

Watch One Hour With Me

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Every action and every inaction has a consequence. Sometimes the repercussion is negligible, and sometimes it is life-altering, and sometimes you are damned if you do and damned if you don't. But the hard reality is that sometimes you have no choice but to make a choice, and all you can do is hope and pray that it is the best one for you and those you love.

I want to tell you right up-front that I am unabashedly pro-life. I am also unashamedly pro-abortion. What I am not is unequivocally running for political office! Now, some of you might consider my reproductive platform to be oxymoronic. The fact is that many of us find ourselves in this place of seemingly contradictory uncomfortableness when we are asked to articulate our position on the abortion issue. Regardless of our ambiguity, we are forced to take sides which can seem like a betrayal to the complexities involved.

But regardless of where we personally stand on this issue, those women who find themselves in procreative crisis do not care about our moral dilemma. They care about their own. And what they ask of us, whose collective voice holds influence over legislative policies, is that we allow them to make the best choice for themselves and their families, whatever that choice may be. Life, in all of its complexities, is too precious to be regarded with any less compassion or consideration.

Unfortunately, the rhetorical debate that has surrounded the battle for reproductive rights has created more moral paralysis than constructive answers, more heartache than hope, more alienation than understanding, more death than life. It has created an atmosphere of judgment and condemnation that has engendered more fear than trust, more silence than dialogue, more confusion than clarity. The fact is there is no comfortable platform on abortion, only a pro-active compassionate one that takes into consideration more than one limited viewpoint, more than one vital life force. To that end there is only one thing that I am not ambivalent about: I am undeniably pro-choice. The decision to terminate a pregnancy or to bring it to term is probably **THE MOST DIFFICULT DECISION** that any woman will ever make, and either choice has lasting consequences.

Forty-four years ago, the United States Supreme Court made a decision to give women back their lives. Today that ruling continues to be challenged in every state of the Union as well as in the Senate and House of Representatives, and now the new administration is vowing to get it overturned through the Supreme Court. As I see it, Roe vs. Wade was much more than a court battle for reproductive rights. Roe vs. Wade returned to us the internal struggle to engage our

experiences with our beliefs and values, to perceive possibilities in the midst of overwhelmingly difficult circumstances, and to ultimately make responsible and life-affirming decisions for ourselves and our families. It recognized our need for personal ethical response and the importance of communal support at that moment when we are most challenged by Creation, itself.

When I was a graduate student at Harvard Divinity School in the late 1980's, I spent a great deal of time with women who had made the difficult decision to terminate a pregnancy. My dissertation was the result of a study that I conducted with forty-five women who had had abortions—some of them legal and some of them illegal. It was a privilege for me to be welcomed into their sacred space, where they shared some of the painful but necessary choices they had made in their lives.

Among the women I interviewed there was agreement on the basic principle of a woman's right to choose. Beyond that, there was a disparate range of opinion as to the discernment process, the role of faith, or lack thereof, versus the imposition of religious doctrine and morality, the importance of circumstantial conditions, the pros and cons of governmental regulations, the availability of non-judgmental counseling, and medical disclosure. For me, those women dispelled any notion that I ever had that there was or is a single pro-choice voice. I'd also risk saying that a similar range of feelings and beliefs must hold true for those who embrace the pro-life position.

So, in this vast sea of conflicting viewpoints, the one commonality among them all is that we are ultimately left with women who are in procreative crisis—each of their stories being unique unto themselves. What we are left with is a great uncertainty as to what should be our individual and collective response to the moral demands of human procreation and sexuality. And it is precisely the tension of this inherently spiritual dilemma that we, as a society, are terrified to confront.

Over the years I have struggled to find a new lens through which we might view this most complicated issue. Interestingly, I found my greatest source of insight in the inner sanctum of an ancient garden. In it I found one of the most profound struggles of the human heart in conflict, of the ambivalence that comes from making life and death decisions, of the limitations that are placed upon each of us even as we strive to do the right thing. In this place where we are literally and figuratively brought to our knees, I found that our courage comes from an inner place of knowing that no one can give to us, but that only we can find for ourselves. I also discovered that this place of discernment can be a very lonely one.

Somewhere deep in the Gospel of Mark, in the inner recesses of the Garden of Gethsemane, I found the metaphor that helped to give me some clarity on the procreative dilemma.

36 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsem'ane, and he said to them, "Sit here, while I go yonder and pray." 37 And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zeb'edee, he began to be greatly saddened and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch[a] with me." 39 And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." 40 And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch[b] one hour with me? 41 Watch[c] and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." 42 Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, thy will be done." 43 And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. 44 So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. 45 Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

When I contemplate my pastoral response to women who are struggling with the difficult decision to terminate a pregnancy, I find myself drawn to the image of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. So compelling is his struggle between life and death. So filled with anguish are his prayers for deliverance and guidance. So startling is the response of his beloved friends when he asks them to be present with him as he struggles with what lay before him, and they succumb to the powers of passivity. Ultimately, even those people who were closest to Jesus did not fully comprehend the extent of his suffering. They did not understand the restless agony of the human spirit, the flesh, and the divine engaged in a transcendent struggle with worldly ramifications. They did not appreciate the fact that every action and every inaction has a consequence.

At one time or another, we all walk in the Garden of Gethsemane. At different moments in our lives, each and every one of us is drawn into the sanctuary of despair and of hope. It is in this space that our tears become mingled with the resistance of the human heart in conflict. It is in this space where our prayers are given voice—if not for a greater divine consciousness, then perhaps for the purpose of our own hearing. It is into this space that we invite those people whom we deem to be safe beacons of light, surrounding us with their love and compassion.

I cannot think of another metaphor that reveals more poignantly the place that a woman walks when she is faced with a complicated and/or unwanted pregnancy. And I can say that because I, too, have been in such a place.

Very often, when we speak about abortion, it is with such generic and more often than not, judgmental fluency: "Other women have them, young and irresponsible women, promiscuous women, uneducated women, unlucky women, violated women, poor women, rich and morally indifferent women, unchurched women"...the list of labels goes on. It is so much easier for us to think in terms of categorical "otherness" while living with the illusion that we are safe from the perils of procreative crisis and the enormously difficult decisions that they engender. How often did I say, "I'm fine if other women want to make that choice, but I never would...with the slightest hint of self-righteousness in my voice."

Well, in this world of "otherness," where issues of mortality are someone else's concern, where moral dilemmas are someone else's problem, we are all vulnerable. I learned that the hard way when I had an unexpected pregnancy that was potentially life threatening and very debilitating at a time in my life when domestic violence, financial hardship, enormous academic obligations, and two young children made my decision all the more painful. It was certainly an emotional and spiritually devastating time in my life; and during those eternal weeks of discernment, while I struggled to make the most life-giving decision for myself and my family, I learned just how lonely that Garden of Gethsemane can be. Neither God nor Goddess nor other human being could remove the cup of my despair. Caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place, I inherently knew that whatever decision I made would be life-altering. Every action and every inaction has a consequence.

It was during that long dark night of the soul that I understood, perhaps for the first time, the desperation that women have felt since the beginning of civilization when faced with such a life and death decision. And I knew that no human law could supersede what I knew in my heart that I needed to do. For the very first time I understood why every three minutes a woman dies in the world from an illegal abortion—because the risk of death is less feared than having an unwanted pregnancy.

And I wept. I wept because my previous indifference on the abortion issue had betrayed those women who once stood in my place--because until that moment I had not understood the extent of their pain or the need for such personal freedom to choose. Certainly, I had heard the horrible stories of backroom abortions, and those women had my sympathy, but not my willingness to fight for reproductive rights. You see, for me, abortion was something that "other" women did. That "otherness" made them seem less than real to me. In my eyes their struggle was diminished BECAUSE of their invisibility. Then suddenly the collective female body became my own.

Procreative crisis touches all of us in this sanctuary. By virtue of our human sexuality, there will always be unexpected pregnancies, complicated pregnancies, unwanted pregnancies, teenage pregnancies, menopausal pregnancies, incest and rape pregnancies. It could be our daughter or granddaughter, our sister or mother. It could be one of us. Each situation will have its own unique and extenuating circumstances, its own special demands. And each will require a deeply personal response. Yet, procreative crisis also has everything to do with how we, as a community, honor the sacred space in which a woman walks when faced with such a difficult decision. It is here that I once again find helpful the metaphor of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In my own efforts to be made whole again, I, too, sought the comfort and support of those people whom I trusted. Not all of them were understanding or knew how to respond. Few of them could comprehend the sobering reality and spiritual tension that had permeated my whole being. Some abandoned me for what they perceived to be my moral failure, while others wanted

to "fix" my situation but didn't know how. In the end, only I could resolve in my heart the final outcome of my pregnancy. Yet, the watchful presence of the very few who dared to walk by my side, the unconditional love and support that they bestowed upon me, made all the difference in my journey back to wholeness.

What I see as the real challenge of the abortion issue is how we choose to be present with women in procreative crisis—how we choose to honor their needs and concerns. It is what feminist scholar Nelle Morton calls, "hearing each other into speech." It is what Gethsemane refers to as "the call to watch."

This call to watch solicits not passive observation but active response. To watch means to witness, to behold, to safeguard. It demands that we be consciously present. But what happens when a woman in our life comes to us with a decision with which we disagree? Do we abandon her? Do we impose our own prejudice, our own values, our own fears? Or do we acknowledge without judgment the inherent worth and dignity of her person, of her spirit? Can we move beyond the temptation of words? Is the call to watch so powerful in and of itself that we will never again let our loved ones die at the mercy of laws that would hold their lives hostage?

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We...will...never have unanimous agreement on abortion, and it's naïve for any of us to think that we ever will. Therefore, it is imperative that we support legislation for a woman's right to choose for herself. Regardless of laws, however, we will always have to struggle with life and death decisions. As our drive to survive will testify, we will always take the risks needed to make the most life-giving decisions for ourselves and our families. But to do so alone, without the love and compassion and presence of others to hold our hands, makes our decisions all the more difficult.

When the women in our lives come to us in procreative crisis, and yes, some will come—what will be our response? Will we have the courage to be unconditionally present with them as they struggle to make this most difficult of decisions? Or, will they silently wonder the same question that Jesus asked of Simon Peter?

"Husband, lover, sister, brother, friend, mother, father, doctor, pastor...are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour with me?"

AMEN, BLESSED BE, AND NAMASTE