

**“What Kind of a Man Are You?”: Men’s Role  
in the Pro-Choice Movement  
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley  
Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania  
The Rev. Judy Welles©, June 20, 2004**

I was thrilled to be able to participate in the National March for Women’s Lives in Washington, D.C. on April 25. For once, it didn’t matter that it was on a Sunday, because I was on sabbatical in April, and nothing could have kept me from showing up in Washington that day.

I was in good company, a million strong! The largest-ever march on Washington consisted of many, many thousands of women of all ages, as you would expect. I was especially taken by the T-shirts so many of the young women wore, which proclaimed “I [heart] Pro-Choice Boys.”

Well, I [heart] them, too, for the pro-choice boys and men were also there by the tens of thousands. I’ve been involved in the work for reproductive choice for decades, and this was the largest turnout of men I’ve ever seen at any march or demonstration. Duane was at my side, and I know that many men and women from this congregation attended as well.

My friends, this is not just a women’s issue. The decisions about whether and when to have children affect all the spheres of our lives, our human lives, our male and female lives. The abortion issue ripples out far beyond the uterus. If you are going to grapple with the matter of reproductive choice with any depth of understanding, then you will find yourself also considering the separation of church and state, the importance of judicial appointments from the Supreme Court on down, the effect of poverty on public health, the effectiveness of sexuality education in our schools, matters of domestic violence, access to health care and a host of other matters that touch everyone’s lives. This is not a women’s issue; it is a human issue.

So today I want to celebrate the allies, the men who, in a variety of ways, have stood by women, worked with women, helped and counseled women, cried with them, comforted them, celebrated with them, spoken up for them – and often haven’t gotten the credit they deserve for their efforts.

But before I begin, I need to say something about patriarchy. It’s a fightin’ word in many circles. “The patriarchy” is blamed – and rightfully so in my opinion – for myriad abuses of rights and power, and for the subjugation of women in a hundred thousand ways. But “the patriarchy” doesn’t mean “all men.” Patriarchy is not a group of actual people; it is a social structure which gives power to men and a higher cultural value to masculine attributes.

So while we can blame the patriarchy for the many abuses women have endured in a society empowered by men, it would be a terrible mistake to turn to the man sitting next to you and say to him "This is all your fault!" It's *not* his fault; it's the fault of a social structure which we all participate in by the mere fact of having been born into it, but which can be changed and slowly is being changed.

We women don't need fewer people working with us to change the patriarchy; we need more! So let's thank the men who also want to see things change, and acknowledge how important they are in this particular human struggle to protect the right of conscience and strengthen the democratic process in order to improve the lives of everyone.

**Duane:** This is an excerpt from a newspaper column written by Abe Velez, a musician based in New York who persuaded his fiancée to join him on the March in Washington.

Because it's the right thing to do. Because I love my fiancée and want her right to choose protected, always...and [because] a woman's reproductive rights, and sovereignty over her own body are human rights.

Because the participation of pro-choice men seems to be a value-added (excuse the marketing jargon) contribution to the cause. Because I think anti-choice activists are often bullies and I don't like bullies. Because it's the least I can do.

It felt like one of those "stand and be counted" moments in life. I needed to be able to look back years from now and say to myself, "Yep, I made sure to be there."

Men joining the march send the refreshing message to pro-choice women, and to anti-choice men and women, that the cause of women's reproductive rights is, of course, gender-related, but is not gender-defined. After all, men are intimately and intricately, biologically and philosophically, involved when a woman becomes pregnant.

And isn't it immensely powerful and uplifting when a member of one group not directly affected by an injustice stands in broad daylight in solidarity with people who are directly wronged? At that moment the struggle transcends "special interest" and becomes part of the much larger story about human rights.

I remember encountering a disheveled, collared minister on a corner of the mall, heckling a quiet male marcher. "What kind of man are you?!" he called out, through the shrill crackle of a megaphone. Ah, this minister's God apparently judges pro-choice men particularly harshly; expecting men to have the sacred duty to control what women do with their bodies.

In my mind, the prize is stamping women's reproductive rights deeply into the foundation of American life. ...Permit me a rosy reverie: Well within this century, we will no longer have to march, and write those letters, and send those contributions, ... because the powers that be will finally get it, or those that don't will fall into a perennially tiny minority.

And we will finally have the luxury of turning our attention to other matters, for example, raising and teaching and loving our children, children who are wanted, and brought into this world by choice.<sup>1</sup>

**Judy:** To hear such an articulate and loving man speak up for his fiancée's right to choose is a touching thing. This isn't always the case. Many women who seek abortions are married and have several children already; they don't want their husbands even to know they're pregnant, nor especially to know of their decision not to continue this pregnancy. Many single women seeking abortions are not in loving and supportive relationships. I know this from personal experience, as I heard it over and over again during the eight years that I ran a Planned Parenthood clinic and gave counseling along with pregnancy tests.

Yet there were also patients who brought their boyfriends to the clinic with them, and I was often moved by the tenderness and concern that these young men showed for their partners. Going through an abortion, like going through a miscarriage, will either pull a couple closer together or drive them apart. I held out hope for these couples that they would use this crisis as an opportunity for deeper intimacy and trust, to strengthen their future together.

Supporting and helping men through their partners' abortions is a huge unmet need in the area of reproductive rights. Arthur Shostak, a professor of sociology at Drexel University, has studied and written extensively about men involved in their partners' abortions.<sup>2</sup>

He claims that 84% of men involved with abortions reported having been a full partner in the decision to terminate the pregnancy. A second major finding was the anxiety and the high level of personal distress that men reported. ...Ninety-eight percent said that if they could help it, they would never, ever find themselves in this situation again.

Yet 35% of women who have abortions and 25% of the men they're involved with will be repeaters, so obviously, as a society, we're not doing a good job of capitalizing on that motivation to "never, ever find themselves in this situation again."

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<sup>1</sup> Velez, Abe, "Marching as a Pro-Choice Man," *Women's e-News*, May 2, 2004, <http://www.womensenews.org/>

<sup>2</sup> The information in the following paragraphs is excerpted from an interview with Arthur Shostak published in *M.E.N. Magazine* in January, 1993 and found on the Internet at <http://www.menweb.org/abortion.htm>

Men seldom talk with one another about having been involved with an abortion, and there are few systems in place to help them directly.

Part of the reason abortion can be so traumatic for men is that they just never thought about it before. Chances are that when (*if*) their fathers had that awkward “birds and the bees” conversation with them, nothing at all was said about abortion. In general, men are poorly equipped to deal with the emotional consequences of abortion, and they have nowhere to turn for support.

There’s a flip side to this issue as well. Remembering that reproductive choice involves *real choice*, some women will choose to continue an unplanned pregnancy, and there are significant legal consequences for her partner. Here in Pennsylvania, as in most other states, the father of the baby, regardless of his age, is fully financially responsible for that child until it turns eighteen. His life could be dramatically and permanently changed if he suddenly has to support a child by giving up his plans for higher education and getting a job immediately. This information, too, should be part of every father/son “birds and the bees” conversation.

And speaking of fathers and sons, let’s hear now from the son of one woman and the father of another, both of them dramatically affected by abortion in their personal lives.

**Duane:** This reading is excerpted from a longer essay written by Jim Freidl, whose mother died from a self-induced abortion when he was four years old, in 1929.

My earliest recollection is of my father standing at the head of the dining room table, ...and a woman in a dress on the floor. All I can see is her hair... I can’t see her face. That was my mother’s death scene. My father didn’t know what happened. He had no idea. She hadn’t told him she was pregnant.

It wasn’t until [I was in my seventies], when my sister and I got a copy of my mother’s death certificate, that we found out she died from an overdose of ergot to produce an abortion. Finding out that my mother died of an illegal abortion from a drug someone gave her made me furious. I felt that the people who caused deaths like my mother’s ought to be in jail. The hell with jail; the death sentence was too damn good for them.

What makes me angriest about what happened to me is that everybody ignores the orphans. They don’t even try to figure out how many children are orphaned by abortion, neither side, pro-life or pro-choice, not even a wild guess. Yet you’ve got to think that, while we’re

sitting here right now, today, there's some four-year-old child like me out there, and the same damn thing is happening to him or her.<sup>3</sup>

**Judy:** One of the things that draws me to the issue of reproductive choice is how it cuts across all the lines. It's an issue with supporters of all ages, all political persuasions, all economic situations, all levels of education, and both genders. This is one of the reasons why it's so powerful – because it's *so personal*. It cuts through everything else right to the heart of human experience – birth and death, life's longing for itself. Especially in the pre-Roe days (before 1973), thousands of women died annually from self-induced or botched abortions. If there is a mysterious or unexplained death of a woman relative in your family's history, it may very well be abortion-related. This issue touches all of us.

**Duane:** This next piece was written by a man who chose not to use his name, in order to protect the identity of his daughter, who became pregnant as the result of a vicious rape.

*He begins by describing how his daughter, who was in her early twenties, was abducted one evening while walking home from a 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration at the Washington Monument. During the night of her captivity in a house somewhere in Washington, she was repeatedly beaten and raped by three men. Within weeks, she discovered that she was pregnant.*

Now I would like to ask Senator Helms what he would do if he had been the father of the girl. I know what I did. And I can promise the senator and the Moral Majority and all the shrill voices of the right-to-life movement that no matter what law they may pass and how stringent the penalty, I would do it again.

These [politicians] who have no knowledge or understanding of what they're talking about... I don't think they have any morality. It's Godless, it's cruel, it's insensitive, and it's stupid. They are not seeing the human beings involved. They're not seeing love. They're not seeing affection. They're not seeing goodness of heart... They're not seeing anything except some batty feeling that the only thing that matters is the unborn. They have no concern for the born – that is, my daughter, her mother, me.

...When it gets right down to where you stand, you stand with your family and you want to protect your family. When Senator Helms or any other people want to interfere with your family, and they represent the law, then you have to fight the law. I suppose that's how revolutions start.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Freidl, Jim, in *The Choices We Made: 25 Women and Men Speak Out About Abortion*, edited by Angela Bonavoglia, Random House, New York, 1991, page 35 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Also in *The Choices We Made: 25 Women and Men Speak Out About Abortion*, p. 181 ff

**Judy:** Happy Fathers Day! Let the revolution begin...

**Duane:** If you have read John Irving's novel *The Cider House Rules*, you will remember Dr. Wilbur Larch, whose obstetrical practice also included providing abortions and running an orphanage populated by the children whose mothers didn't want them after Dr. Larch delivered them.

*Shortly after providing an abortion to a young wealthy woman at her family's summer home in Maine, Dr. Larch found himself on the train to Portland musing on the future of his medical practice.*

By the time he got back to Portland, he had worked the matter out. He was an obstetrician; he delivered babies into the world. His colleagues called this "the Lord's work." And he was an abortionist; he delivered mothers, too. His colleagues called this "the Devils' work," but it was *all* the Lord's work to Wilbur Larch. He would deliver babies. He would deliver mothers, too.<sup>5</sup>

*In another scene in the book, Dr. Larch is explaining to one of the older orphans, Homer Wells, what happens with the women who mysteriously appear and disappear from the building which houses his medical office and the orphanage.*

"Sometimes," Dr. Larch said, "a woman simply can't make herself stop a pregnancy, she feels the baby is already a baby—from the first speck—and she has to have it—although she doesn't want it and she can't take care of it—and so she comes to us and has her baby here. She leaves it here, with us. She trusts us to find it a home."

"She makes an orphan," said Homer Wells.... "And sometimes," he continued, "the woman *doesn't* go through with it, right? She doesn't go through with having the baby."

"Sometimes," said Dr. Larch, "the woman knows very early in her pregnancy that this child is unwanted."

"An orphan from the start," said Homer Wells.

"You might say" said Wilbur Larch.

"So she kills it," said Homer Wells.

"You might say," said Wilbur Larch. "You might also say that she stops it before it becomes a child—she just stops it. In the first three or four months, the fetus—or the embryo)—it does not quite have a life of its own. It lives off the mother. It hasn't developed.... Sometimes when a woman is very strong and knows that no one will care for this baby if she has it, and she doesn't want to bring a child into the world and try to find it a home—she comes to see me and I stop it."

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<sup>5</sup> Irving, John, *The Cider House Rules*, Modern Library Edition, 1999, p. 66

“Tell me again, what’s *stopping it* called?” asked Homer Wells.

“An abortion,” Dr. Larch said.

Homer continued. “All the women who come here – they’re either going to have an orphan, or they’re going to stop it, right?”

“That’s right,” Dr. Larch said. “I’m just a doctor. I help them have what they want. An orphan or an abortion.”

“An orphan or an abortion,” said Homer Wells.<sup>6</sup>

**Judy:** When I worked for Planned Parenthood, I had a friendly relationship with our Medical Director, whose name was Fritz Bradley. Fritz was a saint. He had had a private Ob/Gyn practice in Santa Barbara, and was a successful and respected physician in that community. For years he had volunteered his services as a medical advisor and sometime care provider at the local Planned Parenthood. As that program grew, they realized that they needed a full-time doctor on staff as their Medical Director. Fritz was part of the search committee, and when no suitable candidate could be found, he did a lot of soul-searching and decided to give up his practice and come full time to Planned Parenthood.

This is the kind of news that makes an Executive Director swoon with joy! His wife, however, was not at all pleased with this sudden change in the family’s income and with their social status, for even on the west coast in the 1980’s in a community as enlightened as Santa Barbara, his decision was not greeted with approval by his medical colleagues. Eventually Fritz and his wife divorced and he married a woman he met as an abortion clinic volunteer.

I remember that he was a devout Presbyterian, very active in the leadership of his church and a member of the choir. All of us were horrified when right-to-life picketers showed up not only at his home, where they terrorized the neighborhood with their shouting and their hateful posters, but at his church on Sunday mornings. Through all of this, Fritz remained steadfast in his commitment to low cost health care for women and reproductive choice, but it did cost him his marriage and no small measure of personal safety.

Let us also remember with humble gratitude those whose losses were even greater: Dr. David Gunn was shot three times in the back in 1993 when entering a clinic in Pensacola, Florida where he provided abortions. In July, 1994, Dr. John Britton was also shot to death at an abortion clinic in Pensacola. His escort, James Barrett, was also killed, and Barrett’s wife was wounded. Jim and June Barrett were members of the Unitarian Church in Pensacola, and long-time volunteer clinic escorts. On October 23, 1998, Dr. Bernard Slepian was shot through the kitchen window of his home near Buffalo, New York and killed.

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<sup>6</sup> Irving, *op cit*, p. 72 ff

There are many other categories of men who have been instrumental in the movement for reproductive choice: clinic volunteers and escorts, police officers, teachers and guidance counselors, judges and attorneys, donors to and directors of health clinics. I'd like to conclude my remarks this morning by telling you about a group close to my own heart, the men who made up the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion.

I can't overemphasize the importance of the clergy as allies in the struggle for abortion rights. Clergy tend to hold a position of respect and moral authority in society which gives particular weight to the causes they support. The presence of clergy willing to take professional and legal risks to aid women seeking illegal abortions was an ethical statement, which became very important in changing social attitudes towards the legalization of abortion. And the careful consultation service they established gave women access to safer and more affordable abortions than they would have been able to obtain otherwise.

Begun by a small group of clergy in New York in 1967, the service set up a simple model which was easily copied elsewhere. There was no office, no bank account, no records were kept, there was no staff and no board of trustees. There was, however, discreetly managed publicity. Newspapers occasionally ran articles about the service, and the answering machine was deluged with calls right from the start. The twenty-one ministers and rabbis who started the service were quickly made aware of a desperate need, as they were soon receiving calls from all over the country. It didn't take long for them to contact justice-minded colleagues in other cities and urge them to set up similar services.<sup>7</sup>

Farley Wheelwright is a retired UU minister who began what he believes was the first Clergy Counseling Service to be housed in a Unitarian Church. In a personal message, he told me that "the counseling process was difficult, often heartbreaking and embarrassing. Properly this counseling should be done by women but there was not one female clergyperson in the area at that time. And you cannot imagine the number of calls for our service. Between us [he said there were about 15 of them in Cleveland] we must have counseled over a thousand young and middle-aged women. [Their] stories were heart-breaking.

"At the end of [each final] interview all our records were trashed. I wish we had kept more information. It seems in recollection that at least one fourth of the women were Catholic. Many were mothers of five or six children for whom one more would have been a family disaster. Many Catholic women said they would have the child if the Pope would bring it up."

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<sup>7</sup> Carmen, Arlene and Howard Moody, *Abortion Counseling and Social Change From Illegal Act to Medical Practice: The Story of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion*, Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA, 1973

Farley concludes his recollections this way: "The day Roe vs. Wade was announced, the Cleveland Clergy Counseling Service on Abortion went out of business. We all heaved a sigh of relief. Speaking for myself, however, if Roe vs. Wade should be reversed in my lifetime, I am prepared to start up another Clergy Counseling Service on Abortion."

Farley is not the kind of man you throw your arms around, but I might just do it anyway if I see him next week at General Assembly. These men were principled and very courageous, in view of the fact that, in New York for example, one could receive a thousand dollar fine and up to a year in prison for aiding and abetting a woman in attaining an abortion. As the head of the Cleveland service, Farley was the constant recipient of hate mail and death threats, he was the target of nasty editorials in the newspapers and the local Catholic press, and he finally had to stop doing live radio talk shows where he would be accused of infanticide ("in much less elegant terms").

I have scarcely said a third of what I wanted to tell you this morning, but perhaps the most important thing remains to be said: thank you! Thank you to the loving partners who grieve with their wives and girlfriends over unplanned pregnancies, but never leave their sides. Thank you to the men who rose up to speak out when their families were touched by abortions. Thank you to the courageous doctors and clergy who risked their reputations and sometimes gave up their lives to help women who needed the help only they could give. Thank you to the pro-choice men who marched with us in Washington, and who will continue to work with pro-choice women for as long as it takes, "because it's the right thing to do."