

## Service

### Reproductive Justice

Roger K Howe – 2013-02-03

#### **Welcome & Announcements**

Our service today was designed and the sermon will be delivered by Roger Howe. Roger is a retired family physician who lives on a small farm near Phoenix, Oregon. He is a member of the Rogue Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship and originally delivered this service to that fellowship on February 3, 2013. It was subsequently submitted to the Unitarian Universalist Association annual contest for sermons on social justice topics, and won the prize for 2013.

#### **Chalice Lighting (Words by Steve Stock)**

We light this chalice to celebrate the inherent worth and dignity of every person;

To reaffirm the historic pledge of liberal religion to seek that justice which transcends mere legality and moves toward the resolution of true equality;

And to share that love which is ultimately beyond even our cherished reason, that love which unites us.

#### **Opening Words [Two readers, alternating]**

1. "When men and women are able to respect and accept their differences then love has a chance to blossom." - John Gray

2. "If we lose love and self-respect for each other, this is how we finally die."  
- Maya Angelou

3. "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." Nelson Mandela

4. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." - Martin Luther King

5. "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest." - Elie Wiesel

6. "Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are." - Benjamin Franklin

**Opening Hymn - Love Will Guide Us – 131**

**Reading:** [The following reading was originally presented as a children’s story, but became such an integral part of the service that it is included here.]

*Wishing for Family*

By Rev. Leslie Becknell Marx

In the beautiful woods near an open meadow lived many animals, birds, and bugs. In one cave lived two bears who wanted to be parents but they weren’t able to make a baby. They had so much love to give a child they hoped that a child would come for them to adopt.

One day, the brown bear was walking through the meadow and saw a puffy dandelion. She had heard that if you made a wish and blow on the dandelion, all the little tufts will carry your wish so it can come true.

She thought she would try. She picked a dandelion, the puffiest one she could find. She closed her eyes, and made a wish that was a lot like a prayer “please send me a child so I can be a mama.” Then she blew as hard as she could. All the little tufts flew out over the meadow and drifted down to the ground.

One of those tufts landed right near the center of the meadow, and the seed nestled down into the dirt, was softened by the rain, and warmed by the sun, and started to grow into a dandelion flower.

On the other side of the meadow lived a bear who realized that she was pregnant with a baby bear growing in her belly. She loved this little baby who was preparing to come into the world. She wanted the best for this baby bear. And she felt sad because she did not believe she could provide the kind of care and comfort this baby would need.

She decided to take a long walk through the woods to the meadow to think about what might be best for this baby. On her walk, she came to realize that this baby was meant for another family. She felt great peace and happiness when she imagined the baby being welcomed by a family who had been longing for and waiting for a baby.

When she got to the edge of the meadow, she saw a puffy dandelion. She knew that if you make a wish and blow on the dandelion, all the little tufts will carry your wish so it can come true.

She leaned over, picked the dandelion, closed her eyes, and made a wish that was a lot like a prayer “please find a loving home where this baby will be safe and happy.” Then she blew

as hard as she could. All the little tufts flew out over the meadow and drifted down on the ground.

One of those tufts landed right near the center of the meadow, and the seed nestled down into the dirt, was softened by the rain, and warmed by the sun, and started to grow into a dandelion flower.

As the flower grew, it noticed another dandelion very close by. This dandelion had been growing longer and was taller with more skinny yellow petals. The tall dandelion said to the short dandelion,

“Hello, little friend. Do you carry any wishes with you?”

“Oh, yes, a very special wish from a bear with a baby growing in her belly. She wants a loving home for the baby. “

“I carry a wish from a bear who is wanting a baby so she can be a mama. How can we make their wishes come true?”

The next time a bee buzzed by looking for nectar, the dandelions called him over and told him about the two bears and their wishes. The bee quickly flew to the bears and whispered the other’s wish into their ears. They were so happy.

The baby bear was born. Everyone was laughing and crying with lots of feelings when the baby bear went from the one bear to the other. There was so much love in the woods that day, you could feel it all the way to the center of the meadow, where the two dandelions beamed with joy.

**Reading:** [This Reading was also integral to the service. It is a description of an article published in the New York Times on April 14, 2012, written by Susan Heath, a columnist for that paper. Ms. Heath’s article was entitled “No One Called Me a Slut.”]

In her article, Susan Heath describes a time in her life in 1978, five years after Roe v. Wade. She was then 38 years old, had four sons — ages 12 to 17. She had returned to school, was working on a B.A., and was feeling successful.

But she was about two and a half months pregnant with a child she did not want. She had a family. She loved her children but didn’t want any more. Her life had moved on; she had other things to do; she didn’t believe she could refocus to be a good mother to a fifth child.

Her husband drove her to Planned Parenthood to have a legal abortion. They considered this a serious matter for both of them; they agreed it was her decision to make. They had been conscientiously using contraception but it had failed.

She was pregnant but she did not feel trapped.

All she had to do was call the clinic and make an appointment. She wasn't ashamed or terrified, because she knew that brave women before her had fought to make abortion legal, had gone public with their stories of shame and terror and had made sure that no woman ever again would have to die from a back-alley abortion or bear an unwanted child.

Her husband parked the car and they walked up to the entrance of the clinic. There was no gantlet of pickets shouting that she was a murderer, no fear that someone would throw a bomb.

The receptionist took her name and indicated that she had an appointment with a counselor first. She accepted that as part of the procedure. She told the counselor her story; the counselor nodded understandingly and said they would be ready for her soon. The counselor expressed no judgment, showed her no pictures of fetuses, and did not try to make her feel guilty. She just wanted to be sure Susan was sure about what she was doing.

And of course, she was.

Susan writes that it wasn't bad. She felt less invaded than she felt going for monthly checkups when she was pregnant. The workers at Planned Parenthood were kind to her, made sure she was warm, and assured her that her husband would be able to take her home soon after it was done. Soon it was over, she was fine, and she was ready to go home.

She reports that having the abortion released her from a burden she could not have borne, and allowed her to continue to be the best mother she could be to her four boys.

Susan recalls that two years or so later, as she was out driving, she looked over at the right hand seat of her car and acknowledged to herself that if she had not had an abortion, there would have been a child seat there, with a small child in it, feeling safe in her care. It might have been a girl. She thought she would have liked having a girl.

But she did not find herself grieving for the little girl she never had; she writes that she does not now have and has never had a single qualm about not bringing that child into the world. She knows women who have grieved over the children they decided not to have, and she writes that she is thankful to have been spared that sadness, guilt and regret. She writes that she also knows many women who, like her, have felt only gratitude and relief at having been able to take control over their lives safely and legally.

**Hymn** - We'll Build a Land – 121 (verses 1,2,4)

**Sermon - Reproductive Justice – The Issue that Will Not Go Away**

Reproductive Justice – it has a strange sound to it, this juxtaposition of reproduction and justice. We think about the issues of sexual education for our children, family planning, and choice to have a pregnancy terminated as being separate issues. I know I did as I started preparing for this morning. Then, adoption sneaked its nose under the edge of the tent, and my mind began to work. Think about it – there is a justice issue that surrounds issues of adoption, family planning, sexual knowledge, the choice to enter or not to enter into a sexual relationship and the choice to determine the outcome from that relationship. You all understand what I mean when I refer to it as the issue that will not go away.

I should tell you that Rev. Leslie's story about adoption is a particularly poignant one for me. After Nancy and I had been married for several years, we concluded we were not going to be able to make a baby. In July, 1970, we adopted a baby; our second adopted baby came in August, 1971; our third adopted baby arrived in July, 1978.

In 1970, I began Family Practice training at a County Hospital in Northern California. I remember that one of the more tragic recurring themes among emergency department visits and hospital admissions was a slow but steady trickle of young women arriving at the ED with vaginal bleeding, or high fevers, or shock, following poorly performed non-medical abortions. These young women risked a great deal to terminate unwanted pregnancies – illness, loss of fertility, and loss of life. The recurrence of this theme led the hospital to create a process for the approval of pregnancy termination by medical personnel, legal under California law, though stretching the law to the utmost. Under the general protection of this program, resident physicians were permitted to learn and to perform, those terminations. It did not take caring for more than a few casualties of botched abortions to convince me of the merit of the program. Properly performed, early pregnancy termination was a simple, easy, quick procedure almost devoid of risk.

I would like to tell you there was some ultimate idealism involved in my decision, but I do not remember that; I remember being convinced that it was better that I should do the abortion and keep the woman's life, health and fertility out of jeopardy than that someone unskilled (like the woman's boyfriend) should try the job with an unbent coat hanger or a hunk of willow stem. I learned to perform abortions, did a number of them while in training, and participated in teaching younger physicians in how to do them. This was practical humanitarianism.

In 1972, I joined another physician in Mount Shasta; I continued to perform abortions.

In about 1974, Nancy and I became vegetarians after realizing we could not kill the rabbits we had raised to eat. This became the touchstone of an ethical position – if I am unwilling to take direct responsibility for the death of the animal whose meat I eat, should I eat that meat? The clear answer, to us, was “no.”

With such a commitment to not killing animals, how should I feel about performing abortions? I realized I had taken an ethical position regarding the sanctity of life that was not compatible with continuing to perform abortions; I stopped doing them.

But the reasons why they needed to be done did not go away. Nor had I any right to impose my ethical standards on anyone else. I would not force everyone to be a vegetarian just because I was; I would not force anyone to forego an abortion merely because I was unwilling to perform the procedure myself. I referred women to those of my colleagues whom I knew to be kind, sympathetic and competent.

In this sort of strange way, I became anti-abortion and pro-choice. My views about eating meat have changed – another story for another day. I continue to believe that the correct path to reproductive self-control lies through education and prevention, rather than abortion. That a woman carrying an unwanted pregnancy might choose abortion is no surprise to me, and I support her right to choose that course – I am fortunate that such a choice will never be mine to make about a pregnancy that I am carrying.

A story from one member of this congregation about the founding of a family planning clinic indicated that the local obstetrician was unwilling to provide family planning services because he really liked delivering babies. He didn't want to offer services that would reduce the number of babies he delivered. You may have gathered that I find such an approach inappropriate and unethical – and we may get to stronger terms as we move along.

I delivered babies too, and I loved it. It is a wonderful experience to be involved in the birthing of a wanted, loved baby – but it has never been in my power to impose that wanting and love on an unwilling mother. I offered contraceptive information, instruction, prescriptions, counseling, and sterilizations.

In the late 1970s, the Mount Shasta Community Hospital was sold to Catholic Healthcare West – now known as Dignity Health. The hospital changed ownership, and certain medical practices became forbidden. The pharmacy did not stock contraceptives. Sterilization procedures were not allowed. Abortions were certainly not allowed. We had to make referrals to physicians and clinics in other medical communities – the nearest being in Redding, CA, some 60 miles down Interstate Five. Fortunately, because vasectomies are office procedures, I could continue to do them in my private office. But to do tubal ligations, I had to travel with my patients to Redding, where I had privileges at a surgical center and a non-Catholic hospital to perform those procedures. For years, I traveled that road about once a month to do two to four tubal ligations at one of those two facilities.

In preparation for this morning, I called Planned Parenthood and spoke to a representative for the Southern Oregon region, who assured me that family planning services are widely

available in our area, both at the Planned Parenthood clinics and in primary care physician offices. Abortions are performed by at least two physicians in Jackson County.

But, in the final analysis, the story here is not about young women with botched abortions and it certainly is not about the ethical tribulations of a young family physician four decades ago. The story is about respect for the dignity and worth of every person. It is about young women being in a position to make decisions about how they will lead their lives and to carry out those decisions without condemnation.

The story Rev. Leslie wrote for us about adoption is such a story. To be able to choose to have a family and to have that family come by way of adoption is a remarkable part of choice. You might think I should oppose abortion – all of my children might have been aborted instead of being available for me to adopt. I think there will always be women who would rather carry and birth an unwanted child than have the pregnancy terminated; for there to be eager, loving parents available to such a woman, who will adopt her baby, is a support for her ability to choose her pathway.

The story from the New York Times is a remarkable story about a woman making decisions for herself, choosing her own destiny and taking the risk of making her own mistakes – and it was done with the support of those she loved. Many years later, she appreciates that she made the right choice and is today without regrets.

These are stories of reproductive choice.

On the other side of the coin are those who would deny access to abortion services to everyone, who would also withhold sexual education and contraceptive information and tools from young people. Maybe these people believe that sexual abstinence is the only acceptable pathway to birth control – if they believe and wish to practice that, it's fine with me; but for them to wish to impose that on others is not just, and it seems to me to be a carryover of an unsavory legacy we carry forward in our western culture. For millennia, systematically and persistently, we have reduced the worth and taken away the dignity of half of the population – and I think it is pretty well-nigh time we stopped doing that.

One of the tools that men have used to subjugate women has been sexuality and reproduction – keep them barefoot and pregnant and you keep them subservient and dependent.

Women have been fighting in this country for two hundred years to be able to stand on the same legal ground as men, whether that means arising from subjugation, as I see it, or coming down from a pedestal, as others would portray it. But the fight is not won – in fact, in many ways, it has barely been engaged.

Violence – physical, sexual, emotional – is used regularly in our culture as a tool for the subjugation of a significant portion of our population. Estimates that one girl in five has been sexually abused by the end of her thirteenth year are certainly underestimates. Every 13 seconds a child in our country is abused, and about once a minute a little girl experiences sexual abuse. Five American children die each day as a result of child abuse. Over 200 thousand females over 12 years of age are raped in this country every year – one every 2.5 minutes. 54% of those rapes are never reported to the police and 97% of the rapists never spend a single day in jail. I am horrified – are you horrified too? This is America, the land of the free, where we subject our females to a blistering array of violence and repression to keep them firmly in their places.

I think that withholding sexual education and access to contraception is either a form of abuse or it is a form of terrorism. Access to contraceptives does not turn chaste individuals into libertines as some would seem to think, but it does allow women the same privilege men have – to be sexually active without being pregnant and dependent. When contraception does not work, it may be that a woman's only rational choice is abortion. I'm glad it's not my choice, but I honor the women who have to make that choice, regardless of what they choose. I submit to you that it is up to each woman to make that choice for herself – it is not for her parents, her husband or her boyfriend to make the decision for her, but it is their place to support her in her decision. For a man to decide whether a woman should have an abortion is an assault on her ability to determine the use to which her own body will be put just as surely as rape is such an assault.

There is ample evidence that rape is rarely a sexual crime – it is a crime of dominance, a crime of politics and terrorism. Child abuse rarely seems to be a deliberately planned process, but more something that happens when people don't know any other way to behave. Our challenge is to affirm that violence is wrong, to confront violent behavior in a way that causes it to stop, whether it be sexual or physical or psychological, while maintaining our compassion for the violent, who are often the victims of violence perpetrated by their own parents.

You have heard two stories this morning that point at progress we have made. But the story from the New York Times titled “No One Called me a Slut” is 35 years out of date, and we have, sadly, slipped backwards since then. Honoring the worth and dignity of every person includes honoring the worth and dignity of women as much as of men; it means seeing women as the agents of their own destinies rather than as the incidental victims of the destinies of their men. Choice, for women, is not just about reproductive justice – though that issue screams loudly at us – it is also about a host of other choices in life, many of which are dependent on women being free of rape, physical abuse, intimidation and domination by the men in their lives.



The Unitarian Universalist Association has set reproductive justice as a congregational study/action item. I have told you what I believe. What do you believe? What can we do about it? What can the UUA do about it? How do we get moving?

Let us resolve now to study this issue and to look for ways to help to ensure dignity, worth and justice – including reproductive justice – for all people.

**Closing Hymn - We Are a Gentle Angry People - 170**

### **Closing Words**

Please remain standing. I invite you to join hands.

The Unitarian Universalist church is dedicated to the proposition that behind all our differences, beneath all our diversity, there is a unity that makes us one and binds us forever together, in spite of time and death and the space between the stars. We pause in silent witness to that unity.

We came into this place today to worship – to hold up those things of highest value to us in our lives – our seven UU principles, especially the first, affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and the second, upholding justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We have explored the issue of reproductive justice, suggested to us by the UUA General Assembly to be a Study-Action issue. We have seen that while progress has been made, we have more to do to secure equity and justice for all.

May we leave this place feeling our resolve, reinforced, uplifted, ready for another week “out there,” in a world that may fail to recognize and uplift the same values we do.

Peace be with us.