glorious Sunday
getting in touch with a subject so wrought by anguish and despair. And here you
thought January and February were enough doom and gloom for our tender human
spirits? It may be so. But there are things we need to know and things we need to
do as we move forward into the next season of our lives.

Our Jewish and Christian heritage councils us not to wish away the night too quickly
lest we enter this season of new life unchanged.

Passover...One of the most significant holiday seasons marked by the Jewish
calendar is a time of reflection and remembrance . Bitter herbs and salt water are
shared as part of the Passover Seder as Jews everywhere are invited to remember
when they were slaves and how they escaped from Egypt and wandered in the
wilderness." This annual ritual meal that helps put the taste of suffering right into
our mouths of the faithful.

Christians enter this season by way of Lent.-a time to get in touch personally and
communally with suffering through the passion story of Jesus. Marked by Ash
Wednesday many enter into the Lenten season as a time of sacrifice through
fasting, or giving up something they truly love.

Here in our congregation Martin Luther King Sunday marks our season of social
conscience, as we dedicate many of our worship services to issues of injustice ...to
bring us into greater awareness and acute empathy with those who suffer and
increase our ability to respond.

This morning we will bring to light some of the more hidden issues related to birth
control, poverty and choice. We will hear a variety of stories and facts.

Interestingly enough the beginning of Lent coincides with the more ancient pagan
celebration of Embolic-which honors women, procreation, gestation and the first
stirrings of unveiled life, not yet visible beneath the blankets of snow and cover of
frozen earth.

I have five short testimonies to share with you. These will not be easy to hear...If you need to leave the room for a few minutes, I will understand. My hope is that we serve as witnesses to sorrow and injustice together by increasing our understanding, compassion and ministry in the hope that balance will be made more possible for those who live in poverty, ignorance and shame.

The following stories are portions of testimonies from "Many Voices - Many Choices; an online collaboration of women sharing their experiences.

Our Truths, Nuestras Verdades is produced in collaboration with the Exhale newsletter, a diverse group of women who are reproductive rights activists, social workers, counselors, feminists, writers and artists. While all support universal access to legal abortion, we also know that for many women and men their experience of abortion is connected to their beliefs about family, culture, religion and relationships as well as affected by their access to resources and information. This zine aims to help break the silence that many women face, providing a forum for women to share their stories about abortion, and to affirm their decisions and experiences.

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"Riye's Story*I am an Inuk from North West Territories and I am about to have an abortion tomorrow morning. I feel like I have no choice but to go ahead with it. I don't want to bring up a child and explain to him or her that the father of my baby was extremely dangerous, violent man and in and out of jail for physically abusing others."

"Words for my baby-Please forgive me for what I am about to do to you." " I am numb and scared but I know this is the right thing to do."

2

"Jaye -June 20, 2004 Well, today is father's day - tomorrow is the first day of summer, and I am scheduled for a 3:00pm abortion at Planned Parenthood. "

"Today on my way to work I think I saw more anti-abortion bumper stickers in one hour than I have in a year. Maybe I was just noticing more. Everyone is entitled to their own beliefs, their own choices - this is America people. I love this about our country (one of the few things left). If this right had been taken away before today I might not have lived to see 2005. (I would have chosen suicide rather than giving birth) It would have been my own protest for the right to choose.

At the same time I regret my irresponsibility deeply. I don't see abortion as something anyone should take for granted; it is a one-time 'get out of jail free' card. I know that the life I am ending is a life. "But I also know that it won't feel the pain of death, neither will it grow up deprived of parents emotionally and financially able to provide for him/her. "

Valerie's Story

I was one year from college graduation and from a family that pregnancy before marriage would be unacceptable. The day (I) found out about the pregnancy (I) scheduled the abortion. I cried during/after the abortion, but felt immense relief as soon as it was scheduled, and again as soon as it was over.

The only people who ever found out were those I chose to tell. I graduated a year later and now am happily married with a successful job - my husband and I are now trying to conceive our first child and we are now prepared for a child, physically, financially, and emotionally." "When I told my now husband he revealed that 15 years before he and his then high school girlfriend had to have an abortion. "

It is more widespread and more accepted than you may think. Do not live in fear. Those who are judgmental against you have never been in your position and are self-righteous about the fact that they wouldn't allow themselves to be in that position. It can happen to anyone. You shouldn't have to pay for the rest of your life. And it can be ok afterward. I won't tell you that I never think about it- but I have never for one moment regretted it.

Dear Baby Kathleen,

I am writing to say goodbye to you. I hope someday you will read this and understand. This is the hardest thing I have ever done in my life." When I found out I was pregnant my heart sank. I knew I couldn't have you.

But, I also knew I couldn't have an abortion. I did that once and I had a really hard time with how I felt afterwards." " I met your new parents a while ago and I think they are wonderful people. I feel like I'm really doing something good for them-- and for you. I know you are in good hands and that they will love you and care for you.

I come from a big family--Irish--and I have three sisters and a brother. My mother doesn't know anything about this--no one does. She couldn't bear knowing she had a grandchild somewhere. She works in a restaurant and is a great cook." "Right now I clean houses and waitress sometimes. I'm good at both jobs, but I like making people's houses sparkle.

I just haven't settled down on what I'm supposed to do in life. Maybe this is it-- letting Elaine and Mike raise you. Good luck, little one. I wish I could see you grow, but I know you are going to be great. I love you. -Deirdre"

Witness account- Charmayne Denlinger-Lancaster PA (selected from Extending The Table"

"One afternoon while I was living in Bangladesh, my best friend took me to visit Romona.

She greeted us at the door and invited us into her bamboo hut, surrounded by trees. It was nice to be out of the bright summer sun and heat. As my eyes adjusted (in) the dim light, I saw the daughter Ramona was carrying on her hip. The girl's hair was almost white. Her eyes peered lifelessly at me from sunken sockets. The child appeared to be desperately ill. Nearly two years old, she was not strong enough to walk. When Ramona stepped into the kitchen to make tea, I whispered to my friend "What is wrong with Ramona's daughter?"

She quietly replied 'Ramona and her husband can no longer feed all the children they have, so they have to chosen this daughter to die.'

Which of these is the greatest evil? We might ask ourselves this morning... This is the central question before us now, as it has been since the dawn of humanity.

Jesus of Nazareth is said to have picked up a stone and feeling the weight of it in his hand he said "Let those who are without sin cast the first stone."-and the mob dispersed.

The truth is, many "faithful"...hardcore, right to lifers as well as staunch abortion rights activists continue to moralize and polarize as the fundamental causes of teen pregnancy, abortion and infanticide continue.

As access to universal healthcare, quality education and quality of life continue to be politicized by Democrats and Republicans alike.

The fact is...both sides...The Religious Right and The Liberal Religious Front are called to a deeper moral code and more specific action to relieve human suffering.

The United States has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and births in the western industrialized world. Teen pregnancy costs the United States at least \$7 billion annually. (Federal Funding for Abstinence Only education –taught in our public schools-178 million dollars a year. Evidence shows while encouraging teens to wait until they are older to have sex is advisable...abstinence only is not working to address overall teenage pregnancy.)

Thirty-four percent of young women become pregnant at least once before they reach the age of 20 -- about 820,000 a year. Eight in ten of these teen pregnancies are unintended and 79 percent are to unmarried teens.

- **463,000** = number of children in foster care on September 30, 2008 – parents unable to care for their children.
- **123,000** = Number of children waiting to be adopted on September 30, 2008
- **55,000** = Number of children adopted from the public foster care system in FY 2008

State Fact Sheets on Foster Care

The NRCPPFC prepared these fact sheets about foster care for the National Foster Care Month campaign. Most data was supplied by the Children's Bureau for Fiscal Year 2003.

Teen mothers are less likely to complete high school-nearly 80 percent of unmarried teen mothers end up on welfare

Children of teenage mothers have lower birth weights, are more likely to perform poorly in school, and are at greater risk of abuse and neglect.

The sons of teen mothers are 13 percent more likely to end up in prison while teen daughters are 22 percent more likely to become teen mothers themselves.

Teen sex- related to devaluing of females/ cultures lack of positive images of women and female autonomy- since the majority of young girls say they have sex as a result of pressure from males. Teen Pregnancy information obtained from The National Campaign To Prevent Teen Pregnancy

Jewish scripture is filled with stories related to infanticide...for indeed it was And still is common practice.

Infanticide, the murder of a newborn is most often done by a parent who is poor, single, and under the age of nineteen, living in a rural area without a high school diploma. If female, they are likely to have an older child and have not received prenatal care. Female perpetrators show a variety of other risk factors including regular drug and alcohol usage, history of depression, childhood history of inadequate parenting and abuse, current involvement with an abusive partner, history of self-abuse, and lack of social support. Approximately 15 to 30 percent of all mothers who kill their children commit suicide. Of the fathers who murder their children, 40 to 60 percent commit suicide. Infanticide continues to be associated with difficult life circumstances.

"Poverty often means limited choice. What choices are available are often cruel and dehumanizing."

Based upon historical and contemporary data, as many as 10 to 15 percent of all babies are killed by their parents. The anthropologist Laila Williamson notes that infanticide has been practiced by nearly all civilizations. Williamson concludes that infanticide must represent a common human trait, perhaps genetically encoded to promote self-survival.

"Legal sanctions against infanticide were introduced in the fourth century as Christianity infused secular laws. By the middle ages, infanticide was no longer condoned by either church or state in Europe. However, as a result of hard times and a high illegitimacy rate, infanticide was the most common crime in Western Europe from the middle ages to the end of the eighteenth century."

"In examining the numerous causes for infanticide, the physician and researcher Larry Milner contends that infanticide arises from hardness of life rather than hardness of heart" (1998, p. 10).

"Abandonment or exposure represents one of the oldest methods of infanticide."

"During the Renaissance in Italy, the abandonment rate was in excess of 50 percent of all babies. In seventeenth-century China, Jesuit missionaries reported that thousands of infants, mostly female, were deposited in the streets. In 1741 Thomas Coram, a retired sea captain, was so disturbed by (this fact) that he opened Foundling Hospital in England to "suppress the inhuman custom of exposing newborn infants to perish in the streets" (Langer 1974, p. 358). "

"Poverty, famine, and population control are inter-related factors. Where safe and effective birth control (are) unavailable, infanticide is used to selectively limit the growth of a community."

"In many cultures girls have little value. Even when female children were not killed at birth, their needs were neglected, particularly if limited resources were needed to ensure the survival of male offspring."

"In India, the practice of female infanticide "is so common that it has a special name, *kuzhippa*, or "baby intended for the burial pit" (Milner 1998, p. 176). Selective abortion is also a common practice. In 1998 Milner reported that in one Bombay clinic, of 8,000 abortions, 7,999 were performed on female fetuses. "

"With the implementation of the "one child per couple" policy in 1978, Chinese parents (continue the practice of aborting female fetus's); unwilling to invest their one opportunity for parenthood on a daughter. " **all facts on this page from Encyclopedia of Death and Dying <http://www.deathreference.com/Ho-Ka/Infanticide.html>

This law is just now being repealed...largely due to the increased value of young Chinese women as wage earners. While Illegitimacy and poverty are (still) the most common reasons for infanticide in the twenty-first century.

While some infants and toddlers are placed in the welcoming arms of adoptive parents, many begin life and continue life in multiple placements within the foster care system...

If you have not ventured to look at the large numbers of older children and teens who hope for a real home and family...I invite you to do so. It is heart wrenching.

We have ALL grown accustomed to the rhetoric...and false choices. We have allowed the issues of quality of life to be over simplified. We have allowed ourselves to be polarized as a nation...as we "team up" around the difficult issues of rights to life and freedom of choice- both impoverished choices at best.

Imagine if we played a different game. What if we worked together to ensure the rights of every child to be well received?

It is a well acknowledged fact that when the quality of life improves for women the world over...the quality of life increases for everyone.

So where do we begin....This past year...we provided a comprehensive sexuality class "Our Whole Lives" OWL which provided a few young teens in our congregation an experience that may prove to be life changing as they navigate their way into the world. Not only did they learn about the diversity of human sexuality but also ways to discern their own interior thoughts and feelings as well as their social experience before making life changing choices.

How powerful it could be for us to offer this kind of experience to children and teens in our greater community-...especially to those who are at great risk. Think about it...two trained teachers, eight weeks...two hours a week...limited time for Timeless Impact...Consider form of ministry as one of the most significant efforts we can make for long term positive outcomes.

You have heard the story..."An old man was walking down the seashore one morning after a great storm. He saw a young woman picking up star fish from the beach and returning them to the sea. He asked her "What are you doing? This beach stretches for miles and miles and there are thousands of starfish. DO you really think your efforts will make a difference?

Lifting up yet another star fish and holding in her hand she said, "It makes a difference to this one...as she gently placed in back in the sea."

Benediction:

As the Passover story unfolds...Freedom comes to those who have walked together in the wilderness as they continue their journey to the Promise Land.

And as the season Lent comes to a close...so too the stories of pain and suffering with the coming of Easter – where new life is possible and death does not have the final say.

Adrienne Rich gave us these words to help us on our way...

“My heart is moved by all I cannot save; so much has been destroyed. I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power reconstitute the world.”

Go into the world with that peace and commitment that can bring about real change and choice. May it be so, blessed be, shalom and amen.

Sermon by Rev. Lori Staubitz; UUCU March 21, 2010

Resources and References:

“Many Voices, Many Choices” from Our Truths, Nuestras Verdades ; produced in collaboration with the Exhale news letter

State Fact Sheets on Foster Care

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Teen Pregnancy information obtained from The National Campaign To Prevent Teen Pregnancy

Encyclopedia of Death and Dying <http://www.deathreference.com/Ho-Ka/Infanticide.html>

UUA Washington Office for Advocacy; uuu.uua.org/YRUU/justice/advocacy.html

Documentary Film “Abstinence Comes to Albuquerque” produced by Mary Wohlford Foundation and Stuart Television Productions (2006)

“Gifts from the Sea”- Star Fish story by M. Linburg

The following is a response letter from a congregation member.

Dear Lori,

Thank you so much for sending me your sermon, “The Right to be Well Received” -- as always, a thoughtful and eloquent approach to a thorny, multi-faceted subject. One of my most cherished values, given to me by my mother and given to her by her mother, is that when young women are educated about their bodies, given access to family planning, and encouraged to value their own potential, they have power in their lives.

And when young men are educated in the same ways, their lives are better, too. Young couples can build relationships that are partnerships; together, they share the keys to the kingdom. This is why I cared so passionately about giving OWL to our teens last year; it was a way of passing my mother's gift along to the next generation. I'm so glad you lifted up the possibility that UUCC could offer OWL to the community as an act of social justice, and I hope the congregation will do so. I would be proud to be a part of making that happen.

I believe deeply that abortion should be safe and legal, and that women will never have equality without access to it. I also believe that the way to reduce the number of abortions is not through criminalization, but through education and empowerment. Teaching adopted children about unplanned pregnancy can be a sensitive endeavor.

I try to invite my daughters to consider what is fair to the child they might conceive -- we all arrive in the world with no say in the matter! When the emphasis is on the needs of the potential baby (justice towards another), birth control can be a joyful, conscious choice.

I'm so often touched by your awareness of and sensitivity to adoption issues, and I'm happy to share some of my reflections from the perspective of an adoptive parent.

On a number of occasions, I have heard people who identify as pro-life say that adoption is "the answer" to abortion. They sometimes mention the movie "Juno," which ends with the baby adopted -- problem solved, all tied up with a neat bow. The baby is loved, the birthparents have a second chance, the adoptive parents have a child to raise. If only it were that simple.

When people see adoption as the "perfect" answer, they don't see that the problem is not solved for the child, who one day will be a teen and then an adult, grieving the loss of birth family and (in the case of trans-racial and/or international adoption) birth-culture, often struggling with feelings of unworthiness no matter how loving the adoptive family might be.

Those who see adoption as a neat, easy answer also fail to acknowledge the ways in which our society devalues adoption and adopted children, through taunts, taboos, assumptions, lame jokes, and by confusing the adoption of children with the rescue of animals. (I recently wrote an essay on that subject, which I'm attaching; it will be a letter to editors when I have the opportunity.)

Our society talks a good game about adoption, but when schoolmates ask an adopted child, "did they find you in a garbage can?" it speaks volumes about how adoption, and the adopted, are really regarded in our culture. This, too, is a reality that adopted children must grapple with.

They can grapple with it, of course, and must, if they are to have a happy life. The loving adults around them are called on to offer a steadying presence and help them find their inner courage. I remember after my father's death, you said that we never get over the big losses in life; we learn to integrate them into our lives, and every so often, they must be re-integrated.

If we can do this, there will also be room in our hearts for great joy. This is certainly true of the losses that are fundamental to adoption.

By no means am I saying that adoption is wrong, or that abortion is a preferable choice (it may, however, be the right choice for an individual woman, and that is her decision to make). What I am saying is that adoption is complex: profound in its joys and in its sorrows, and not an easy answer to an unplanned pregnancy. Parents need to understand this when they embark on an adoption (David and I have been so blessed with good mentors), and a society that truly wants to support adoption needs to understand it as well. Like abortion, adoption cannot be boiled down to a clever saying on a bumper sticker.

People outside of the adoption community will sometimes react to this perspective by saying that adopted children should be grateful. True, they may be better off than they would have been had they not been adopted, but no matter how fortunate they may be in their adoptive families, the losses are huge and must be respected. When that respect is present, true gratitude is possible.

Thanks for inviting me to share my thoughts, Lori. And thank you for all that you are and all that you give to our community.

Eliza