

## Changing the abortion landscape

*Social Issues briefing #040, 30/4/2005.*

[The following is the text of Tracy Gordon's address to the NSW Evangelicals for Life Forum 30/4/05]

**Marion's story.** *When I left school I was a middle of the road conservative. Yet during my university years I realized that I'd been brought up to think that principles didn't matter, especially if they led to conflict. My response to this revelation was to embrace feminist ideology. It was stimulating, challenging; an interesting and exciting new way to look at the world. I was as feminist as I could be – and still have a husband and children.*

*By the time I'd finished my social work degree, I knew I wanted to be working with strong women who fought for social justice and the rights of women to take equal and powerful positions in the country. Friends introduced me to a prominent feminist figure who employed me to showcase one of the first work-based childcare initiatives in Sydney: I was to take my 13 week old baby to work.*

*I had to learn quickly how to make my personal rhetoric conform to my feminist beliefs.*

*The only conflict came when I announced I was pregnant with my second child. Immediately I was lectured about this. The point was emphatic: I'd crossed back over the line from feminist-woman and aligned myself with the barefoot and pregnant woman of mainstream Australia.*

*Despite my joy about the pregnancy, I felt like a sell-out – until another woman in the office also announced she was pregnant. Apart from this one episode, I was able to live out my new beliefs for a few years. Feminism made such sense.*

*And then my world fell apart. One night my husband didn't come home from a work party. Suddenly I was facing the deepest crisis of my life – the despair of a broken marriage. And I was pregnant with our third child.*

*As the nausea of pregnancy intensified and the ten-year marriage crumbled before me, I turned to the only source of security I knew – my feminist friends. They walked me through the most harrowing period of my life. But I was about to live out the most disempowering decision I had ever made.*

*The decision to abort my baby was born of fear and the belief that to decide to abort was a show of your strength. I was a feminist who believed a crisis pregnancy was easily solved with an abortion. Certainly, no one had ever suggested that abortion carried any consequences.*

*I was so afraid of having the baby by myself. It became a question of me or the baby – my sanity or a situation I couldn't handle. The essence of myself was at stake.*

Many of the values that we encounter in much of Australian and Western culture are embedded in our capacity to choose. We tend to see ourselves as people whose identity and life course are a direct result of our choices.

Taking control of our lives is a common theme for self-help books and the like. Last year The New York Times (Leland, 2004) reported the results of a 2002 Pew Center survey of 38,000 people in 44 countries. They wanted to gauge peoples' responses to the statement: "Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control." In the U.S. more than two-thirds disagreed with the statement, as did just under two-thirds in Canada. In other countries, disagreement ranged from 10% in Bangladesh to 50% in Japan.

Put another way, over two-thirds of Americans thought that success in life is pretty much determined by forces *within* our control. In general, Americans have a relatively strong belief that they are in control of outcomes. While the survey wasn't carried out in Australia, we can imagine that our response would not be dissimilar to those found in the States.

We see ourselves as **choosing individuals**. Our strength is measured by our ability to stand on our own two feet and make decisions.

In a society that views the autonomy of the individual as sacrosanct and defining, we view all challenges to that autonomy as a threat. In addition, we live in a consumer culture, which tells us that we deserve to have whatever it is we want. The choices that confront women are enormous – education, travel, training, housing affordability, job security, and finding a secure relationship all play a part in determining the direction our lives may head. As our biological clocks continue to tick louder than ever, it is often with a mixture of sadness and inevitability that we press on.

Nobody needs to be convinced that life is complex. And complexity is born not only of the abundance of choices and things before us from which to choose, but of the simple fact that some choices in life are mutually exclusive.

So in fact we are also very constrained within the abundance of choice; and the idyll of total freedom of choice keeps receding like a mirage before us. And we find ourselves faced with a problem we can't reconcile: that we simply can't have everything.

A recent interview with a woman named Judith who is a clinical psychologist revealed this about her decision not to have children:

*'I do not have children and yet this was not something I decided never to do from the word go. I have had a lot of choices to go one way or another during my life, but I constantly chose against having children. If I had been in the right city with the right person at the right time....well, perhaps I would have chosen differently. It was something that, when faced with the decision, I tended to choose career, travel, existing friendships, family, over choosing that route.'*

She keeps using the language of choice, but the choices were, in the end, constrained. It was only ever half about choice. We don't ever have as much control as we like to think we do.

And as I speak to women, and men, I find a common thread to many of their stories of how they ended up in their particular situation in life. They **thought** they were free, choosing individuals. But as they look back, their choices were constrained and the results of their choices unanticipated. We get to where we are in life via an assortment of intentional and unintentional choices and, in many cases, the unknowable consequences of these choices.

It has been observed that

*'A conspiracy of powerful 20<sup>th</sup> century-isms dismantled social frameworks and created new, more fluid patterns of life that are incompatible with the biological imperatives and demands of child-rearing. Feminism won education, employment and freedoms for women but forgot about families. Environmentalism and the threat of overpopulation encouraged restraint.*

*'Capitalism made yesterday's luxuries today's necessities with casual work replacing full-time breadwinner jobs in a corporate world hostile towards family needs.*

*'Finally, individualism and the pursuit of personal success created a society where people earn more money watering plants than caring for old people and children.*

*'If you add to this mix widespread use of contraception, morning-after pills and abortions, sharp declines in marriage, fragile partnerships, the postponement of secure couplings that lead to children and IVF technology, which promised to keep a woman's biological clock ticking longer, then it is almost a wonder that we are reproducing at all.'*

These are the new conditions that constrain our choice, much as we like to believe that it is a woman's 'right to choose'. Indeed, these very conditions seem to shape our notions of 'wanting' children.

As a recently published book asserts: "Ask young women in their late teens or early 20's what they want their lives to look like by the time they turn 35 and the vast majority (92% according to one large Australian study) say the same thing. They want to be partnered for life with a man, working in a good job, and the mother of at least one or two children. (Wicks and Mishra 1998)

So – many women, at one level, 'want' children. Yet clearly, when one in five pregnancies ends in abortion, many women *don't* 'want' their child. Perhaps we don't really know if we want children or not.

The time has come to discover the reasons for our confusion.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of January this year, leaders from 15 religious groups across Australia gathered together. The reason for the gathering? They wanted to discern what, in fact, are the real constraints against women choosing to have children; and the ways to have children that they are not aware of; and what are the unwitting consequences of a choice to abort.

The religious leaders met to express their support for initiatives to help women make choices that don't deny the life within them. What they called for was not in the first instance a change to the legislation surrounding abortion; not about some attempt to curtail choice (although there was an exception in the case of late term abortions – but I'll return to that later) but a deep desire to know more about this confusing mixture of choices in Australia and the ways it is affecting women, their unborn children and the communities around them. It was a desire to have a better understanding of what is going on in their hearts and minds.

The leaders were drawn together because of a unified concern and they expressed this concern in a petition which they signed and sent to the Government.

Firstly the leaders called for more data about what was actually taking place regarding abortion. In the past fortnight, Health Minister Tony Abbott responded to a series of questions put on notice by Senator Ron Boswell concerning abortion statistics within Australia.

Here are some of those facts: Approximately 90,000 abortions take place in Australia each year. That is equivalent to one abortion for every 2.8 live births. More abortions occur in the 30-34 year old age group than in the 15-19 year old age group. We need data in order to better understand the circumstances in which women are making the decision to keep their babies or terminate their pregnancies.

Secondly, the leaders called for better counselling for women faced with an unplanned pregnancy. The South Australian example demonstrates that there are better outcomes for women and their babies when counselling is part of the decision-making process. Greater, accurate information is not disempowering to women.

Thirdly, there was a call for better counselling post-abortion. The stories of women told in Melinda Tankard Reist's book 'Giving Sorrow Words' only highlights the tragic consequences that many women face under the guise of 'choice'.

But beneath these issues regarding the circumstances surrounding abortion we glimpse a deeper truth about ourselves – our rejection of God's good purposes for our lives.

Eastern Orthodox theologian David B Hart adds this:

*'...we have made the decision as a society that unfettered personal volition is (almost) always to be prized, in principle, above the object towards which volition is directed. It is in the will – in the liberty of choice – that we place primary value, which means that we must as a society strive, as far as possible, to recognise as few objective goods outside the self as we possibly can... We are devoted to – indeed, in a sense, we worship – the will; and we are hardly the first people willing to offer up our children to our god.'*

Hart highlights how we think that even children are subservient to our act of wanting them. But maybe we need to let the idol of choice totter. Maybe we need to learn what it is to welcome them, to receive them gladly among us.

Hence the religious leader's opposition to and calls for restriction on late term abortions. Although there are not many of them, such a change would symbolically put children back where they belong – as precious others to be received with joy.

There are some key themes in the Bible that speak directly to the complexity that women face. The twin themes of thankfulness and contentment are writ large throughout God's Word. We are exhorted to joyfully receive the good things that God gives us.

Christian theology frees us from the enslaving deceit that all we are is **choosing individuals**...we can be in communities who care for each other, and we can joyfully receive good things that come to us, whether or not we've chosen them.

Christian theology longs to point women to God's deep desire for societies where pregnancy may always be rejoiced in as an unmingled blessing. What might it be like for women and their babies if communities

were full of committed faithful, loving men; and neighbours who support and care for young people with disabilities; with economic conditions where no child need starve or want for clothing; and where motherhood is honoured and considered to be easily as impressive as any other career?

Marion went on to have 3 more abortions, followed by a baby she carried full term. She reflects on her complex and painful decisions this way:

*'Abortion worsened each difficult life decision I had to face. It never liberated me, but merely exchanged one problem for another. I began to recognise myself as part of a group of walking wounded, as I met other women who felt lesser through an act they were told would be a positive solution.*

*'I began to grieve the gullible and uninformed person I'd been, that I'd not asked questions. And something was also happening in my heart. I began to miss my children. It was as simple as that: I missed holding the children I'd never see. When I kissed my new baby's head, I was reminded of the possibility of the other four.*

*'As time passed, I let my children into my heart, grieved them and let them go. Today I know them as Sarah, Lily, Edward and Mary. My children.'*

*Tracy Gordon, for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

### **Sources/Further Reading:**

Cannold, Leslie *What, No Baby?* Freemantle; Curtin University Books, 2005.

Hart, David B, *The Pornography Culture*, The New Atlantis, Number 6, Summer 2004, pp82-89.

Lachman, Margie, Aging under control? American Psychological Association Volume 19: No. 1, January 2005; online: <http://www.apa.org/science/psa/sb-lachmanprt.html>.

Tankard Reist, Melinda *Giving Sorrow Words: women's stories of grief after abortion*, Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 2000.

*Note: This paper is intended to assist discussion and may be corrected or revised in future. Short responses to [social.issues@moore.edu.au](mailto:social.issues@moore.edu.au) are very welcome, but the SIE cannot guarantee a reply. To access this free regular briefing, visit <http://www.sydnevanglicans.net/socialissues> and to receive it by email, follow the link [Sign up for our free weekly briefing!](#) Visit <http://sie.moore.edu.au>, our second website, for other material.*

### **Conditions of use:**

1. You may forward this paper to others, as long as you forward it *in full*.
2. You may freely publish it (e.g. in a church newspaper) as long as it is published in full, not for profit, and including the 'Note' paragraph. (You don't have to include these 'conditions'.)
3. Media and academic publishers should cite this paper according to their professional standards. We would appreciate audiences being directed to <http://www.sydnevanglicans.net/socialissues> .
4. Not-for-profit publishers may use the ideas in this paper without acknowledgement; **but** if quoting it directly, please cite title, authors, and the web link <http://www.sydnevanglicans.net/socialissues>.
5. Permission may be given for use in publications for profit. Please send details of your proposal to [lisa.watts@moore.edu.au](mailto:lisa.watts@moore.edu.au).