

Resources for Communities of Ongoing Religious Exploration

V. 1 Unit 8

Reproductive Justice

Suggested Chalice Lighting

I want to be with people who submerge in the task, who go into the fields to harvest and work in a row and pass the bags along, who stand in the line and haul in their places, who are not parlor generals and field deserters but move in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out. ~ Marge Piercy

I. Introduction

Within the framework of reproductive justice, the Unitarian Universalist Association works against the cultural, political, economic, and structural constraints that limit women's access to health care and full reproductive choice. Reproductive justice, a concept put forth by coalitions of women of color, promotes the right of all women to have children, not to have children, and to raise their children in safe and healthy environments. It does not isolate or pit important social issues against each other, rather it works to promote these rights across many areas, including comprehensive sex education, economic justice, ending violence against women, LGBTQ equality, and racial justice.

In 2015, after three years of study, the Unitarian Universalist Association enacted a resolution on reproductive justice at General Assembly. You can read that resolution here: <http://www.uua.org/action/statements/reproductive-justice>.

II. CONNECT: Readings

Conscience is the name given the governing principles of life to which a person is ultimately committed. The totality of the self and thus the integrity of personhood is involved in the moral dictates of conscience. This is the primary arena of the spirit's struggle with the moral claims made by the will of God. The depths of one's own being and the ground of meaning of one's own existence are expressed in the struggles of conscience. -

Paul D. Simmons; *Personhood, the Bible, and the Abortion Debate*

My decision to provide abortions represented a change of heart on my part. I had been working for 12 years as an OBGYN and had never performed abortions because I felt they were morally wrong. But I grew increasingly uncomfortable turning away women who needed help.

Ultimately, reading a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. challenged me to a deeper spiritual understanding. I was moved by his discussion of the quality of the good Samaritan and of what made the Samaritan “good.” The Samaritan reversed the question of concern, to care more about the well-being of the person needing help than about what might happen to him for stopping to give help. I realized that if I were to show compassion, I would have to act on behalf of those women. I stopped doing obstetrics in 2009 to provide abortion full time for women who needed help. Invariably I field questions regarding my decision, with the most often asked being: Why? The short answer is: Because I can. And: Because if I don’t, who will?

Willie Parker, MD; *Why I Provide Abortions*, New York Times op-ed 11-18-2015

The ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is directly linked to the conditions in her community, and these conditions are not just a matter of individual choice and access. For example, a woman cannot make an individual decision about her body if she is part of a community whose human rights as a group are violated, such as through environmental dangers or insufficient quality health care.

Loretta Ross, *What is Reproductive Justice?* www.Sistersong.net

III. GROW: Questions for consideration and discussion

1. Have you experienced an intentional violation of your personal autonomy around decisions of sexuality and family formation? (e.g., enforcement of religious doctrine, legal prohibitions, physical confinement) If so, what impact did that have on your sense of worth, and your sense of being valued by others as a person of worth?
2. Many people believe that terminating a pregnancy is an act of homicide, based on the assumption that a fetus will eventually reach live birth. Many people disagree, asserting that a fetus is not just contained by, but is literally part of a woman’s body until the moment of birth. Do you stand in one of these two positions, or take another view?
3. Does society at large have some legitimate interest in defining or curtailing reproductive / sexual freedom of individuals? If so, what is the moral foundation for this interest, and what are its limitations?
4. In what ways do your Unitarian Universalist beliefs and convictions influence your views on reproductive justice? What should be the role of liberal religious institutions in the social and political decision-making process around reproduction and sexual freedom?

IV. SERVE: Taking it home

In Alabama, more than 90% of counties have no clinic that provides abortion, so many women must travel considerable distance. Often, that means two trips; state law mandates counseling that includes information designed to discourage her from having an abortion, and then a delay of 48 hours before the procedure is provided. A minor must have parental consent for abortion, regardless of the circumstances that led to the pregnancy. A woman must undergo an ultrasound before obtaining an abortion; the provider must offer her the option to view the image. Health plans offered in the state's health exchange under the Affordable Care Act, as well as publicly funded care, can only cover abortion if the woman's life is endangered, rape or incest.

Our congregation has made contributions to the POWER House, which began as a support system for women and families who must travel considerable distance and then endure a mandated waiting period prior to receiving abortion services at the only clinic in Montgomery offering such services. It remains, first and foremost, a safe space for women to be respected and protected in what may be the most painful and vulnerable moment of their lives, even as POWER House has grown into a hub of activism across intersecting oppressions.

Consider ways in which you have been supported and empowered by the struggles and activism of people who do not know you, and who fight obstacles that you have never encountered. This might include access to screening and health services, birth control resources, education programs for adults and children. Reflect on ways to encourage and support others who are engaged in the work of empowerment and resistance, knowing that we will all benefit from the work even if we are not directly impacted by the problems they face.

V. Conclusion

This material was unapologetically skewed toward the UUA stance on reproductive justice. Were you comfortable with the presumption of a liberal/progressive position in this controversy, or did it feel unfair or uneven? What was it like, expressing opinions on this deeply personal subject? Was this place safe for opinions that differed from the majority? Were you surprised by differences in the group? By similarities? What other feelings did you encounter? What got in the way, and what was missing?

If people in the group would like, invite them to share these things, without interrogation or challenge.

Suggested closing words:

Seek for the spirit of life that is within you;
that you might know more fully its power and strength.

Seek for the spirit of life that surrounds you;
that you might know more fully its connection to you.

Seek for the spirit of life that is within others;
that you might enter more fully into the community
that embraces us, this day and every day.

- Elizabeth M. Strong