

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Our Fight for Mother’s Reproductive Rights”
Rev. Samuel Trumbore May 13, 2007

Sermon

The abortion technique called intact dilation and extraction a.k.a partial birth abortion, isn’t pretty. The gruesome description makes the reality of terminating a life process graphic. Banning this one procedure among a selection of equally gruesome procedures to terminate an advanced pregnancy doesn’t seem, on the face of it, like such a problem ... until you read carefully the April 18, 5-4 Supreme Court Gonzales v. Carhart decision and the passionate dissent written by Justice Ginsburg. It is in the reasoning (or lack of it) by the majority that the first stones were laid to undermine Roe vs. Wade. Listen to how Justice Ginsburg assesses the situation in two excerpts from her dissent:

Today’s decision is alarming. It refuses to take Casey and Stenberg seriously. It tolerates, indeed applauds, federal intervention to ban nationwide a procedure found necessary and proper in certain cases by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. It blurs the line, firmly drawn in Casey, between pre-viability and post-viability abortions. And, for the first time since Roe, the Court blesses a prohibition with no exception safeguarding a woman’s health...(and she goes on to say in her conclusion) ...The Court’s defense of the statute provides no saving explanation. In candor, the Act, and the Court’s defense of it, cannot be understood as anything other than an effort to chip away at a right declared again and again by this Court—and with increasing comprehension of its centrality to women’s lives.

This decision was the latest skirmish in a long fight in the battle for women’s reproductive rights; a battle that began with events like the Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention organized in July of 1848 by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. From the beginning, Unitarians and Universalists have been at the heart of this struggle. Not just in the Unitarian and Universalist Associations but right here in our congregation. In particular, women from our congregation have led the fight for women’s reproductive rights in the Capital Region.

One of those women was Dr. Francis Vosburgh, lifelong member of this congregation. Her parents joined in 1907, 100 years ago! Thanks to Arlene Gilbert and Eva Gemmill, I have some wonderful material about her and her life I’d like to share with you this morning.

Born in 1897 in Voorheesville, “Docky” as she liked to be called, lived through three generations in the struggle for women’s rights. The struggle came to her through

her genes. In May of 1961, Dr. Vosburgh told part of that story in a “This I Believe” sermon from this pulpit:

In 1864, my great grandfather, Warren Chase, wrote a book called, “The Fugitive Wife,” in which he deplored the condition of virtual slavery which many married women had to endure without opportunity to free themselves, or to have legal right to divorce. A woman who left her husband and children in 1859 was seized and returned to her legal and proper owner. A gentleman of her acquaintance who had assisted her flight was also arrested. [My great grandfather’s] comment on this case I quote, “I knew most humane persons considered that a negro who displayed sufficient skill and energy to escape from slavery and reach a free state was entitled to his or her freedom, and that it was almost, or quite barbarous, to return such persons, but I was hardly prepared to believe the people so heartless, cruel, almost barbarous as to return a woman of their race and color to a tyrant, who had treated her so cruelly that it had forced asunder the strongest ties in her nature and compelled her to leave even her children and flee for her life to escape the grave, as I know some have.”

Dr. Vosburgh attended Milne School in Albany matriculating to Vassar College graduating in 1918 as the war ended. Her maternal grandfather working as a Civil War surgeon and her Aunt who was also a physician influenced her choice of medicine. She was one of the 13 women who attended Cornell Medical School graduating in 1925. She began her practice in January of 1927, as part of a group of three doctors at 214 State Street, an address that now sits under the Justice Building of the Empire State Plaza. It was here in 1934 that she opened the Women’s Health Center to advise women about methods of birth control.

Dr. Vosburgh departed from the widely held belief by physicians in those days that women’s purpose in life was to have babies. One physician suggested that woman be defined as “a uterus surrounded by a supporting organism and a directing personality... Their refusal to be pregnant was clearly pathological.”

In today’s modern society with so much freedom for women, it is hard to imagine what life was like for women in those days. We’ve forgotten the vigorously enforced 1870’s Comstock laws, not struck down until 1965, that prohibited the distribution of information about birth control. Comstock wanted to stop lewd behavior and prostitution, which he felt these devices enabled. Middle class and wealthy women got the information privately from their doctors. The ones who suffered were the poor and immigrant women enduring dozens of pregnancies, many of them unwanted.

Margaret Sanger, the aggressive advocate for birth control in the beginning of the twentieth century, recognized the effect controlling fertility had on women’s individual freedom. She is often quoted as saying, “No woman can call herself free

who does not own or control her body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother.”

In the debate over late term abortions, we lose focus on the central struggle which is women controlling their own bodies. To help us step back in time this morning, I'd like to share a letter and more of Dr. Vosburgh's words.

This letter to the editor of the Knickerbocker News in March of 1979 came from First Unitarian Society member Darwin Skinner:

In the 1930's, I drove a cab in Albany. At the time there were three major abortionists in the city. Of course, there were many lesser lights and midwives who serviced the poor women who could not afford the \$50 the big boys charged.

One of the three was on Columbia Street across from the Albany County Courthouse. Another operated a block from the Cathedral of Immaculate Conception. The third, who had a six-bed wing on his house, was in business a half block from St. Peter's Hospital and the Convent.

Nearly 50 years later I find I cannot forget the muffled sobs from the poor girls – for some reason they almost always went alone – riding to or from the abortionist.

The Right to Life people cannot understand this. It is not a question of abortion or no abortion. Abortion we are going to have. The question is: Will we have legal or illegal abortions. If every legislator would take a minute or two to think this over, he would be able to cast an intelligent vote.

Now let's return to the 1950's. I'll quote another larger section of Dr. Vosburgh's 1961 sermon. I'm sure many in this room will have their own memories stimulated as Dr. Vosburgh discusses women's options when they discovered they were pregnant in those days. From it you get a sense of her compassion and strong values as a doctor and as a person:

Glamour and popularity seem to be the burning desire of the girls [today] and the ones who do not “go steady” feel very unhappy. This going steady is too often interpreted as permissive of sexual intimacy – which eventually leads to trouble.

Being a woman in the general practice of medicine, I am very often presented with the problem of the unmarried girl who becomes pregnant. She is often brought to me by her mother, sometimes by a friend – but I always wish she could have been seen in time to prevent all the anxiety and unhappiness which these conditions cause. In the past 10 years I have delivered 888 babies. Of these 89 have been what I call ‘irregulars.’ These are not primarily bad girls. They come from any stratum of society. Their ages from 13 to 35 years –

averaging 19 – 21 years. They were not the results of ignorance. These girls were not necessarily promiscuous. They belong to various religious denominations. They have craved attention and popularity. Some were directly due to over-use of alcohol. Some had been deceived by promises of marriage, and some had unwisely accepted the attentions of married men. Except for the married men, who go roving – I do not feel the boys are any more to blame than the girls. It is as much as a shock for the parents of a 16 year old boy for him to be accused of being the father of a child to be – as it is for the family of the girl. But, it is easier for him to escape the consequences.

In my experience there have been three types of solutions to the problem.

1. The baby is released for adoption. 39 cases – 43 %
2. The girl marries and keeps the baby. 20 cases – 22 %
3. The family accepts the girl and her baby and care for it, with or without help from the father of the child. 27 cases – 30 %

Each individual case has to be handled according to the maturity of the girl and the family circumstances. I know of several marriages at 15 or 16 which have turned out very well. Some of the girls who have kept their babies to raise have never regretted doing so. There is frequently a subsequent marriage with good acceptance of the step-child by the new husband.

Of the girls who give up their babies, some adjust very well. Others have the type of grief that a mother would have whose baby had died – and they live in fear of disclosure of their past to any future partner. A few have returned for care through another pregnancy out of wedlock. These are indeed the unfortunate ones for families are not as patient the second time. The whole attitude of families, friends and the community toward these situations is very different from that shown in “The Scarlett Letter” of Hawthorne.

It is possible to get financial assistance for these children from public funds and the Children’s Court makes a great effort to get financial help from the father of the child during his years of dependency.

I have not mentioned the girls who want to, or do, “get rid of it” by abortion. Because this is illegal, unsafe and against all the laws of nature I refuse to help these girls – but give them assurance that they will have my whole hearted support if they will allow nature to proceed normally.

This last paragraph is very important. During her lifetime, Dr. Vosburgh delivered 2755 babies and never performed one abortion. Her pioneering work giving birth to what became Upper Hudson Planned Parenthood was motivated by preventing unwanted pregnancies. Once abortion did become legal and safe in New York State however, she did agree to its necessity as an option and even referred some women to

doctors who performed them. She gradually changed her thinking as she considered the arguments as the issue of abortion was debated in the 1960's in our congregation.

At the center of the struggle to repeal prohibitions against abortion in New York State were women from this congregation. The Committee for Progressive Legislation grew out of our Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation. These women had been putting aside their sewing projects and church luncheons to discuss the social concerns of the day. They decided to stop talking about the issues that disturbed them and do something. Their names included Kay Dingle, Mary Freeman, Jean Brady, Bunnie Vaughn, Ann Eberle, Mary Alice Maynes, Mary Riech, Ruth Estey, Vivian Moomaw, Ann Brandon, Polla Yolles, Janet Oliphant, Eleanor Heron, and Georgette Thomas. From First Unitarian Society in Schenectady they were joined by, Madonna Gandhi, Natalie Yepsin, Trudy Carpenter, Lilian Samuelson, Betty Dietz, Lydia Eis, Katie Rich and Doris Aiken.

Leading the way in a subcommittee on abortion was Kay Dingle. In our archives, we have a folder full of copies of letters to legislators she wrote arguing that every child should be a wanted child. Authorities argued compulsory pregnancy led to child abandonment, child abuse, infanticide, gross neglect and rejection. Dr. Karl Menninger, of the Menninger Clinic, wrote at the time, nothing is more tragic, more fateful in its ultimate consequences than the realization of a child that he is unwanted. A clergyman involved in prison work said, "I am convinced that the greatest class of criminals is the unwanted child."

In those days, the source of the opposition to abortion rights was the Catholic Church. CPL documented the variety of religious perspectives disputing the Catholic doctrine of giving a fertilized egg the moral status of a live birth. There is no specific teaching about this in the Bible. Reform and Conservative Jews see the fetus as part of the mother until it is viable outside the womb and therefore having no moral claim to life that is greater than the mother's claim to control her body and protect her health. The fetus' moral status is clearly defined in the Islamic tradition to be given at 180 days after conception.

The New York Legislature agreed by one vote and Governor Nelson Rockefeller signed this into law in 1970. The New York Times credited the Committee for Progressive Legislation as a key component of the victory for women's reproductive rights.

Every year, at our Christmas Eve services, we split our collection between Upper Hudson Planned Parenthood and the FOCUS food pantry. I remember wondering why we were always so generous to Planned Parenthood. Now I know and now you know too. Dr. Vosburgh was not the only supporter of Planned Parenthood. Many members and friends of this congregation have served on its board or supported it. Many have served as escorts in recent years. The Committee for Progressive

Legislation was part of the founding of Family Planning Advocates that lobbies for women's reproductive rights.

And the fight goes on. I lobbied for FPA at the beginning of this month for the Healthy Teens Act that would provide schools curriculum with medically accurate birth control information. We are in this for the long haul because we want women to have the freedom to control their own bodies. We want every baby born to be wanted, cared for and loved. It is possible to hold together the birth of babies, what Docky called the most beautiful thing in the world, and women's freedom to choose if and how many times she wants to be a mother.

In light of the Supreme Court's ruling, may protecting that right continue to be our work as well.

Benediction

Mothers we praise this day

 Happy they carried us to birth,
And we're grateful to them
 For affirming our inherent worth.

We're also very glad

 She became family planning wise,
Using contraception
 So to control our family's size.

May every child that's born

 Grow up healthy in a loving nest;
A gift to mother earth
 Giving comfort so she too be blest ...
 with fewer of us.

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