

Giving Women Room to Exhale

LISTENING TO WOMEN WHO HAVE HAD ABORTIONS

By Jennifer Baumgardner

ON THE 32ND ANNIVERSARY of *Roe v. Wade* this past January, the US had just inaugurated four more years of an administration hostile to abortion rights. That day, when Senator Hillary Clinton addressed 1,000 abortion rights supporters, she asserted her belief in *Roe* and also said that abortion can be “tragic” for some women. Her words sent shock-waves through the major prochoice organizations and spurred the *New York Times* to surmise that the senator was “recalibrating” her prochoice position in preparation for a 2008 bid for the White House. In other words, she and Democrats like Senator Kerry are back-pedaling. But are they?

This seeming shift in focus from “Keep your laws off my body!” to “Let’s talk about feelings and sadness and (gasp) whether fetal life has value” is a conversation with a long history. It is likely that it goes back further than this, but one way of telling the story begins in 1980 with a 30-year-old counselor named Charlotte Taft. Ms. Taft was two years into her tenure directing the Routh Street abor-

tion clinic in Dallas when, feeling enthusiastic, she decided to draw up a questionnaire for patients coming in for their two-week checkups. “I asked a lot of open-ended questions,” recalls Taft, now 54 and a counselor in private practice in Glorieta, NM. “I was shocked by how many women who seemed fine during the procedure were now having thoughts and feelings that no one had anticipated.” The biggest thing she noted was that women felt sadder than they had anticipated. “They wondered, ‘How can I feel sad about something I chose?’”

Her findings ran counter to everything Taft knew: *women came in to a clinic in crisis, she had assumed, and they left relieved.* While it was just seven to 10 percent of the patients who needed follow-up care, it was a lot of people. Taft discovered that it was not safe for women to talk about abortion in their lives. “Number one, it was supposed to be a secret,” she says. “So these women had no idea who else in their lives had gone through this experience. Two, we don’t have good language even today for making a good but complex decision. Third, some women felt that if they said anything, it was ammunition to remove the right to choose. You either said you were fine or admitted you were a murderer.”

Around that same time, in 1981, Peg Johnston was opening Southern Tier

Women’s Services, an independent abortion clinic Binghamton, NY. A red diaper baby [baby boomer children of American Communists] and the grand-niece of suffragist Elizabeth Freeman, Johnston had grown up with radical ideas and earned a reputation as someone who could handle controversy. And she got it: five years after Southern Tier clinic opened, fellow Binghamton resident Randall Terry founded what would become the nation’s most high-profile antiabortion organization, Operation Rescue, and pioneered his strategy of blocking clinic entrances at Johnston’s clinic.

After a while, though, Johnston turned her attention from the protesters to her patients. “I don’t know if I just started getting bored with Operation Rescue, but I definitely started to get interested in what women were saying instead,” recalls Johnston, now 56. She’d hear the protesters say “You’re killing your baby!” and then she’d sit in a counseling session with a woman who’d say, “I feel like I’m killing my baby.” At first, she says, she assumed that the patients were simply repeating what they’d heard outside, having internalized right-wing disinformation that Johnston needed to “correct.” But “once I began listening more intently to her, I learned that she *wasn’t* saying what the picketer was saying—although she used the same words.” Johnston believes that

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women were struggling with the value of life and how to do the right thing and be a good person. “Frequently they were already mothers and they knew a time when, at that same stage of pregnancy, they had welcomed the life and felt like it was their baby,” says Johnston. “They weren’t mouthing an antichoice message—they were acknowledging that this was serious stuff. ‘How can I want one kid and not the other?’” During the course of counseling, Johnston drew the disparate threads together: “I felt like they needed a place to say the worst and then work their way to the rightness of their decision. Many were on a journey to realize the power and responsibility of being a mother,” says Johnston. “Which

the November Gang. A combination think-tank and support group, they named themselves after the month in 1989 when they first met in response to the Supreme Court’s *Webster* decision. At first they focused on what was happening outside of the clinic—would *Roe* stand? How much were they spending on security? But after a while, they began to discuss what happened within the clinic. Once they did, they began asking questions that shocked some of their colleagues. *What if we showed fetal tissue to patients if they wanted to see it? Why are we protecting ourselves from what the patients are really saying?*

Many of the clinicians do indeed offer to show fetal tissue to patients, and view-

like Aspen Baker, never knew a time when abortion wasn’t legal. She had an abortion when she was 19 and taking a break from attending Evergreen State College in Tacoma. “It was not an easy decision,” she recalls. “I struggled with feelings of deviance, selfishness and loss afterwards.” Four years, lots of counseling, and an “amazing ritual process,” helped her feel resolved. But at a NARAL speak-out on the University of Washington campus in 2001, Barcklow spent hours preparing a presentation about her experience and closure ritual, only to arrive at the speak-out and confront recycled coat hangers and “we’ll never go back” signs. “I would cite this experience as my first real disconnect from the

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is that sometimes it’s the power of saying no to a life.”

The threat that legal abortion could actually be overturned has animated most strategic discussions of choice for the past three decades. Recently, though, the strategy of listening to patients—and letting them use words like “baby” and “killing”—is gaining momentum among pro-choice activists. At a clinic in Fargo, ND, (the only clinic in the state), I was surprised by the journals that staff leaves in the waiting and recovery rooms for patients to jot down thoughts. Many women wrote some version of “Don’t think of it as losing a baby, but as gaining a guardian angel.” These were women who clearly felt a relationship to a pregnancy as a child, not a mass of cells. It is a sensitive moment to acknowledge this, as supporters of abortion rights have long been losing legal ground.

The philosophical leaders of this strand of the movement are a loose group of abortion providers that call themselves

ing it is often a relief to the patient. For her part, Peg Johnston began developing the all-options element of counseling, saying to patients, “Okay, you have a complex decision to make and there are only three options. I focused on pregnancy, not abortion.” She eventually created the Pregnancy Options Workbook (available at www.pregnancyoptions.info) that is used at hundreds of clinics for counseling.

Younger women—the ones raised with legal abortion, birth control and sex education—are pushing this still-controversial line of activism forward. Aspen Baker, 29, co-founded Exhale, a postabortion talk line, in 2000 because she didn’t have anyone to talk to after her abortion. Exhale organizers have tried to eliminate anything that might stop a woman from calling, including using words like “feminist” and even “pro-choice” in their materials, although Exhale is both. Emily Barcklow is a 27-year-old from Seattle, Wash., who,

mainstream abortion rights movement,” she says. Barcklow recently decided to create an abortion zine, *Our Truths/Nuestras Verdades*, to reflect women’s experiences, which launched in print and on the web in May 2005.

Projects like Barcklow’s, which focus on telling women’s stories rather than repeating what their mostly young authors consider stale aphorisms, are popping up around the country. I’ve been working on one, which includes a documentary called *Speak Out*, a photo exhibit (by Tara Todras-Whitehill) and T-shirts that read “I had an abortion.” Sarah Varney, a 32-year-old reporter for National Public Radio, created radio documentaries in which older women tell their pre-*Roe* abortion stories. Varney also produced a series of events called the Beta Project to use the stories to help people talk about and understand abortion. Two other filmmakers, Faith Pennick and Penny Lane, are also completing documentaries. While Lane’s focuses on younger feminists—

often referred to as Third Wavers—Pennick’s is called “Silent Choices” and explores the experiences of black women.

The experiences of women of color are particularly submerged in terms of the mainstream debate. This fact is not lost on Loretta Ross, age 52, the co-author of *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (SouthEnd Press, 2005). “If you’re in the field, you know that black women are 12 percent of the female population but get 25 percent of the abortions in the country,” says Ross, “Yet black women are saying this is not their issue. I have to ask, why not?” An organization Ross works with, Sister Song, was instrumental in changing the name of last year’s prochoice demonstration in Washington from “March for Freedom of Choice” to “March for Women’s Lives.”

“We couldn’t endorse the march unless they recognized the entire range of complex issues that women face,” says

Ross. “Every woman who is pregnant wonders if she has a bedroom for that child; can she afford to take off the time to raise that child? Why flatten the decisions around abortion to just abortion? When women don’t have jobs or health care, where is the choice?”

Talking freely about abortion is a sign of the movement’s strength. And it’s a feminist act. Akin to the response generated by Senator Clinton’s comments, a similar firestorm has erupted around an essay by Frances Kissling in this magazine last fall. Kissling’s suggestion that a good society values life, including fetal life, is divisive among advocates, just as some groused that the name change for the Washington march “weakened” the message of abortion rights. Perhaps most impugned, though, are younger women. Rather than see what Baker and Barcklow are doing as an evolution of abortion rights—women don’t have to have one simple, boilerplate response to their abor-

tion—the action is often distorted into “these young women don’t understand about choice.”

Loretta Ross takes the long view. “The defensiveness that the prochoice movement has is well earned,” says Ross. “We’ve been shot at, picketed, fought every step. But I’m very glad that the conversation is changing.” November Gang members liken these critical conversations to a picnic—and a picnic has crumbs that the “ants,” or political opponents, will pick up. Their belief is that feminists must not sacrifice even a few women because of fears about the crumbs.

“Rape crisis, birthing experiences, divorce law all got changed because women dared to speak the truth of their lives,” says Peg Johnston. “If we can’t hear women, then where are we?” Where we are, I’m beginning to see, is in a place where women are telling the truth. In the face of daunting, well-organized opposition, that fact gives me endless hope. ■