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I was twenty-one years old in 1972. By that time, a year before *Roe v. Wade*, I was aware that practically all of my female friends—at least those whom I knew well enough to know such an intimate detail about—had already aborted a first baby. Some, a second.

I had not. But this was not because my sexual life-style was any different or better than theirs: the late sixties and early seventies were the heyday of life-style experimentation and the sexual revolution, and I was out there skirmishing like much of the rest of my generation. It's just that I never became pregnant.

I also knew that we were all good women, caring and sensitive, in fact quite biophilic, pacifists or near-pacifists mostly. ("Make Love, Not War.") We did not act out of malice. And such good women do not commit murder. Therefore abortion could not be murder.

The Church of my childhood, the Catholic Church, I had left behind several years before. It seemed to me that the Church had rules for sexuality that bound like iron bands, and rules for war and the military that were more like *rubber* bands. This apparent inconsistency robbed Church "Sanctity of Life" arguments of moral legitimacy in my eyes. I also sided with the secular feminist movement against my Church on virtually every disputed question.

So I got out.

Like many abortion rights advocates, I saw an unwanted pregnancy as an adversary situation. On the one hand, you have a woman in crisis, a woman big as

yourself and just as articulate. On the other hand, you have an embryo or fetus the size of a cashew, a walnut, or a pear. The one, you know. The other, you don't. Choosing sides, you choose the woman. End of argument.

By the mid-1970s I had been involved with most of the movements on the "progressive" agenda: United Farm Workers, anti-Vietnam war, anti-nuclear, environmentalism, and feminism—including feminist spirituality of the Goddess-reverencing sort.

In my meditations the notion of a Godhead "in whom we live and move and have our being"—a phrase Paul used to describe our relationship to Christ—suggested a distinctly maternal picture. *Pater Noster*, the Holy Roman Empire God who looked to me like Blake's *Urizen*, all beard and biceps, had no womb for us. So the God in whom one could "live and move" like a baby in its watery womb world, must certainly be a Goddess.

But I also had a vague notion that if this Goddess were, God forbid, a feminist, and I were the fetus, she might reject, destroy, abort me—and I wanted so much to be born! That sent a chill through me. I set aside the Goddess meditations and went back to being a Christian-of-a-sort, a Christian as far as feminism would let me, a Christian without definition.

I set aside thinking much about abortion, too, for years on end, perhaps because I did have this disquieting tendency in unguarded, intuitive moments to see myself as the *embryo*: on the wrong side of solidarity, on the wrong end of the gleaming technology, and, surely, on the wrong side of the argument.

Progressive religious peace-and-justice centers turned out to be ideal places to hide out from the

abortion issue in the 1970s. Catholic, Christian, interfaith, whatever: I knew of "nonviolence" communities which avoided having a serious discussion of abortion-as-violence for a solid silent decade. We did not search our sacred gospel or our almost-sacred Gandhi for deep perspective, nor did we inventory our own resources for ways to offer a life-giving or a life-defending response.

Surrounded by pictures of My Lai and Hiroshima children, we would not look steadily (who could?) at who or what was at the business end of a suction curette.

At some point in the late seventies, though, I experienced a turn-around. It would be a long story to explain all the factors in my conversion, for they were not clear and all-at-once, but subtle and cumulative. But once a turn-around had been made, once I began to go public with it in the Christian Left, everything changed. To put it briefly, all hell broke loose.

First, I must explain the basic shift in perception which caused me to reject my former toleration of abortion.

I saw, first of all, that the whole "sexual revolution" failed to live up to its claims. I began to see casualties: women tipped off by fly-by-night relationships; men and women uneasily aware that they'd used somebody, or that they'd been used; people becoming cynical, or downright callous (though we'd been told that greater sexual "openness" would help us to be more *in touch*, more *compassionate*).

Above all, I saw women hurt, and hurt badly, by abortion. Women friends who'd expressed only "re-lief" after obtaining abortions five or six years before, were telling me that they were now barely able to cope

with the undercurrents of emptiness and pain in their lives. Numbness—a chosen numbness—had replaced sensitivity; avoidance—also chosen—replaced awareness; euphemistic, evasive locutions replaced the one-syllable frank language upon which we had formerly prided ourselves.

I saw romantic relationships which were supposed to be saved by abortion, split; I saw careers which were supposed to be enabled by abortion, fail to materialize or fail to satisfy. I saw appalling heart-hurt.

All of our holistic philosophies had a hole, and the hole kept getting bigger, not smaller.

Yes, I'd once made the assumption that an unwanted pregnancy was an adversary situation between a morally significant woman and a not-as-significant embryo; and of course the stronger currents of solidarity in me said, "side with the woman."

I now saw that pregnancy is not an adversary relationship; it's a mutual relationship. The woman and the unborn life she carries are not rivals; they in fact share the consequences of good treatment or bad. Their well-being does not naturally compete: it naturally coincides. It was not "woman versus fetus": it was wholeness *for both* or injury *for both*.

The solidarity of woman and embryonic child, the "sharing" of the consequences of good treatment or bad—it made sense in terms of everything else I believed in: the discipline of nonviolent conflict resolution; the insights of ecology ("Everything is connected"); women's health and wholeness advocacy. I felt as if I had become a "pro-lifer" not despite, but because of my commitment to values on the "pro-

gressive" side of the political/social spectrum. I had become, in plain words, *consistent*.

At the same time, here I was, a feminist with a skeptical view of "sexual and reproductive rights." A Left-Liberal who sided—on one subject, at least—with Jesse Helms. I had become, in plain words, a freak.

I felt a strong thirst for dialogue with people on the Left. But the white secular Left was, simply, *not interested*. "Abortion rights" had become so nearly an absolute that discussion itself was taken for treason. Requesting a two-sided dialogue was seen as an offensive and provocative act in itself.

I'd started a little group in 1979 called *Prolifers for Survival* ("P.S.") for the explicit purpose of waging protracted dialogue about abortion within the peace community, and, conversely, for pushing a moral critique of war and the nuclear arms race within the pro-life community.

Why was I unprepared when civil libertarians from the National Lawyers' Guild threatened to have P.S. people arrested on the public street for *leafletting*? Why was it stunning to me when peace-and-justice folks cut off our microphone at a public meeting and chanted to drown us out when we attempted to offer a resolution on "pro-life/pro-choice dialogue"? Why was I *surprised* when announcements for P.S. speakers would be ripped down from the bulletin boards on liberal university campuses within minutes of their being posted?

I guess it's because I always assumed that liberals were better. "We," "our type of people," the "progressives," were more tolerant, broad-minded, able to handle conflicts creatively. Or so I'd thought.

(Incidentally, the response of mainstream pro-lifers to our peace-movement proselytism is a wild and oddly symmetrical story—one which will have to be told elsewhere.)

On the other hand, segments of the Christian Left seemed more willing than the secular Left to acknowledge the radiating pain of abortion, and to struggle with it on a moral and pastoral level. Groups like Sojourners, the Catholic Peace Fellowship, Pax Christi, and Evangelicals for Social Action were able to see the surgical invasion of women's wombs and the destruction of our coming-children as a kind of sacrilege. They were also able to regard post-abortion women as veterans of an unjust "war"; agents of violence, but, much more, victims of it.

Even within the more congenial sectors of the Christian Left, talking about abortion was difficult. But as more and more people allowed their ambivalences about abortion to come to the surface—and as those ambivalences escalated to the sticking point—*not* talking about it became impossible.

For a long time most of the "dialogue" or "debate" appeared to be between Catholics and ex-Catholics. Did it only seem that way to me? After all, my home base (Erie, Pennsylvania) was predominantly a parish-and-pizza kind of town; I circulated in the heavily Catholic Northeast and Midwest, and even the other "movements" with which I was involved (United Farm Workers, anti-war, and such) were thick with people coming or going, to or from, Catholicism.

Even beyond the little circles of my own experience, in the larger culture, when *this* was the topic it seemed that being a Catholic or not made a big difference.

Nobody who spoke out for or against abortion was ever identified as an "ex-*jeu*" or a "former *Methodist* seminarian." When they wanted a pro-choice sound-bite, the major media relied heavily on ex-Catholics, post-Catholics, and semi-Catholics—one would think these were the three major religious denominations in America.

In the other camp, it was always the Diocesan Women's Guild and the Knights of Columbus out there collecting maternity clothes for the Pregnancy Aid Center; the State Catholic Conference lobbying against the death penalty, strip-mining, *and abortion*; the Klatch of Cardinals up there testifying against funding the MX missile *and abortion*. The Catholics, again.

I wanted dialogue. But where could you find some sort of De-Militarized Zone in the midst of the polarized debate, some common ground where people could get together to open their hearts and receive each other? At the Women's Center? (Ha.)

Where could you hope to find a forum on a consistent—even a coherent—ethic on killing? In the university? (Ha, ha.)

Or where could you get support for women—young women, women with no money—so that they could face an unexpected pregnancy with confidence and dignity? From the medical establishment? Holy Mother the State? (You get the picture.)

Faulty as it was, the Church was the only game in town.

And it goes beyond the Church as an organizing tool or an institutional base for ministry. It dawned on me that, precisely at their most dogmatic, this Church's teachings *are* consistently against murder, whether by

the bomb, abortion, or a baseball bat. It was not Right Wing or Left Wing. I grasped that when this consistency is obscured, it is the fault not of the dogma but of teachers who fail to teach the Whole Thing: teachers who have assimilated to the culture, who have sold out left and right.

So after orbiting the Church for a long time, I came in, finally, for a landing.

Was it all an intellectual thing? No. The Church gave me a coherent ethical position on life-and-death questions, for which I was grateful; but, much more than that, the Church is a community with the heart of Jesus at heart.

Before, I had been troubled with the identification I'd felt with that undocumented alien, the shrimp-sized embryo: I'd thought it was incompatible with solidarity with women. Now, I saw, with a flow of wonder, the identification of God Almighty with the embryo. I saw also the outpouring of the Spirit on women, slaves and Gentiles, and children, born and unborn, as a revelation: don't cut us apart! We are one!

I saw the significance of a Mary-like soul, a Mary-like Church, and a Mary-like Cosmos, which could receive the Word of God and keep it, grow it, and bring it to birth. (Now *there's* a womanistic theme to be found in this putatively patriarchal Church!) I loved the poetry *and* the dogmatics; I loved the tenderness of the tradition.

I loved it not only because it was beautiful. Anyone (at least, anyone as bright as most of my friends) could think up a half a dozen beautiful myths in the course of a morning spirituality workshop, and concoct a sacrament or two over lunch. No, I loved the Catholic tradition because it is actually true.

So it was a whiff of the sea, a shoreline testing of the water, and then a headlong dive back into the depths of the notorious pro-life Church, the *Pacem in Terris* Church, the old Church which had out-lived everything, even my skepticism.

Was it all so heady and romantic and overheated? And did I end up running with a pack of *awful* triumphalistic popish anti-choice fanatics? No. There was a lot of work to be done, the great Yes and No: No to the killing and Yes to the living. So my friends and I didn't have that much time to stay totally misty-eyed and mystical about it.

For one thing, we held the Sexual Revolution responsible for too many hurt and too many dead; so we were doing everything we could think of, culturally and personally, to replace the Sexual Revolution with Sexual Shalom. We were trying to restore the traditional Christian vision of natural sex, sacred sex, at the service of the family, and bonding, and life.

This was supposedly "conservative."

On another front, we were also trying to get support for women who were unprovided for at the time of pregnancy—comprehensive "human services" at the political level, mutual aid and advocacy at the street level—so that women would not be subjected to the insecurity and panic which coerced so many into destroying their young. "Support, don't abort"—that was our theme.

This was supposedly "liberal."

We struggled to get the courts and legislatures to recognize that "personhood" is co-extensive with human life, and that human rights begin where human life begins. We tried to win a progressive expansion of

recognition of the human rights of everybody without exception.

A very "establishment" way of pursuing a progressive goal.

And we wanted to directly protect pregnant women, and the children they carry, from medical violence. As simple as that. So we organized sit-ins to try to shut down the abortion places, providing the women with another chance to find nonviolent alternatives. This tactic actually saved hundreds of lives; and, as the Talmud says, "To save one life, it is as if you had saved the whole world."

A radical way of pursuing a very traditional goal.

The labels came to mean less as the reality of our work meant more.

I married a Baptist I met during a sit-in campaign and had a baby, finally, at age thirty-eight (my favorite pro-life direct action, by the way). It gave me to understand in the flesh the honorable and enduring love of a man, and the dearness of ties to women (like the St. Mary's Morning Mass ladies who took me under their wings: yes, I liked being clucked over!). I understood better the vulnerability of the birth-giving woman, and the incredible power which flows through her.

Shalom: we used to say it was "from the cradle to the grave," but of course it doesn't begin at the *cradle*; "from womb to tomb"? But it doesn't end at the *tomb*.

Now I say Shalom is "from erection to resurrection." It's acting in the benevolence of God, under the Mercy, excluding nobody, please God, and holding even the littlest ones dear.

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The Daughters of Heaven
Are Weeping

Colleen C. Conant