

They Did Not Die Unlived Lives

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This reflection was offered at a D.C. Abortion Fund gathering in the weeks following Dr. George Tiller's assassination on May 31, 2009. Less than a year before Tiller's murder, another dearly beloved community member and abortion-access activist was lost in her battle with cancer.

I'd like to start with a poem that many of you may be familiar with—'Fully Alive' by Dawna Markova. I know of this poem through Robin Fletcher,* a woman who lived 20 years after being given only a few months to live. Robin, like Dr. Tiller, dedicated her life to saving women's lives.

I will not die an unlived life. I will not live in fear of falling or catching fire. I choose to inhabit my days, to allow my living to open me, to make me less afraid, more accessible, to loosen my heart until it becomes a wing, a torch, a promise. I choose to risk my significance; to live so that which came to me as seed goes to the next as blossom, and that which came to me as blossom goes on as fruit.

Fletcher, like Dr. Tiller, refused to live in fear, refused to risk dying an unlived life. Right now, slumbering giants of injustice are once again emerging, if ever they slept—on Sunday May 31st, they pushed opened the doors of Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita Kansas and viciously slew one who did not cower in their presence. And now those of us who dedicate our lives to the same path of love and liberation that Fletcher and Tiller did are left wondering what doors they will push through next.

And this what the terrorists want—they want us to wonder and be fearful. They want to rob us, people of profound compassion and love, people dedicated to creating a just and beautiful world. They want to rob us of our hope, courage, and joy.

So, we are not going to let them.

I remember talking with Fletcher about her work, why she did what she did, why she worked so tirelessly to help women get abortions at all stages of pregnancy. And as I recollect, she basically said that given her shortened life-span, she needed to pack in as much living and loving as she could. Getting women abortions was the work that allowed her to cram in a whole lot of life into too few years. She gained life by saving the lives of others.

Fletcher saw working in abortion provision as the best way to risk significance, to live a full, meaningful, and joyful life. I think Dr. Tiller and his family and staff might agree.

My abortion work has made me risk significance in a way few things can, it compelled me to embrace the fullness and complexity of love and life. Abortion saves—that's what all of Dr. Tiller's patients are writing in their tributes. And for the abortion providing community in the

room, that's what our patients say about us too. The more we provide, the later we provide, the more life we are saving.

Life is not just a beating heart and some pumping lungs. Those working to restrict and eliminate abortion cannot bear to give witness to the suffering and evil that exists in this world. They cannot acknowledge that while humans are limited in our powers, we can choose profound acts of compassion that ease suffering, that create space for life full of spirit and love. Instead, they desecrate life by equating it with mere physiology. Life is far too sacred to demean it with vulgar oversimplifications. Abortion provision is far too sacred to demean it with vulgar oversimplifications.

Abortion provision is sacred because it requires us to perform that ancient duty of witnessing. It requires us to witness evil, the evil of violence, of rape, of incest, sexism, racism, ableism, of poverty and NOT TURN AWAY. It requires us to see all the ways we humans are both powerful and powerless, hurt and healing, despairing and daring. It requires us to overcome that urge of denial, that urge to oversimplify, and that urge to treat sacred texts like cheap books of aphorisms. When evil gets denied, when we refuse to acknowledge the suffering in this world, we fail to understand the powers we do (and do not have) to alleviate it: we rot our moral, spiritual, and communal foundations.

How does one prevent house rot? What does one have to do so that a house's timber foundation does not rot out?

You have to air it out, you got to ventilate it. That's what witnessing does, that's what providing abortions does. Abortion-provision is that healing, curing air that prevents evil from rotting the foundation of our human household. Witnessing leads us to healing, it leads us to joy, love, and fulfillment. Abortion-provision leads us to healing, leads us to joy, love, and fulfillment. That's why we do what we do. And this human household we live in, this is one house that any anti-choice, anti-justice, anti-compassion terrorist is going to burn down. Our hope, our joy, and our love will simply not let them.

It's okay to be scared, uncertain, sad, angry, numb, or uneasy. That's why we come together. For thousands of years, that's how all persecuted justice-seeking communities have gotten through. By relying on the power of community, relationships, and the bond of love developed among people doing the hard but right thing. We will prevail by coming together, by grieving together, and by celebrating together—because there is so much life and love to celebrate in this room and in our movement.

I invite us right now to speak out loud or to ourselves, the gifts we have received and the gifts we have given in doing this work. Speak aloud the foundations of our reproductive justice movement. What has Dr. Tiller, Robin Fletcher, given us? What has it given the world and what has the world given you?

(People speak)

Let us take a moment in silence so that all has been said and unsaid may penetrate our hearts with love, courage, and compassion.

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May we leave this gathering with hearts our as wings, torches, and promises, heavy with grief and light with love. Go in peace.

*Robin Fletcher is a pseudonym, used to protect her family's safety and privacy. Robin mentored a number of abortion access activists and abortion counselors (including myself) and was responsible for securing thousands and thousands of dollars of funding for women trying to access abortion services. She died less than a year before Dr. Tiller's murder. She is one of the reasons I decided to pursue liberal religious leadership.