

A Delusional Prison of Separateness: Why Abortion Provision is the Moral Center

By Darcy Baxter, M.Div.

Delivered as a presentation in the Resurrecting Our Moral Center workshop at NAF Annual Meeting 2010
and as a closing plenary address at the NAF Annual Meeting 2011.

So I have to admit that I am uneasy with the title of this panel, this idea that the abortion providing community needs to “resurrect” its moral center. I am uneasy because I do not think our moral centers ever died. In fact, I know they never died because you all have continued to provide women abortions despite all of the obstacles and threats. Your actions point to a vibrant and thriving moral center. Actions always speak louder than words. However, we human beings have proven ourselves to need more than actions—we like words and stories that articulate meaning.

So, rather than resurrecting our moral center, I think the community needs to figure out how to connect to and speak about this moral center/s, wants to figure out how to engage it so that we are better sustained and nourished. This means we need to figure out our words and stories; this means we need to share with one another, more regularly and openly engaging the inevitable complexity, ambiguity, and doubt, the fear, hope, and joy that is inherent in work that is on cutting edge of love, on the cutting edge of morality.

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the Universe, a part limited in time and space. ~~He~~ She experiences ~~himself~~ herself, her thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest a kind of optical delusion of ~~his~~ the consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

—Albert Einstein

A couple years ago, I worked at UCSF as an interfaith chaplain on their labor and delivery ward and their neonatal intensive care unit. I came to that work after a couple of years working on the NAF hotline, under Rae Falls and before the days of the Justice Fund. As I walked onto the NICU floor for the first time, I kind of wondered what my reaction would be. I peered in the little isolette boxes, taking in these little bodies with all the various tubes and devices attached to them. And then I came to the smallest preemie in the unit—a 24 weeker. So I looked at this 24-week preemie. And this is what came to me and forgive me if you find this distasteful. This is the more polite wording of what went through my head: “How would I feel if this preemie was dismembered in a dish?”

As Einstein said, our separateness is a delusion. Life is always so much more than a beating heart and some pumping lungs. All the women I have counseled have taught me this too, that to nurture life requires endings, requires choices. “To live, we must die every instant. We must perish again and again in the storms that make life possible.” ~ Thich Nhat Hanh (c. 1962). Looking at that preemie, I actually felt a sense of grace. I felt a sense of grace and harmony because that 24 week preemie embodied for me just how complex, heart-rending, and full life is; how connected and not-separate life and death are. I felt a sense of grace and harmony thinking about you all, you who choose to exercise profound compassion and humility, you who take a stand that life is always more than the delusional prison of separateness we find ourselves in.

You are able to overcome that all-too-common urge to turn away from suffering, to deny it, to oversimplify it, to say “hey honey it’s not really that bad—you will manage.” You witness. You give witness to what a lot of people in this culture do not want to see: poverty, violence, rape, incest, ableism, sexism, and racism. You see

life's complexity, you see connectedness, you see the choices we are always making, whether you are pregnant woman or a doctor figuring out how late you will provide.

Einstein expresses what has only become more and more obviously true over the years: that there is no such thing as a separate individual, a separate life. Everything in the world is connected and related, that life itself could and should never be characterized only by something like an individual heartbeat. Rather life is constituted by the interdependent set of relations that allow that heart to beat. This connectedness is central to what I want to offer as our shared understanding of morality.

On the most basic level, morality has to do with the goodness or the badness of an act. But what constitutes good and what constitutes bad and for whom? There are a variety of answers to these questions, but I would like to propose the following: morality is a set of beliefs and practices that allow life to flourish, where life is understood to be inherently interdependent and relational. There are no separate individuals existing outside of interconnected web of existence.

What makes the task of articulating and connecting to our moral center more difficult is that it is based on radically compassionate understanding of life and power and human relationship, understandings that are relatively new on the scene. Many of us in the U.S. have been operating off of classic liberal philosophy, which articulated the delusion to which Einstein referred: that somehow people, that life can be separate or separated. But in the past 40 years, this assumed individualism and separateness has crumbled. The ecological crises we are facing illustrate this principle of life's inherent interdependence, as do the stories we hear in clinics: "I have two children and I just can't support another one." To deny this interdependence and relationality, to deny the boundaries of life, the storms that make life possible, wreaks havoc and harm.

The relative newness of our moral scheme is why I think abortion provision is so inspiring and potentially transformative for the greater left-liberal community. But we need to be able to tell our stories about why abortion provision is so moral. I think one way is to do this is to begin shifting our own meanings around abortion provision so that we understand abortion providing as inherently moral and spiritual work.

Now, what do I mean by that? Spirituality has to do with the issues and questions that all humans address in some way. It has to do with the deep feelings and beliefs we have about meaning and purpose, priorities and values, justice and goodness, our relationships and connections to others and the world. Common spiritual themes include forgiveness, reconciliation, suffering, healing, recovery, community, relationships, love, death, birth.

In contrast, religion is a set of texts and traditions that can be used to address spiritual questions and needs. Everyone has inherent spirituality, whether they call it that or not but not everyone uses specific religion to address their spiritual needs.

Why do I say abortion-provision is inherently spiritual? There are a couple of reasons. First, in my conversations with some abortion providers, you articulate what I would say is a sense of calling to this work—it is not "rational" and "logical" to choose abortion provision as a medical specialty. You do it because it provides your life with a sense of meaning and purpose, a sense of connection to something bigger than just oneself. Secondly, providing abortions is a specific response to human need and suffering. You see suffering, you see how hard life is, and ask yourself the difficult question about what is in your capacity, your power to truly address the suffering, what is in your limited power to address the injustices you see.

What I find so appalling about the anti-abortion movement is that they DENY the amount of suffering and evil that exists. They deny the power humans have to address this suffering and evil. They turn away, they cannot

stand to bear the burden of really seeing how hard and painful life can be, nor can they bear the burden of what power they may have to address that suffering. They believe that their ends justify their coercive means. But history shows us that coercion only breeds bitterness, rage, and violence. Abortion providers take a militant stand against coercion, in service of an idea of love and humanity far more powerful, I think, than the antis' romanticization and fetishizing of life. But if we cannot tell our stories drawing on spiritual, even religious wisdom, without pulling on those myths that run through our culture, people will not understand us, will not understand our moral center. I think this is why Dr. Tiller called his work a reproductive health ministry. I think this is why Dr. Carhart speaks about the religious belief to have and provide abortions. Our work is sacred, our work is on the cutting edge of love, on the cutting edge of compassion, on the cutting edge of morality.

And lastly, I believe your work is inherently spiritual because of how many of you speak about your work. I have often heard that your work "saves women's lives." After George Tiller's murder, there was an outpouring of voices all saying the same thing "George Tiller saved my life." Saving, salvation, is a critical concept in spiritual thinking. What heals? What keeps one safe? What nourishes us? What protects us? I believe your work offers a radical new definition of what salvation means: it means acknowledging that life is always limited, that we are always in relationship to others, which requires us to make choices that protect the entire interconnected web of existence. I like to say that life requires us to have abortions every single moment. Life never DOES NOT ask us to choose. We need help, good company, and love to make choices. We need to grieve and rejoice. This choosing saves us. Abortion is salvation.

I would like to end with an excerpt of a piece I wrote for RH Reality Check:

What I want the abortion-providing community to embrace is the fact that our movement can be and often is an embodiment of a wisdom that asks us to transform our most basic understandings of power and life. Advocating such transformation is heartrending at best, deadly at worst. However, it is a sacred task, calling forth our best selves, calling on us to do what is right, just, and loving. Moreover, what I want the broader liberal and prochoice community to see is that abortion is not some issue you sweep under the rug for political expediency—it is something we claim as our moral and spiritual center.

I do not think you need to resurrect your moral center. You just need to do the hard work of realizing and connecting to the truth that your work IS the moral center.