

Posted with permission of the author. A version of this has been published on AlterNet.org

Aspen Baker was born in a trailer on the beach in San Diego on the third anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. Her parents were “surfers, but surfing Christians,” says Baker, now 29, who was home-schooled. Her mother was a former Catholic, and Baker was raised in a non-denominational Christian church. Baker was pro-choice, sort of, but she also knew that she could never have an abortion herself. Just after she graduated from Berkeley, she learned she was pregnant. “Initially, I believed I was going to be a mother and have the baby,” she says. She was living with roommates, working as a bartender—“imagine the eight-months-pregnant bartender,” she laughs—and she sensed that the relationship she was in was short term; she would be a single mom. Two co-workers at the bar told her that they had had abortions and felt it was the right choice. While Baker gradually realized that she didn’t want to have the baby, the decision to have an abortion was hard. “When I finally went, it was in a hospital, and I had a nice doctor that explained the procedure to me, and plenty of counseling beforehand,” she says. “I was so grateful for the positive medical experience, despite my ambivalence.” She assumed that at some point, though, someone at the clinic was going to tell her how to get follow-up counseling. But no one did. “I didn’t bring it up myself because if it’s not something that they do, then I figured that my feelings were abnormal and would go away,” she says.

They didn’t. In fact, her confusion and sadness only increased. “I thought I’d never have an abortion—and now I had,” Baker says. “I questioned my moral beliefs as a human rights activist. I didn’t believe in the death penalty. I felt bad about the boyfriend, who had gotten back with his ex.” When she told her parents, who were divorced, her mother refused to talk about abortion and “when I told my dad, he cried all night and told me that this was something I would have to ‘reveal’ to my husband someday.” She felt very alone, Baker recalls: “I cried all of the time, but I didn’t want to burden my friends.”

Her father called her the day after to say he wanted to support her any way he could, he just hadn’t known what to do in the moment and Baker began looking for resources. All she could find were thinly disguised antiabortion messages. As a feminist, she says, “I didn’t see anything that reflected my experience.” Seeking resolution, she interned at CARAL—the California arm of NARAL, one of the country’s oldest abortion rights organizations. But when she would raise the lack of emotional resources for women, she confronted blank faces. It was, she says, as if admitting that she was struggling with her feelings meant that she wasn’t really prochoice.

Eventually Baker discovered several like-minded women and they founded Exhale, a non-judgmental post-abortion talk-line for the Bay Area, in 2000. The group tried to eliminate anything that might stop a woman from calling, including words like “feminist” or even “pro-choice” in their materials, even though Exhale is both. “We didn’t know if we’d ever get a call,” recalls Baker. “But we got our first call the second night. It was from a father who wanted to know how to support his daughter.” Five years later, Exhale gets about 60 calls a month—and around 10 percent are from men, often wanting to know what they can do to help a daughter or partner going through an abortion. In June, Exhale’s talk-line is going national.

Exhale’s approach to abortion centers on the experience of women, in addition to—or rather than—legal rights or lobbying. Ditto Haven, a hosting network in New York City. Haven hosts provide a place to stay for women who travel long distances to have later-term abortions (and thus two- and three-day procedures) in the city. Hosts are vetted, and the vetting is to weed out pro-life proselytizers as well as the pro-choice ones. Both groups are a strand of an increasingly high profile conversation that is changing the way supporters discuss and approach abortion. In particular, this strand of the conversation is gaining prominence—and meeting resistance. To wit, when Senator Clinton addressed 1,000 abortion rights supporters on the 32nd anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* this past January, she both asserted her belief in *Roe* and said that abortion can be “tragic” for some women. Her words sent shock-waves through the major pro-choice organizations and spurred the New York Times to surmise that the Senator is “recalibrating” her pro-choice position in preparation for a 2008 bid for the White House. In other words, she and politicians like Senator Kerry are back-pedaling. But is it?

This seeming shift in focus in the national conversation from “Keep your laws off my body!” to “let’s talk about feelings and sadness and (gasp) whether fetal life has value” actually has a long history. It is likely that it goes back further than this, but one way of telling the story begins in 1980 with a 30-year-old counselor named Charlotte Taft. Ms. Taft was two years into her tenure directing the Routh Street abortion clinic in Dallas when, feeling enthusiastic, she decided to draw up a questionnaire for patients coming in for their two-week checkups. “I wanted to know if patients were afraid to be intimate sexually and emotionally after a procedure and did they feel adequately protected from another intended pregnancy—so I asked a lot of open-ended questions,” recalls Taft, now 54 and a counselor in private practice in Glorieta, New Mexico. “I was shocked by how many who seemed fine during the procedure were now having thoughts and feelings that no one had anticipated.” The biggest thing she noted was that women felt sadder than they had anticipated—“they wondered, ‘how can I feel sad about something I chose?’” Often they felt like they couldn’t talk to their partners about the feelings, even if their partner was supportive of the choice. It ran counter to everything she knew: women came in to a clinic in crisis, she had assumed, and they left relieved. While it was just 7 to 10 percent of the patients who needed what follow-up care, “that’s a lot of people,” she notes. Abortion patients get more

counseling than those undergoing any other medical procedure—and still, Taft found, it was not safe for women to talk about abortion in their lives. “Number one, it was supposed to be a secret,” says Taft. “So these women had no idea who else in their lives had gone through this experience. Number two, we don’t have good language even today for making a good but complex decision. Third, some women felt that if they said anything, it was ammunition to remove the right to choose. You either said you were fine or admitted you were a murderer.”

Around that same time, in 1981, Peg Johnston was opening Southern Tier Women’s Services an independent abortion clinic Binghamton, New York. “I came out of a rape crisis background,” says Johnston, now 56. “Back then, rape was really controversial. People didn’t believe that it was a problem.” A red diaper baby and the grand-niece of a suffragist Elizabeth Freeman, Johnston had grown up with radical ideas and got a reputation as someone who could handle controversy. And she got it: Five years after Southern Tier clinic opened, fellow Binghamton resident Randall Terry founded what would become the nation’s most high-profile anti-abortion organization, Operation Rescue, and pioneered his strategy of blocking clinic entrances at Johnston’s clinic. Johnston kept her sense of humor, counter-picketing Operation Rescue, and posting a sign outside the clinic that read “Please Don’t Feed the Protesters.”

After a while, though, Johnston turned her attention from the protesters to her patients. “I don’t know if I just started getting bored with Operation Rescue, but I definitely started to get interested in what women were saying instead,” recalls Johnston. She’d hear the protesters say “You’re killing your baby!” and then she’d sit in a counseling session with a woman who’d say, “I feel like I’m killing my baby.” At first, she says, she assumed that the patients were simply repeating what they’d heard outside, having internalized right wing disinformation that Johnston needed to “correct.” But “once I began listening more intently to her, I learned that she *wasn’t* saying what the picketer was saying—although she used the same words.” Johnston believes that women were struggling with the value of life and how to do the right thing and be a good person. “Frequently they were already mothers and they knew a time when, at that same stage of pregnancy, they had welcomed the life and felt like it was their baby,” says Johnston. “They weren’t mouthing an anti-choice message—they were acknowledging that this was serious stuff. How can I want one kid and not the other?” During the course of counseling, Johnston would draw the disparate threads together: “I felt like they needed a place to say the worst and then work their way to the rightness of their decision. Some were on a journey to realize the power and responsibility of being a mother,” says Johnston. “Which is that sometimes it’s the power of saying no to a life.”

Listening to patients—and letting them use words like “baby” and “killing”—is one of a number of innovations among abortion activists to break away from the calcified approach to abortions and abortion rights post *Roe*. At a clinic in Fargo, North Dakota, (the only clinic in the state), I was surprised by the journals the staff leaves in the waiting and recovery rooms for patients to jot

down thoughts. Many women wrote some version of “Don’t think of it as losing a baby, but as gaining a guardian angel.” These were women who clearly felt a relationship to a pregnancy as a child, not a mass of cells. It is a sensitive moment to acknowledge this since supporters of abortion rights have long been losing ground while the pro-life world has recently had a call from President Bush commending them on their respect for life. The threat that legal abortion could actually be overturned has animated most strategic discussions of choice for the past three decades.

In the face of that defensiveness, there is a loose cadre of abortion providers that call themselves the November Gang—a combination think-tank and support group named after the month in 1989 when they first met in response to the Supreme Court’s *Webster* decision. *Webster* upheld a Missouri statute banning the use of public facilities for abortions and codified that most restrictions were fine as long as they weren’t *too* onerous for a woman. In other words, she might have to jump through many hoops on the way to the abortion—from mandatory delays to having to sell her car in order to pay for the procedure—but if she could jump, then the hoops didn’t conflict with *Roe v. Wade*. The group’s mission was and is to “explore the work abortion providers are doing” simply by providing a space for the women to talk openly about their fears and their un-PC observations. Taft and Johnston are founding members. At first they focused on defense outside of the clinic—would *Roe* stand? How much were they spending on security? But after a while, they began to discuss what happened within the clinic. Once they did, they began asking questions that shocked some of their colleagues. *What if we showed fetal tissue to patients if they wanted to see it? Why are we protecting ourselves from what the patients are really saying?* Many of the clinicians do indeed offer to show fetal tissue to patients, and viewing it is often a relief to the patient. For her part, Johnston began developing the all-options element of counseling, saying to patients, “Okay, you have a complex decision to make and there are only three options. I focused on pregnancy, not abortion.” She eventually created the Pregnancy Options Workbook (which is available on-line at [HYPERLINK "http://www.pregnancyoptions.info"](http://www.pregnancyoptions.info) [www.pregnancyoptions.info](http://www.pregnancyoptions.info)) that is used at hundreds of clinics for counseling. Charlotte Taft wrote the abortion section of the workbook. “We worked so hard to have abortion rights,” says Taft, “not so that every woman could have an abortion, [but] so that women could have fuller experiences of their lives.”

Emily Barklow is a 27-year-old from Seattle, Washington, who, like Aspen Baker, never knew a time when abortion wasn’t legal. She had an abortion when she was 19 and attending Evergreen State College in Tacoma. “It was not an easy decision,” she recalls. “I struggled with feelings of deviance, selfishness, and loss afterwards.” Four years, lots of counseling, and an “amazing ritual process” helped her feel resolved. But at a NARAL speak-out on the University of Washington campus in 2001, Barklow spent hours preparing a presentation about her experience and closure ritual. “I arrived at the speak-out and was disappointed with the lack of depth in the other

presentations—all recycled coat hangers and ‘we’ll never go back’ signs,” she recalls. “I would cite this experience as my first real disconnect from the mainstream abortion rights movement.” Barklow recently decided to create an abortion zine, *Our Truths/Nuestras Verdades*, to reflect women’s experiences, which will launch in print and on the web in May 2005. Her first steps were to reach out to the November Gang and to Aspen Baker. (I’m on the advisory board, too.)

Projects like Barklow’s, which focus on telling women’s stories rather than repeating what their mostly young authors consider stale aphorisms, are popping up around the country. I’ve been working on one, which includes a documentary called *Speak Out*, a photo exhibit (by Tara Todras-Whitehill), and t-shirts that read “I had an abortion.” Sarah Varney, a 32-year-old reporter for NPR, created radio documentaries in which older women tell their pre-Roe abortion stories. Varney also produced a series of events called the Beta Project to use the stories to help people talk about and understand abortion. Two other filmmakers, Faith Pennick and Penny Lane, are also completing documentaries. While Lane’s focuses on younger feminists—often referred to as Third Wavers—Pennick’s is called *Silent Choices* and explores the experiences of black women. The experiences of women of color are particularly submerged in the terms of the mainstream debate. This fact is not lost on Loretta Ross, age 52, who has long worked to bridge the divide between women who get abortions, who are often lower-income and disproportionately black women, and abortion-rights advocates, who are often middle-class and white. “If you’re in the field, you know that black women are 12 percent of the female population but get 25 percent of the abortions in the country,” says Ross, the co-author of *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (SouthEnd Press, 2005) “Yet black women are saying this is not their issue. I have to ask why not.” An organization Ross works with, Sister Song, was instrumental in changing the name of last year’s pro-abortion rights demonstration in Washington from “March for Freedom of Choice” to “March for Women’s Lives.” “We couldn’t endorse the march unless they recognized the entire complex issues that women face,” says Ross. “Every woman who is pregnant wonders if she has a bedroom for that child; can she afford to take off the time to raise that child? Why flatten the decisions around abortion to just abortion? When women don’t have jobs or health care, where is the choice? There is nothing worse than a woman aborting a baby she wanted because she couldn’t support it.”

Ross notes that black women were the first to resist the pro-choice/anti-choice dichotomy. “A very large percentage of [black] women are personally opposed to abortion but are pro-choice,” says Ross. “Women of color agree with not giving unborn children more rights than grown women, but even when they’re terminating a pregnancy, they call it a baby. This has been going on as long as we have had the debate. What women of color mostly say is that we have the right to do decide what children are born or not, that is part of women’s power.” Charlotte Taft identifies a 1995 Naomi Wolf essay called “Our Bodies, Our Souls” as the first time she saw these ideas spoken in the feminist mainstream. Wolf’s essay called for the pro-choice

movement to embrace guilt, and acknowledge that some women mourned the loss of the fetuses. At the time, I was an editor at Ms. and Wolf's essay was controversial at the office, to say the least. I felt she was handing ammunition to the right wing and condescending to abortion rights activists—did she think we didn't contemplate moral issues? Besides, the piece ran in The New Republic under Andrew Sullivan, I harrumphed, and neither were known as pro-feminist. After having spent the last two years talking to women about their abortion stories, I have revised my knee-jerk response. I still believe Wolf's take was insulting to women—she wrote of glib “Chardonnay abortions”—but talking honestly about abortion is a sign of the movement's strength. And it's a feminist act. Nearly ten years later, a similar firestorm has erupted around an essay by Frances Kissling, the founder of Catholics for a Free Choice. Kissling's suggestion that a good society values life, including fetal life, is divisive among advocates, just as some grouched that the name change for the Washington march “weakened” the message of abortion rights. Loretta Ross takes the long view. “The defensiveness that the pro-choice movement has is well earned,” says Ross. “We've been shot at, picketed, fought every step. But I'm very glad that the conversation is changing.” November Gang members liken these critical conversations to a picnic—and a picnic has crumbs that the “ants,” or political opponents, will pick up. Their belief is that feminists must not sacrifice even a few women because of fears about the crumbs. “Rape crisis, birthing experiences, divorce law all got changed because women dared to speak the truth of their lives,” says Peg Johnston. “If we can't hear women, then where are we?”

THE END