

Sharing a Journey

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Sargent works as a chaplain for Planned Parenthood. She delivered this sermon Jan. 15, 2006 at the Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church in Walnut Creek, Calif., where she worked as a ministerial intern for the 2005-2006 academic year. She graduated from Starr King with an M.Div. in May 2006. "Sharing a Journey" won the 2006 Richard Borden Excellence in Sermons competition, sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association. Sargent delivered the sermon in June 2006 at the UUA's General Assembly in St. Louis.

As you've already heard in this morning's service, this week marks the annual holiday when we remember Martin Luther King and his work. It also marks the 33rd anniversary of Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion. These may seem like two unrelated events – indeed, they were several years apart – but today I'd like to share with you how I believe these two things are in fact intimately connected.

As many of you know, a major piece of my call to ministry lies in the area of reproductive rights. After I graduated from college, I worked for Planned Parenthood for several years. Most days, I walked through protestors to get to work. They usually carried crosses and said things like, "Jesus will forgive you if you repent for your work." It turned out that the most revolutionary thing I did during my tenure there was not to force pathways through the protestors, not to lobby the legislature, but in fact to put up a bumper sticker. I hung it up in my office cubicle, and it said: I'm Pro-Choice and I Pray.

Within fifteen minutes of hanging it up, a colleague stopped by my desk. "Do you really pray?" she asked in a whisper. "Yes," I answered. "So do I," my colleague replied, still whispering, as if she was sharing the deepest of secrets. "I thought I was the only one." It turns out she wasn't. I hardly

got any work done that day due to the number of people who stopped by my desk to talk about The Bumper Sticker. People were so excited to be able to talk about it. I learned that day that my colleagues weren't working at Planned Parenthood despite their religious beliefs, but because of them. I went on to have similar conversations with patients, many of whom were making their reproductive decisions – whether adoption, abortion, or parenting – after many hours of prayer and meditation.

These experiences were a big part of what led me to seminary. I arrived at seminary with the goal of becoming a chaplain for Planned Parenthood. At the time, I'd never heard of anyone doing that, but today there are four chaplains at Planned Parenthoods across the nation. This summer I piloted a chaplaincy program for Planned Parenthood Golden Gate, and I hope to return there when I complete my internship here.

As a chaplain at Planned Parenthood, I was in a unique position. Many patients, particularly those seeking an abortion, came to the clinics believing that all religions and religious leaders were standing against them. I remember one patient I talked with who broke down sobbing once it became clear to her that I was in fact a pro-choice chaplain. I still remember her looking up at me and saying, "I didn't know anyone like you existed."

In my work, I talked with a hundreds of patients. I reaffirmed for them that they had a right to their own spiritual beliefs, and their own relationship with and interpretation of God. I was continually amazed at the strength of each person. Many of the patients I met were facing incredibly difficult odds and heart-wrenching decisions, and still they kept going. I'm humbled to have had the privilege of doing my work and sharing in their lives.

But perhaps the stories about reproductive rights that have touched me most deeply are those of my own family members and friends. My friend Julie is one of these stories, and I share her story with you this morning with her permission. Julie and I have been friends for many years, and I was delighted when I heard that she and her husband were trying to have a child. One day she called me, so excited. She was pregnant. Her voice was giddy with joy. The months went by, and Julie and her husband Tom bought baby clothes and sat together with long lists of baby names. Her in-laws couldn't wait to be grandparents.

Then one day I received a short email message from her. They had been to the doctor, and received the news that their baby – who they now knew was a girl – had a very serious heart condition. Upon being born – if she made it that far – she would have to be rushed into open-heart surgery. The first few months of her life would be filled with surgeries, all painful and all with low success rates. Even with all the surgeries, there was no chance she would ever have a regular childhood or live very long beyond that.

I still remember sitting on the phone with Julie, tears streaming from my eyes as she talked with me and cried. “Why?” she asked me. “Why did this happen to me?” She had wanted that child so much, loved her so much even before she was born. Eventually, she told me she had decided she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t put her daughter through that. She and Tom decided to terminate the pregnancy.

As they waited to schedule an appointment for an abortion, Julie tried to avoid going out into the world. Out in the world – at the video store, at the grocery store, at work – people would comment on her protruding stomach, asking her when she was due and whether it was a boy or a girl. It was too much for her to bear.

They learned that there was no doctor or hospital in their area that would do the procedure. They had to fly to Kansas. So Julie and Tom packed their suitcases and bought plane tickets. They checked into a motel and waited for their appointment. When the time came, Julie and Tom fought their way through shouting protestors to get into the clinic. Julie told me the nurses and doctors were kind and compassionate, and eventually the two of them were back in their motel room, no longer pregnant and devastated beyond words.

In the weeks to come, I talked with Julie about her grief. I listened, and I cried with her. Julie also told me, though, about the peace she had in her heart, knowing that she and Tom had made the right decision for themselves and for their daughter. This decision, the freedom to make a choice in life’s most difficult situations, is at the core of the reproductive rights movement.

The reproductive rights movement, as I see it, is about preaching the radical message that people, and women in particular, are trustworthy moral agents. It is about saying, “Yes. Women do know what they’re doing. They do know how to best lead their lives, and they should be trusted with those important decisions.”

Some of you who know me may wonder how it is that reproductive rights is so important to me, when my life partner is a woman and, therefore, many of Planned Parenthood’s services will likely never be necessary for me. The answer I would offer is that the movements for reproductive rights, for gay and lesbian rights, for civil rights, for immigrant rights, for human rights, cannot be separated. Each of them is fundamentally about ensuring that every person has control over their own life.

In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

I'm 31 years old. I've never known a time when abortion and birth control were not legal, but I know many of you have. I'm also a white person, and I've not had to fight prejudice and hatred because of the color of my skin, but I know many of you have. What I have known is what it's like to live in a society that tries to control the choices I make about who to love and how to love, with a government that has throughout history made it illegal for me to express my love. I know many of you here today also know this feeling of having your choices controlled, perhaps because of your race, your sexual orientation, or the choices you and your family have made about whether and when to have children.

If you search on the Internet for reproductive rights, you can't get past the first few pages of results before the words "racism" and "homophobia" appear. Perhaps Martin Luther King also saw these connections. As a young minister in his first parish in Alabama, he joined a Planned Parenthood committee that distributed literature on unwanted pregnancies. When he received an award from Planned Parenthood in 1966, he praised Margaret Sanger, the founder, for her work.

This sermon is called "Sharing A Journey" because that's what I believe we're doing. We're sharing a journey with many people and leaders who came before us – such as Martin Luther King and the Rev. Farley Wheelwright, who wrote the Reading for this morning – and also many who will come after us. We're sharing a journey with people from different parts of the world, different classes, different backgrounds, and together we're working to create a time when we will all be respected as human beings, and entrusted with making our own choices and determining our life's own path.

Determining our own path is a core value of our Unitarian Universalist faith. Early Unitarians and Universalists did not simply accept what the church leaders of the time were saying. Instead, they made choices about what they would believe, and this was a courageous and dangerous thing to do.

One such person was Katherine Vogel, who lived in Poland in the 1500s, in the early years of the Protestant Reformation. She was branded a heretic, because she freely admitted to believing in the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus. The Bishop of Krakow locked her in a chapel to convince her to repent. She stayed there for ten years. Throughout those years, she was given numerous opportunities to recant, to say that she'd changed her mind. She never did. In 1539, when she was 80 years old, she was led out into the public square and burned at the stake. It is said that she went "boldly and cheerfully. Her last words [were]... that neither in this life or the next can anything evil befall the soul of one who stands loyal to the truth as one is given to know it."

And this, my friends, this is the great and powerful legacy we have inherited as Unitarian Universalists. We count many heretics in our past – the Latin root of the word heretic means choice. We are a religion of people who choose. We're not bound together by a creed, or a particular sacred text,

or one idea of the Divine. Rather, we're bound together by the belief stated in our fourth principle – that each person has the right to their own free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We choose to believe in one another.

We share a commitment that each person has the right to explore life for themselves, to interpret their own experiences, to arrive at their own answers. We know that life comes with hard choices, and so we are together in church communities to support each other through this adventure, through life itself. We commit to trust and honor each other through the good days and the bad.

As a logical extension of this trust, we've been publicly in support of abortion rights since a 1963 General Resolution. We've passed more than a half-dozen resolutions on the subject since then, and still reproductive rights are in big trouble today. Let me share a few statistics with you:

- 87 percent of U.S. counties have no abortion provider.
- Nearly one in every five hospital beds in the United States is now operated by a religious entity – many of which prohibit performing, or even talking about, abortion, sterilization, contraception and AIDS prevention.
- In 2004, the last year for which statistics are available, abortion providers in the U.S. and Canada reported 49 counts of vandalism, 1 anthrax threat, 8 incidents of assault and battery, 4 death threats, 15 incidents of stalking, 2 arsons, 453 harassing phone calls and 13 bomb threats.

Here's what happened just within the last week:

- The Catholic bishop in Phoenix wrote that “the use of contraceptives is always morally evil.”
- A bill introduced in Indiana would make it a Class C felony to perform an abortion.
- A bill introduced in Virginia would prohibit a doctor from providing fertility treatments of any sort to a woman who's not married.

And, finally, the Supreme Court nomination of Samuel Alito, a man who has said the Constitution provides no protection for reproductive rights, moves forward.

So what can we do? We are religious people who choose, and we are also religious people who act. We can call our elected officials and let them know what we think. We can send donations to the organizations that work on these issues. We can write letters to the editor. We can share our own life stories and talk about the people we know like Julie and Tom.

Most importantly, if we do nothing else, we can commit to talking openly about our faith and how it informs our beliefs about reproductive rights. In the words of Martin Luther King, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” You have the power to make sure there's never another young woman who says to me, “I never knew anyone like you existed.” We

are pro-choice people of faith, and I urge you to boldly proclaim it. If you need something to get the dialogue started, I have a whole supply of bumper stickers.

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