

"To Define Life's Edges – A Reflection on Abortion"

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Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

All Souls UU Congregation, New London, CT

*In the quietness of this place, surrounded by the all-pervading presence of the Holy, my heart whispers:*

*Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve,  
that in good times or in tempests,*

*I may not forget that to which my life is committed.*

*Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve.*

Howard Thurman's words pass through my mind as I began considering this sermon. To what are our lives committed as Unitarian Universalists?

For one, our progressive faith movement, led by our Unitarian Universalist Association, has been committed to reproductive justice including abortion justice. The UUA's first resolution in support of legalized abortion was released in 1963. Unitarian Universalists have refined our thinking and values ever since and in 2015 a statement of conscience on Reproductive Justice was released that in part says this:

*The reproductive justice movement envisions the liberation of people of all genders, sexual orientations, abilities, gender identities, ages, classes, and cultural and racial identities. Such liberation requires not only accurate information about sexuality and reproduction and control of personal reproductive decisions, but also living wages, safe and supported housing, high quality and comprehensive medical and reproductive health care, access to voting and the political process, affordable legal representation, fair immigration policies, paid parental leave, affordable childcare, and the absence of individual and institutional violence.*

It's an excellent statement – one upon which you may lean. It stands in contrast to other faith traditions that express support for the right to abortion although that support is frequently tepid at best. (That is with the exception of Reform and Conservative Judaism both of which hold equally progressive stances.) The caveats are more lengthy than are the valid reasons why abortion may well be the best option for a pregnant person.

For one, quite a few of these statements sternly state that abortion should not be used as a method of birth control ... as a matter of convenience. Clearly the writers have never had to find an increasingly rare health center to administer an abortion. Nor have they had to wait the prerequisite 24 hours required in

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some states. As obvious is the fact that none of the faithful writers are teenagers who have had to get permission from parents before getting an abortion. Finally, we can be sure that not of enough of these writers have had a paper cape draped over their lower body with legs splayed in stirrups.

Convenience? Don't get me started.

You can be glad for the unapologetically supportive statement of conscience penned by your Unitarian Universalist Association.

So there's that.

Last I preached on abortion was back in 2006 – 15 years ago. It was on the eve of a major march for reproductive rights being held in Washington D.C. and I was going with my daughter – her first national march. My tone today will be different than it was then. Here's how that sermon started:

*The complexity, passion, and heartbreak of this topic make it potentially shattering. It is a discussion worthy of nuance and delicacy. Yet, the current cultural conversations hold little such elegance. And with this lack comes another certain lack ... a lack of honesty. That anyone can claim that this question is clear cut shows how low we have landed. We're at a cultural juggernaut on this issue. I'm not sure how we can set ourselves free. But I do have a deep yearning for the conversation to get more real.*

Fifteen years later, my understanding of what's "more real" has changed. We are teetering at the edge of a devastating loss of autonomy for half of the population. There's nothing more real than the devastation that may well follow.

I no longer crave the same nuance and delicacy. I crave the righteous and unequivocal moral clarity that says that every American has the right to bodily autonomy and no legislature has the right to interfere with matters of reproductive health including abortion.

You all know plenty about this issue. Especially, you know about the politics, the cynical use of abortion as a wedge issue to advance more insidious and oppressive efforts on a whole host of fronts. What lives at the bottom of this swamp is misogyny, racism, and a deep pool of cruelty.

That's not what we're talking about this morning.

As a faith community we are challenged with the deeper questions concerning life's edges, perhaps none so vital as those questions that concern the meaning of life and of death.

You well know that various conservative faith traditions argue that life begins at conception and therefore, an abortion is the equivalent of murder. However, that is not how most mainline Protestant and progressive religionists understand the start of a human life. The UU resolution on abortion approved in 1987 states that,

*Because we believe not only in the value of life itself but also in the quality of life and WHEREAS, pain, suffering, and loss of life were widespread prior to the legalization of abortion in 1973 by the U.S. Supreme Court (Roe v. Wade ) that the 1987 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association reaffirms its historic position, supporting the right to choose contraception and abortion as legitimate aspects of the right to privacy.*

How then do we understand when life begins? Let's wonder together.

For pregnancies that are very much planned and wanted and, for that matter, for those that are unplanned but are received as a joyful surprise the sense of when life begins is radically different than for unplanned pregnancies received with panic, fear, anxiety, desperation, and despair – and much worse if violence was at the root of conception.

There are an infinite number of stories upon which these stories rest. We'll begin on one end of the continuum and move along the way.

A friend was overjoyed when she conceived and so she was devastated when she miscarried. With deep sorrow, she wondered aloud, "How can I miss someone who I never even met?" To her, her child's life had begun in utero and for some mysterious reason, their life had ended.

Conversely, for the person who finds themselves pregnant and the pregnancy is unwelcome for a range of legitimate reasons – reasons that carry with them a whole lot of panic, fear, anxiety, desperation, despair and even perhaps some sadness – these responses do not bode well for quality of life – for the future of pregnant person or the person yet to be developed or birthed. *Panic, fear, anxiety, desperation, despair and even perhaps some sadness* have taken up residence in the uterus.

*Unitarian Universalists believe not only in the value of life but in the quality of life.*

This understanding sits comfortably for me. It may or may not sit comfortably for you. Let's keep going in this wondering and consider the end of life and see what we find there.

The outer edge of life is of course death and it brings with it similar questions as does the start of life. As we move toward death, decisions are made that concern whether to accept or reject medical intervention based on the hoped-for quality of life. Sometimes family members must make those decisions on behalf of our dearly beloved. And when we do we remember that we *believe not only in the value of life but in the quality of life.*

When the decision is made to release our loved one from this life, the decision is rightly honored as respectful, compassionate and loving. We hold our loved ones close and then we let them go.

In those moments, there is a holy hush in the space between life and death. We are witnesses to a mysterious passing over. We hold our loved ones close and then we let them go.

These are life's edges that cannot be defined, as described by Melissa Florer-Bixler, a Mennonite pastor. Emmy will share:

Reading: From "As a Pastor, I Can't Define Life's Edges. Neither Can Lawmakers" By Melissa Florer-Bixler, Mennonite pastor  
Sojourners, 9.20.21

*Pastoral ministry often involves walking people through the margins of life's beginning and end. These moments are awe-filled and holy. I've sat at the bedside of a woman who was hours away from her vital organs shutting down. I watched the clock tick the final seconds of her life and reflected on how strange time felt in that moment.*

*... I have held the cold hand of an unconscious parent, surrounded by her children. We followed the rise and fall of her chest, often punctuated with long and prescient pauses, the body slowly releasing its need of oxygen.*

*In these moments, decisions must be made: When do we remove intubation? When is surgery no longer a good or helpful option? When do we let go? Sometimes these are difficult choices; other times they are planned far in advance.*

*As a pastor I don't ask, in this holy space of in between, when death is drawing near, theological questions about personhood or ensoulment. Neither do medical definitions of what marks life's margins — heartbeats,*

*breath, or brain function — occupy my concern. These are the gray edges of life.*

These are the gray edges of life. The holy space of in-between. As it is in the midst of the vigil of the loved one who is dying, so it is at the bedside of a person having an abortion.

In those moments, we do not endeavor to define life's edges. We fall into a strange emotional mix of relief and agony.

I say, with a clarity that I hope you'll receive with the Love with which it is offered, these decisions made at either points of life, are acts of Love and compassion ... because we care as much for the quality of life as we do the value of life.

Melissa Florer-Bixler, the wise pastor we heard from earlier has this to say about the harm that comes when people are prevented from making these Loving and compassionate decisions at the start of life, at pregnancy.

She says:

*The Bible, for all of anti-abortion's Christian culture warriors, has little interest in pinpointing the start of personhood. It says nothing about when a body gains a soul or the ethics of abortion. But the Bible is clear about this: There is tremendous grief in the world — much of it caused by people who create structural and social hierarchies. For those whose bodies are unruly to coercive power, the result is profound harm.*

As Unitarian Universalists, as people of faith, we reject the notion that any of us have the right to create structural and social hierarchies that cause profound harm. In fact, we make concerted efforts to dismantle such systems. Depriving people of the range of available reproductive choices is a system that begs to be prevented in some states and dismantled in others.

I want to honor the choice to terminate a pregnancy as a profound act of Love. An act of Love and compassion that goes to great lengths to assure that children are loved into being and when that is not possible – for whatever reason – the choice to let go is as compassionate a choice as those that we make at death's door.

And for some, those lives are not forgotten. The poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, wrote of her abortions, specifically of the children that were not loved into being. The

poem was published in 1945. (For context, birth control wasn't widely available in the U.S. until 1965.) The poem is called "The Mother." Brooks concludes the poem saying:

*Believe me, I loved you all.  
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you  
All.*

In the polarity that is holding both agony and relief, Brooks continued to Love them beyond the edges of life that defy description, the value and quality of life honored.

Let's settle into a soft landing right about here. I'll leave you with this thought, the most important one of all, Good People: It is best for human beings to be loved into being, loved into life. Here's what being loved into life looks like.

From the poet, Corey Mesler:

*I want you to taste the  
sweet heroics of your mother's  
sweat, feel that moment  
when your lungs first filled and  
changed us all. This was  
the first day, a holy day,  
the beginning of a long happy battle,  
which, reluctantly one day  
we will relinquish, and you,  
brave one, will fight it for us.*

There it is: the edges of life that are beyond definition.

Yesterday at the march, I blessed the gathered community before we stepped off from Parade Plaza to march to the court house. I ended that blessing with these words:

"You are loved. You are whole and holy. You are strong."

So it is.

So you are.

So we are.

“Keep fresh before you the moments of your high resolve,” Dear Souls.

Amen. Blessed be.

For further reading:

<https://sojo.net/articles/pastor-i-can-t-define-lifes-edges-neither-can-lawmakers-abortion>

<https://slate.com/human-interest/2017/04/when-does-life-begin-outside-the-christian-right-the-answer-is-over-time.html>

[http://religiousinstitute.org/denom\\_statements/reproductive-justice-2015-uua/](http://religiousinstitute.org/denom_statements/reproductive-justice-2015-uua/)

<https://www.uua.org/action/statements/right-choose>