

## **“Reproductive Compassion”**

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A group of people who are blind encounter an elephant one day. They each reach out to feel and understand what an elephant is. One touches the side of the elephant and says, “An elephant is like a wall.” Another touches the leg of the elephant and says, “An elephant is like a tree.” And another touches the tail and says, “An elephant is like a rope.” Finally one of them touches the trunk and says “An elephant is like a snake.”

Good morning, friends. Good morning, family. Good morning, all of us who have mothered. Thank you for having me here today.

I think motherhood is a lot like the story's elephant. We touch different parts of it and think, maybe hope, that one part tells us everything about its entirety. We hope that if we touch the trunk, then maybe we don't need to touch the tail. Today, I would like to honor motherhood by celebrating a neglected part of her elephant: these things we call reproductive rights.

There is a saying from the Talmud: "Your heart will give you greater counsel than all the world's scholars." It is from my heart that I speak today and about my heart that I must reveal something. About eight months ago, I walked into the UC San Francisco Medical Center's neo-natal intensive care unit for the first time. I was to be their interfaith chaplain for the next year. I faced little clusters of isolette boxes housing premature and ill babies, glowing in the light of various monitors. I walked around looking into each of the isolette boxes, taking in these little bodies and the various tubes and devices attached to them. As I was approaching the last isolette box, I paused for quite a few moments. I stared through the plastic, focusing on the smallest preemie in the unit—six months old, as in her mother had given birth at 24 weeks of gestation. So I looked at this 24-week preemie. And then I thought about the women I had counseled while working for two years on an abortion hotline. Some of these women considered

terminating their pregnancies at this same gestational age or even later in their pregnancies. One might think I would feel some confusion or ethical distress. But I didn't. In fact, I would say I felt a sense of grace. I felt a sense of grace and harmony because that 24-week preemie embodied for me just how complex, heart-rending, and full life is; just how complex, heart-rending, and full motherhood is. Today, I would like honor the so many unrecognized ways we mother in our lives. I want to celebrate and honor that there is no life without loss, that loss itself is a form of birth.

Reproductive rights is a strange phrase, I think. Somehow, it doesn't capture what we are really talking about. We are talking about how you, and you, and me; how we experience sexuality, creation, loss, birth, death, relationship, and family. Reproductive rights is the hackneyed political jargon that has become the placeholder for one of the most intimate and sacred parts of our lives.

And while it would be easy (and not wholly untrue) to say that it has just been the radical conservatives that have caused such sacrilege, it's not just those of us who identify as pro-life. It's many of us pro-choice folks, who have participated in this dehumanization of motherhood. Ever since *Roe vs. Wade*, we progressives have acted out of fear. Fear of the zealotry of religious conservatives who have successfully not only limited access to abortion, but also to things like birth control and medically accurate sexuality education. We have also acted out of fear of that 24-week preemie, who embodies the complexity and ambiguity of life. We progressive have veered away from publicly embracing the true depth and humanity to which this term reproductive rights refers.

As pillars of the liberal religious community, I think we Unitarian Universalists are called to remind the pro-choice movement of the incredible depth of emotion and compassion that lies within us whenever we talk about reproductive rights. And we can do this by grounding ourselves first in awareness and compassion for our complicated and messy stories of motherhood and familyhood.

Sarah was a mother of two. She called a national abortion hotline, where I was a counselor. Sarah had recently discovered she was pregnant again and had not yet told her husband. Eight months prior, they had decided they were financially stable enough for him to leave his job and open his own business. The business was doing reasonably well but only because of the long hours he clocked in. While they had talked about one day having another child, Sarah knew this wasn't the ideal moment. But she didn't want to talk to anybody she knew about getting an abortion—she felt ashamed. "I'm not a teenager anymore, for God's sake. I shouldn't have made this kind of mistake." She said they could handle one more child, though it would be difficult and she felt terrible for "putting" this kind of stress on her husband. My first response was to tell her that it takes two to tango and that her husband probably wasn't too stressed at the time. She laughed.

And then we talked about parenthood, her feelings about being a mother, and how being a loving parent meant making difficult decisions at times. We talked about how having another child now would mean sacrifice not only for herself and her husband, but also her two children. It became evident that Sarah wanted to have the abortion but just needed to talk it through with someone who wouldn't try to sway her in a particular direction. That's how a lot of women are who call the hotline—they know what they want to do but need to figure out how to make sense of their decision; how this decision will fit into their lives.

In the case of mothers like Sarah, we talked about what other things Sarah would "give birth to" by terminating this pregnancy, what opportunities for her existing children, for herself and her husband, as well as opportunities for the maybe third child she and her husband could have later on. We talked about how complicated things can be, how right and wrong, good and bad are not such clear categories.

This call wasn't so unusual—I was a compassionate, reflective counselor who helped a woman clarify some things. And then right before we hang up, Sarah says to me, "You know, it was a snow storm. There was a snow storm and my birth control was out in the truck. And I just didn't feel like going out to get it. That's how I got pregnant."

Thud. Suddenly, I was no longer just a compassionate, reflective counselor, maintaining a professional distance. I knew what Sarah was talking about. I knew that feeling—like when I don't want to do the dishes again, or take the garbage out again...wanting to just NOT do that thing I do over and over and over again as I try to be responsible human being. And there are days when it doesn't get done. "Sarah," I said, "you are human. Show yourself some compassion—I think there are a bunch of us that wouldn't have made it out to the truck"

Sarah was not just another caller—I could feel my head banging on a wall, saying, "I can't believe the one time I didn't..." That feeling of complete disbelief that life could not have just let this one slide? But actually, I could believe it. Because that's humanity—our ironic, joyful, and tragic existence. Because there are snow storms. After that call, I figured out the following numbers and would use them with other callers: If a woman is on a daily birth control pill from age 18 to 28, that is 3,600 times she must remember to take a pill. If she is on it from age 18 to 33, that's 5,400 times. And just how perfect do we expect each other to be?

So how do we honor all of motherhood? We acknowledge that in this interdependent web of life, in our limited physical world, creation does not occur without loss. Birth does not happen without death. I don't think the question of "choice" comes down not to whether or not we mother, but rather what we choose to mother; to what do we give birth. For continuing to look away from all of motherhood leads us to an all too familiar place: alienation, from ourselves, from each other, and from the sacred.

I don't know how Sarah felt after the abortion. I wonder if she was relieved and happy; or sad and depressed. I wonder if she will feel fine until years from now, when she gives birth again, she finds herself crying uncontrollably. Or maybe not. Maybe she will feel empowered. Maybe she can take pride in her choices of motherhood or maybe not. You just don't know. What makes me sad is that Sarah probably won't have very many opportunities to talk about what feelings come up for her.

There are some hotlines she could call; most of which are run by religious conservatives. Whatever her experience, whatever her feelings, she will most likely cope with them alone, I'm sorry to say. It's true for Sarah, and it's true for countless other women who experience forms of motherhood and birth which go by many different names: abortion, termination, selective reduction, miscarriage, infertility, fetal loss. Alienation: that's how a lot of us deal all with loss in a culture that refuses to acknowledge and celebrate how intertwined creation and loss really are.

So many of us feel alienated. You can only imagine, or perhaps you know from personal experience, how alienated we feel in our reproductive choices. Over one in three women will have an abortion during the course of her life. Somewhere around 15-20% of couples will struggle with infertility. Around 15% of women who know they are pregnant will experience a miscarriage. Please, take a moment to look around you. We are the people making up these statistics. We are the people loving, losing, creating, dying. Think about the decisions you have made, the decision you may or may not have struggled with. Think about the relief and or sadness. Think about the freedom and/or grief. Think about joy and possibility. What have you birthed through loss? What have you mothered?

Right now, I can only imagine the feelings in this sanctuary. Some of you may be feeling sadness, grief; others a sense of empowerment, joy. Others, maybe nothing in particular. Others, annoyance because you feel I am suggesting there is "A Way to Feel." Others of you may be upset that I would group together those who terminated a pregnancy, those who miscarried a wanted pregnancy, and those who are infertile. Others may be feeling gratitude. Others may be upset that I would use death and life in reference to a fetus. Others may be relieved that finally someone has. What is the religious view on reproductive rights? To name and embrace all that is being thought and felt in this sanctuary right now. To acknowledge that THIS is reproductive rights, that tightness in your chest, the sense of lightness in your neighbor's, the tears in his eyes, and the sense of relief in hers.

Feminist psychotherapist and author Miriam Greenspan says the predominant US culture suffers from emotion-phobia, where on both an individual and communal level, we fear not only complexity and ambiguity, but also grief, despair, and fear itself. She writes that grief, despair, and fear are our human birthright just as much as joy, wonder, and love. There is no life without loss. But the emotions and experiences we reject, the complexity and confusion we try to avoid can be like a dark rich soil from which unexpected flowers can bloom if we only have the courage to dig, to get our hands dirty. Digging in means embracing, truly embracing, all we feel in this sanctuary this morning.

Digging into the soil means not turning away from mother of the 24-week preemie or the woman who at 24 weeks is walking into an abortion clinic. It's welcoming and loving them both because without them we will continue to understand motherhood as only a rope, a snake, a spear, or a tree. For me, I ground myself in those thuds in my chest, in Sarah's snowstorm and the incredible humanity nested inside. The religious perspective on reproductive rights means grounding ourselves not in a noble compassion for abstract women, but in our own experiences of birthing through loss. "The choice" is not whether or not to mother, but rather what we will mother in our lives.

So why did I feel a sense of grace that first day in the UCSF neo-natal unit? Because that 24-week preemie called me to exercise a compassion beyond boundaries of politics, ethics, and law. It called me into the deepest place of my heart, into the heart that gives us the wisest counsel.

So on this Mother's Day, I invite us into these deepest, most tender parts of our hearts. I invite us to celebrate all we have birthed: the possibilities, hopes, and dreams. I thank and honor all of us mothers for all the unknown and unseen ways we have mothered in our lives. There are so many ways to make a life-giving choice. May it be so. Blessed be.