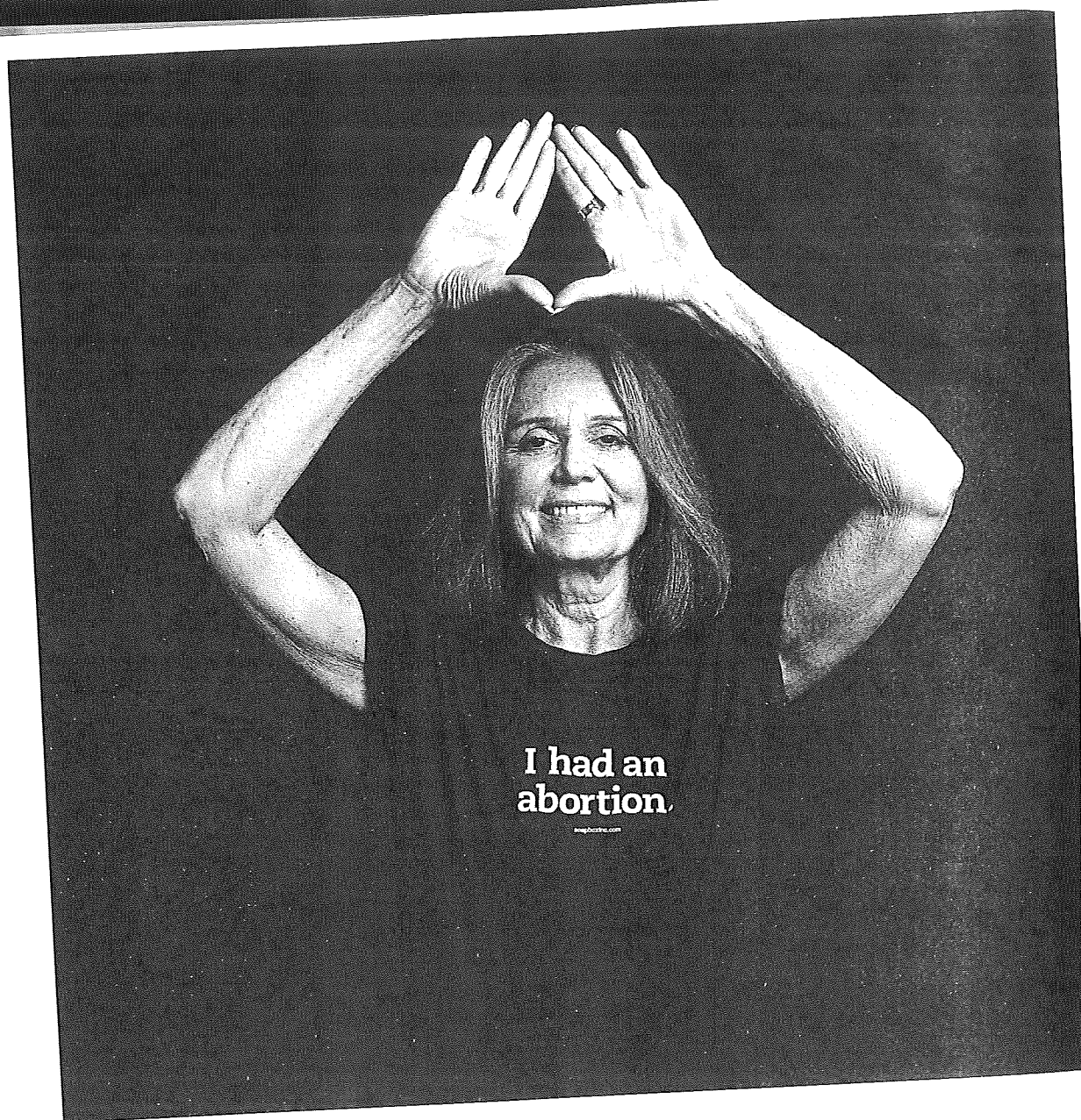


ABORTION & LIFE

BY JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER
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AKASHIC BOOKS
NEW YORK



GLORIA STEINEM, BORN MARCH 25, 1934

I grew up with no discussion of sexuality. I think the most information I got was from a little pamphlet that Kotex used to put out—and it was all about menstruation . . .

When I was in high school, the greatest shame was to get pregnant. It was the worst thing that could happen to you. It was most likely to get you banished from your family, disapproved of by your neighborhood, turned into somebody who was clearly not a “nice girl.” And in my neighborhood growing up—a very working-class, factory-working neighborhood in Toledo—there were clearly only two types of girls: nice and not nice. There was also very little knowledge about reliable contraception, so most of the people who I knew got married either before they graduated from high school or immediately afterwards—and most of them got married, at least in part, because they had to.

As a senior in college, I was engaged to a wonderful man, but not somebody I should have married. That would have been a disaster for both of us. So I broke off the engagement with him and that was part of my motivation for taking a fellowship and going to India. He and I were together again just before I left, and soon I kind of knew—or feared—that I was pregnant. I was living in London, waiting for my visa to India which took a very long time, working as a waitress with no money, no friends, dark winter days, trying to figure out what to do.

You know, in a way, ambivalence about abortion is a function of its legality. I was not ambivalent. I was desperate. I did not see any way that I could possibly give birth to someone else and also give birth to myself. It was just impossible. So there was not one moment, not one millisecond, of me thinking it would be a good idea to have a child.

In London at that time [the mid-1950s], if you got two physicians to say that having a child would endanger your health or your mental health, then it was possible to get a legal abortion—not easy, but it was possible. After many weeks of fear, confusion, and magical thinking that I would somehow have a miscarriage, I found this wonderful doctor who had many writers and poets as his patients, and he said, “All right, I’ll help you. But you must promise me two things. You must never tell anyone my name and you must promise me to do what you want with your life.”

So he signed what was necessary and sent me to a woman surgeon, who gave me an anesthetic, so I was not conscious for the actual procedure. Afterwards, she gave me pills and told me to be aware of the amount of bleeding, but it wasn't much. So I just went home and stayed in bed for the weekend and went back to work as a waitress—but with such a feeling of lightness and freedom and gratitude.

I thought everybody was supposed to feel guilty, so I used to sit and think and think and think; but I could not make myself feel guilty for even a moment. Far from feeling guilty, it was the first time I had taken responsibility for my own life. It was the first time I hadn't been passive. That I had said, *No, I'll take responsibility for my own life, I am going to make a decision.* And you know, to this day, I would raise flags on all public buildings to celebrate the chance I had to make that decision.



ANI DIFRANCO, BORN SEPTEMBER 23, 1970

The first time I got my period, my mother, a big feminist, wanted to have a party to celebrate it. I was mortified, but I guess the lesson there is that she was really open with me . . .

about what it meant to have a reproductive system—both the harder realities of it and the glory.

When I was fifteen, I had a thirty-year-old boyfriend. My mother encouraged me to get on birth control. I went to Planned Parenthood in Buffalo, New York, and said, “Um, I’m a virgin and I want to have sex. Can I get birth control?” The women at the clinic literally paraded me around. “This is Annie,”—“Ah-nee,” I’d say—“And Annie is getting birth control before she has sex for the first time!” They were so impressed that I was planning it all out before I did anything. A few years later, though, I began thinking that taking hormone pills was not what I wanted. I went off of the pill, but I hadn’t developed a mechanism for using other forms of birth control, like using condoms.

I got pregnant at eighteen. Getting pregnant illuminated a lot about that relationship and, ultimately, ended it. I paid for the abortion myself and I got myself to the clinic and back alone. I was not cold to the emotional impact of the experience. I felt a bit traumatized and a sense of loss. A lot of soul searching went into the decision, even though I knew I didn’t want to become a mother at eighteen. It was not the right thing for me; it wasn’t what I wanted or was capable of. Still, it would cross my mind: *Oh, it would be three or it would be seven . . .*

I remember wondering, *Should I feel guilty? Should I feel ashamed?* The feelings might have been socially constructed, but emotionally they were real. It took me awhile to really answer those questions, to say to myself, *No, you should not be ashamed. No, you should not allow society to judge your complex responsibilities. Those eggs are yours and what you do with them and which ones you allow to grow is your decision.*

It was a few years before I wrote a song about it, which I think was evidence of my turmoil, because I have never been one to mince words. Writing “Lost Woman Song” was definitely part of a feminist continuum—bringing it out of me in song, speaking out, which was very healing. I don’t think I could have written the song without that Lucille Clifton poem called “the lost baby poem.”

I had another abortion two years after that first one. I still didn't have my birth control worked out yet without the pill. I was reconfronted with all of those questions: *Now, shouldn't I be ashamed? Wasn't I supposed to have learned that lesson?* To admit to having one is to admit to being young and inexperienced, but to have two, well, you're a bona fide floozy and irresponsible.

It's been fifteen years since I have had an abortion or really written about it, and I'm suddenly realizing that the tools I needed in order to understand having a reproductive system or what it meant to be a horny youth, these tools were not given to me. They were squelched by patriarchal society—women's knowledge and stories were kept from me, even a basic understanding of how common abortion is that could counteract that shaming around it was suppressed. I mean, the idea that you can just "choose" abstinence is false, because our bodies and desires are designed to push us to have sex when we are the most likely to get pregnant—it's all stacked up to get us pregnant.

You know what? I'm thirty-five now and I just found out I'm pregnant a few days ago. I'm having a baby and I'm thrilled. I can't believe I'd ever look on that piss-on-the-stick and feel good about it. I want people to understand that pregnancy is bigger than individual responsibility. I want to tell women and men, "You are an animal and it is a beautiful thing."*

*Ani gave birth to her daughter, Petah Lucia, on January 20, 2007.



ROBIN RINGLEKA, BORN JUNE 10, 1974

When I was eighteen, my Catholic high school organized a trip with the diocese in Memphis to go to the annual Roe v. Wade protest in D.C. . . .

My friend's mother had exposed me to peaceful pro-life marches in Memphis and I thought this national one would be even better.

My mother is pro-choice. In fact, I was very hesitant to ask her if I could go because she's an ardent feminist who has always been very open and vocal about her pro-choice stance. At that age I really railed against my mother and her alternative ideas. She had lesbian relationships for ten years but wasn't entirely comfortable with her sexuality. I picked up on this anxiety and internalized it to a large extent myself. We had moved from Michigan to Tennessee when I was twelve (two years after she came out), and it proved to be a major culture shock for our whole family. My mother would bring pseudo-dates to my school functions because she wasn't really out to the rest of the world. I always felt like a freak because everybody at my school had this grand normalcy—or at least I imagined that they did. When I was exposed to Catholicism, I welcomed and latched on pretty tightly. As odd as it may sound, I think it's fair to say that I "rebelled" with religion. I was certain my mom didn't want me to go to the protest, but she surprised me when she said, "If you feel strongly enough about something that you need to march on Washington, I'll fund the trip."

The night before the march, they had a special mass in honor of the annual pro-life pilgrimage to D.C. The basilica in D.C. is just breathtaking and it was teeming with people who had traveled from across the United States to attend the march. I remember being surprised at the number of men there, it seemed like most of the participants were male. The chaperones on the trip really emphasized what a privilege this was for us—there were going to be bishops and cardinals from all over the world here. At one point early in the mass I heard this blood-curdling scream from the back of the church that resounded throughout the basilica. A woman was screaming about these men and their attempts to control women and end legalized abortion. I instinctively turned to acknowledge the source of the screams, but the priest next to me grabbed ahold of me so that I couldn't physically turn around. Perhaps they are used to this kind of thing happening at such gatherings, but I was

so affected that I began to cry. I noticed another young woman close by who seemed equally as freaked out, and she was crying too.

At the march the next day, I was lost in a sea of really graphic images. We had talked about abortion in religion class at length—and especially about all of the Christian families with good homes waiting for children while selfish women aborted their babies—but I had never seen anything like this. Amid pictures of dismembered fetuses, there was a woman with a happy, chubby little white baby. My friends and I posed for pictures with the infant because we thought it seemed so appropriate. I felt like the trip was important and invigorating. My pro-life stance was a significant part of my identity, as was my commitment to save sex until marriage.

Dennis didn't go to my school. I knew who he was because my sister had gone to his school and he was really beautiful and popular. We both worked at the mall—I worked at Lerner and he worked at Gadzooks. We talked here and there when we would see each other on our lunch breaks, and soon we were dating. Every time we slept together I would promise myself that it wasn't going to happen again, because my shame was so great. I believed that pregnancy only happened to a certain type of girl, and we would protect ourselves only some of the time. But of course I wouldn't plan ahead, because to do so would mean that I had intentions, and I didn't want to be that kind of girl either.

In July of 1992 I suspected I was pregnant. I was sick almost right away. I told Dennis that I didn't believe in abortion and if I were pregnant we'd have to put the child up for adoption. We bought two pregnancy tests and they were both positive. I was very ashamed, first and foremost, and scared of what people would think. I felt like a jerk and a fraud, especially because I had been so vocal (and self-righteous) about waiting until marriage. You could say that I had a lot riding on the identity I'd created, and there was no way to hide a pregnancy. One of my primary concerns, if not the biggest, was keeping this whole business under wraps, and going far away to have a baby really appealed to me.

We had learned in religion class about a baby shortage and I sincerely

believed that there were all of these families waiting with open arms. I found an agency out east that placed babies with affluent families. The woman with whom I spoke was really great, and she commended me for my bravery. We talked at length, and she told me about the wonderful opportunities babies placed through their program would have. The agency had these portfolios with glossy photos from which I could choose adoptive parents to interview. She said that I could even start taking college classes and that I wouldn't have to worry about expenses while I lived in Boston. She asked about my background and my plans for college in the fall. I had a cheerleading scholarship to the University of Tennessee. She said there was no reason that I couldn't go back the following year after I gave birth and just "pick up where I left off," cheerleading and all. It didn't even occur to me that going through pregnancy and giving up a child for adoption might be hard on me.

Then she asked about Dennis. I told her about his athletic scholarship to Brigham Young and the good family from which he came. I remember feeling sort of nervous talking about him but pushed these feelings down. I must have indicated he wasn't white because she stopped me and said, "Oh, so Dennis is black?" I could tell right away something horrible was happening. When I said yes, she said, "Oh, well . . . I'm very sorry but our program can't help you. There just isn't demand for biracial children."

I hung up and thought, *Oh my God. I'm going to have to stay in this community. I'm going to have a child at eighteen. Not only am I going to have a child, but a biracial child.* I can't even tell you the hostility with which Dennis and I were met in Memphis and we didn't even hold hands in public. I couldn't imagine how this child would be treated, how I'd be treated.

Dennis and I started looking for other options. We first went to a place that was advertising "all options" counseling. Before we walked in, I recognized the sticker on their door from my days of protesting and recognized it as a pro-life crisis pregnancy center. I didn't go in. I must have known that I was seriously considering terminating the pregnancy and if I went in there, I was just going to be traumatized. I remember thinking that I could now

understand how tempted women were to end their pregnancies, and realized it was time to talk to my mom.

My mother was initially calm, but told me it was outrageous to think that I could go to school and be pregnant at the same time, and that she would not support me and this child. An abortion was the only answer. She told me that she, too, had terminated a pregnancy, but would not discuss the details (and to this day never has). At the time I was really angry at her for saying she wouldn't support me, or at least I pretended to be. But honestly, I think I was immensely relieved. I had zero interest in being a mother, but I was not ready to admit to myself that I really wanted to terminate this pregnancy. I allowed her response to "let me off the hook" and blamed it on her, asserting that I had no other choice. And so I "agreed" to have an abortion.

The day of the abortion, I remember my sister driving into the clinic entrance and saying, "Oh my God, don't look!" Of course I looked and there were protesters everywhere. There was this really crazed-looking older man storming back and forth in front of the entrance, pushing a baby carriage and hollering. The protesters didn't block our way, but were close enough to really upset me by the time I could be whisked in through the back entrance.

The doctor was very rushed and didn't have much of a bedside manner. I was pretty terrified and I began to cry when he entered the room. This seemed to piss him off and he demanded to know why I was crying. I started thinking really fast. I knew that this needed to happen and I had to pull myself together and get it over with. I said, "Oh, I'm fine. I'm just a little scared." There was a doctor's assistant present who must have been through this with many, many women—or perhaps through it herself—because nobody at the clinic had seemed especially nice until her. She was very reassuring and calm, and held my hand while I cried and drifted into sleep. I woke up in another room with a pad in my underpants. I checked the pad and saw blood. I remember thinking that this may result in eternal damnation—but more than anything else, I felt immense relief and offered up a prayer of thanks.

The first person I told (other than my dad) was a guy I was dating at college

freshman year. He really couldn't have been a worse candidate to date or tell, but I think by that point I was into punishing myself. The one-year anniversary of my abortion was approaching and I was having bad dreams. One of these nights I awoke and told him everything. He screamed and threw things but, honestly, he was more offended that I had slept with a black guy than that I had an abortion. He proceeded to tell his friends what had happened. They would say things like, "Man, we can't believe that you even touch her," and then he would bring that up in fights. I didn't stay with him much longer after that.

I didn't talk about it again until I had transferred from University of Tennessee to Michigan State University. My best friend, Shannon, had taken a Women's Studies class and encouraged me to enroll. I did, and then another, and I was hooked. Around the same time I found a therapist that I really liked named Terri.

I had reached a point in therapy where I knew I couldn't progress any further until I told Terri about my abortion. But I was terrified of her reaction nonetheless and didn't know where to begin. I began to cry and told her that there was something so horrible that I had done and couldn't figure out how to tell her. I knew that she had lost a baby hours after he was born; I think that was why I was so afraid to tell her. I told her, "Maybe I'd feel better if you could tell me how Nicholas died."

Then *she* started to cry and she said, "Oh, honey. You've had an abortion, haven't you?"—I was so relieved that she said it for me. Then she said, "Robin, I've had one too." I was floored.

"You don't understand," I said, "it's not just the abortion but the circumstances surrounding it." At this point I was really crying hard. "I don't know if I'm as dedicated to antiracism as I'd like myself, and others, to believe."

And so I told her the story about how I had an abortion after I was told it couldn't be adopted and how I had been scared to be eighteen and have a biracial kid in Memphis (or any kid, anywhere!) and I didn't want to be a mother then anyway.

Terri was so angry on my behalf. She said, "You had no idea how complex

this issue was. You were told your baby wasn't wanted. You weren't supported, Robin." She encouraged me to tell Shannon.

We had lived together for a couple of years and I had never been that close to anyone. I poured the whole story out while she held my hand. I was so scared of what her reaction might be, that she might go so far as to kick me out of the house.

When I stopped talking long enough to take a breath, Shannon said, "I would never judge you and I love you and this explains all of the shame that you carry around with you—because it never made sense to me before."

After Shannon, I began telling my close friends one by one. With every person I told I became more confident, angry, and unapologetic. I wasn't looking for forgiveness anymore. I was looking to debunk the dangerous myths that surround abortion and the women who seek them. I am an advocate for keeping abortion safe and legal, and also for women having good information about our bodies and our options so that we can make informed decisions.

One of my biggest issues with the pro-life movement is the racism implicit in their arguments against abortion. Unlike what I learned in religion class, worldwide there isn't a "baby shortage." In our own country there isn't either. To say there is a baby shortage is to suggest that nonwhite babies aren't babies. According to the Guttmacher Institute, there are over 586,000 children in the U.S. alone without homes, 100,000 of whom are available right now for adoption. *Right now.* And many of these are children of color. And then add to that all of the children born into abusive families and environments that don't want or honor or nurture them.

I have come to believe that having an abortion can be a very motherly decision. I am not sorry that I had an abortion. I am only sorry that I was duped by antichoice rhetoric, about my brief role in perpetuating it, and that so much of my time and energy was spent feeling shameful and fearful of my story and sexuality. I am profoundly grateful for my experience with an unintended pregnancy. It has been a gift that has transformed my worldview and made me a more compassionate and dedicated advocate for women, children, and choice.