

Celebrating 100 Years of Planned Parenthood

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

October 16, 2016

Rev Paul Beckel

WELCOME

As we begin let's take a moment to breathe deeply and settle our hearts and minds. For our prelude Andrea has created an arrangement from the soundtrack to the movie *Cider House Rules*. Which is only a so-so movie but a great, one of my favorite books—a very humane saga that engages with all of the questions and complications of adoption, abortion, sexuality and violence in a bittersweet (listen for that in this music) a bittersweet, and compelling, but non-preachy way. Y'know? I hope we can accomplish something similar today.

PRELUDE

INTRODUCTION

In 1916 the first birth control clinic in the U.S. opened in Brooklyn, NY. This led to the formation of the American Birth Control League, which later became Planned Parenthood. Today we celebrate the 100th anniversary of this milestone, this apparently radical notion that access to reproductive health care can transform people's lives.

Why are we talking about this here, in a religious context? Well, sadly, religious institutions have endorsed, for centuries, counterproductive attitudes toward sexuality—as taboo—such that any reference to our bodies, our natural desires, our relationships, or the realities of sexual violence—any thinking about, or public acknowledgement of these things is silenced and shamed. It is essential, then, that we *reverse this perverse perception of religion*, and as advocates for healthy relationships, as parents, and friends, and citizens, we *utilize the power of our principles* to transform ourselves, and our communities.

I am proud to stand today with Rev Vincent Lachina, chaplain to Planned Parenthood in the Pacific Northwest region. I'm also pleased to honor all who are here today, working in health care, education, media, law enforcement, or in any other capacity to affirm and promote the vision of society strengthened by personal freedom, privacy, nonviolence, and equality. [We invited employees of the local PP clinic and were honored that several were in attendance.]

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

GATHERING SONG

Woke up this Morning #153

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

You Forgot your Skirt, Amelia Bloomer, by Shana Corey

READING

Rev Vern Barnett (adapted)

The vision of Justice, revealed imperfectly in human law, the vision of justice has been both a secular and a sacred value nurtured across the ages by religious law-makers and religious law-breakers.

So begins the invocation presented by UU minister Rev. Vern Barnett at an installation ceremony for a U.S. district court judge. A UU minister, of course, is unlikely to offer a conventional invocation; rather, Vern took the opportunity to share a lesson in the historical relationship between religion and law:

The vision of Justice, revealed imperfectly in human law, has been both a secular and a sacred value nurtured across the ages by religious law-makers and religious law-breakers.

Hammurabi received his law code from the sun god Shamesh, a theme echoed in the story of Moses receiving the ten commandments on Mt Sinai. Both systems say that the whim of the powerful cannot be law, that law is rooted in something that transcends any particular case.

In Jewish and Muslim life, the observance of law is in itself an act of faith. These traditions make the welfare of society and the disposition of disputes so important that the question of how humans relate to each other becomes an ultimate religious practice, for to damage the community is to break the covenant with the divine.

In ancient Roman law, the priests developed elaborate formal rituals which became the legal procedures of proof.

In pre-modern Hindu India, it was impossible to distinguish law from religion—one word is used for both. Dharma is a complex notion measuring duties for each person within a set of social expectations. And it was the lawyer, Mohandas Gandhi, who became the most renowned and potent religious figure of his time.

In Confucian and Taoist China, a violation of li, social convention, upset the basic spiritual balance of the cosmos. The penal system's purpose was to restore natural equilibrium.

Law in the Christian West has evolved largely from Roman law, as you'll notice in all of the Latin legal terms we use today. And in English common law, a fascinating adaptation grew out of what had been the fiction of historical "ecclesiastical continuity" where it was understood that every priest and pope was ordained by someone who had been ordained by someone...going all the way back to Jesus Christ...which is now expressed in the doctrine of legal precedent.

The First Amendment to the US Constitution and the notion of secular government are consequences of religious thought that protects the soul from the state.

So on this occasion it is fit to rejoice in all that we are heir to, and in the work ahead, to use law not as a tool of privilege but as an instrument of justice, not dividing us for selfish ends, but in allegiance to the common good. Now we pause to celebrate a legal system ripened with the meanings of due process, equal protection, and other doctrines of law which give body to the ideals of justice.

So now, working within a *secular* framework, may each of us sense the *sacredness* of liberty and justice for all.

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

REFLECTIONS

Rev Vincent Lachina

(Let Tammy Jo know if you'd be willing to transcribe Vincent's remarks...which were very inspiring. He gave a brief history of Mt. Baker Planned Parenthood, shared stories of support from faith leaders and communities, and personal remarks about what drives him to do this vital work.)

PREFACE to WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE Elizabeth Skinner

When my daughter Molly and I moved to Bellingham in 1999, she was 16 and enrolled at Sehome High School. I signed a permission slip for her health class curriculum on sexuality and reproductive health, which looked pretty straightforward on the form I signed. Then the module started. She came home from school one day and said, "Mom, isn't this weird?" She had a little pink plastic fetus that said "preborn, 12 weeks" on its back. She told me her health teacher gave it to her. She then told me that a guest speaker had brought in large, color laminated photographs of second and third trimester aborted fetuses, and she had a little pin that was a pair of tiny feet. She showed me her curriculum materials, which included a tremendous amount of misinformation, including 6 sheets single spaced, front and back sided, what appeared to be quotes from doctors and researchers, all of which said condoms don't work or were harmful. None of this was on the permission slip I signed.

We ended up reaching out to the school district curriculum director. The teacher was completely rogue, and for that year, we ensured she stayed on curriculum. We also reached out to Linda McCarthy at Planned Parenthood. I was the only parent who complained or brought light to this situation.

I had volunteered and interned for two years in the Family Planning clinic of the Thurston-Mason health department while in college, but reproductive health information does evolve, so it was great to bring all the misinformation in to Linda to get accurate health information for my daughter. I could talk about this at length; suffice to say Molly was inspired to volunteer as a youth educator for Planned Parenthood for several years, testified in the state house and senate for passage of a bill that required sexuality education in the public schools to be medically accurate, became a Peace Corps health volunteer, got her MPH at Columbia specializing in reproductive health, and now works for Affiliates Risk Management Services, which is the training, quality control, and insurance agency for the Planned Parenthood affiliates.

Sounds like a happy ending, no? But that same teacher is still teaching health at Bellingham High School, and I wonder if anyone is monitoring her. I wonder how many so-called "fetal development specialists" are still bringing this horrid misinformation into public schools. A sad lesson I've only recently learned is that we have to monitor and continue to fight for gains we think we already won. So I am proud to stand up here today and sing an original song that Linda Allen wrote for the 100th anniversary of Planned Parenthood, "I Choose". Please choose to stay vigilant and to support Planned Parenthood in their mission to support health care in our community.

BUF WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE

You don't get to Choose, written especially for today by Linda Allen

REFLECTIONS

Rev Paul Beckel

There are many theories about law, sexuality, obligation, and self-control. But ultimately our responsibility is to deal with the realities that we find at our doorstep.

Having served for years as a nurse, Margaret Sanger met a patient—a young immigrant named Sadie Sachs—who asked her doctor for contraception and was told to have her husband sleep on the roof. Three months later, Sanger watched as her patient lay dying from a self-induced abortion. Sanger later called this her great awakening.

For she knew that this tragedy was unnecessary, as the rubber condom—the first reliable, affordable form of birth control—had been developed by Charles Goodyear in 1837.

So Margaret Sanger opened the first public birth control clinic in the U.S. in 1916. After 9 days it was shut down and Sanger was jailed. When she was released she opened the clinic again, only to have it shut down again within a few weeks.

Sanger also published a newspaper called the *Woman Rebel*, which ran afoul of postal regulations against obscene literature. In another paper, her column, “What every girl should know,” talked frankly about sexuality and reproduction. When the Post Office censor banned the column, she ran it again, kind of. Now she left the space blank, and changed the headline to read: “What every girl should know—nothing, by order of the U.S. Post Office.”

By the 1930’s about half of the states still had laws banning the distribution of contraceptives. But enforcement was lax. You could even get “preventives” through the Sears, Roebuck catalog. Clinics had opened in many American cities...but they were careful to follow such rules as only serving married women. And in their most defensive posture, clinics would focus on women who already had children, or whose lives would be threatened by a pregnancy.

Periodically clinics would be shut down, and when an attempt to overturn one of these laws finally made it to the U.S. Supreme Court, the Court simply ruled that the laws were ok since there was no danger that they would ever be enforced. Not till 1965 was a decisive statement made by the Supreme Court that bans on contraceptives violated a couple’s right to privacy.

The Roe v. Wade case, affirming a woman’s right to abortion, came in 1973. But how far would the courts take this right to privacy? Certainly not so far as to protect gay citizens. A 1986 Supreme Court ruling stated that Georgia’s anti-sodomy laws *are* constitutional. To which Justice Harry Blackmun wrote, in a scathing dissent: “Depriving individuals of the right to choose for themselves how to conduct their intimate relationships poses a [terrible] threat to the values most deeply rooted in our Nation’s history....”

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The Unitarian Universalist tradition has a long history of advocacy and hands-on work to improve public health. The UUA has always supported equal access to medical services for all people. This has meant standing up for the rights of people to make private decisions—even when we disagree with their decisions.

Why do we do this? Because a morality based in fear and shame, in coercive rules and prohibited acts, does not work and it negates our responsibility to understand, affirm, and embrace our sexuality, and our responsibility to teach these things to our children.

Since October is domestic violence awareness month, and since this year at BUF we are paying special attention to relationships and connections, here are some connections to note: domestic violence, poverty, the gender pay gap, efforts to defund Planned Parenthood, abstinence only sex education, and the celebration of coercive power rather than cooperative power. These are all connected.

And speaking of coercive power: this week we are finally talking publicly about the pervasive reality of sexual assault. But in so many cases the media are using euphemisms for body parts, and understatement about sexual assault, and thereby downplaying the brutishness and criminality that we are apparently still unwilling to address.

And so, with all of its imperfections, I am proud to be a part of a religious tradition that not only acknowledges human sexuality, but cherishes human dignity so much that we can talk about this, and teach our children not just about contraception but about *consent*. And we will engage with this awkward but essential aspect of our lives with enough depth that we can evaluate the difference between healthy and unhealthy sexual activity.

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Moral absolutes are not useful when we talk about reproduction. Life is a continuum over eons; any one moment which we might pick out of that vast timeline...any one moment which we might call “the beginning” of life will necessarily be arbitrary.

This reality is challenging. Legally, ethically, this gray area calls for us to be our best: both caring and thoughtful—and very often: to compromise. This uncomfortable and inescapable situation calls us to choose from among our ideals, to balance competing goods, because even our most cherished values will come into conflict with each other in real life.

It would be nice to think that it could be easier. Clearer. But as parents, as citizens, we have always had to make choices about life and death. As technology advances in genetic screening, fertility, and surrogacy, we face increasingly complex choices about the health and even about the characteristics of our children.

The so called “pro-life” and “pro-choice” positions have always been fictions. As medical technology advances, this will become increasingly obvious. I see hope in this. I see hope that our polarization as a society will ease as we *all* find ourselves in moral gray areas.

And this polarization must ease. Our fights over moral absolutes must be put to rest because we have difficult work to do, together. To care for one another, to support freedom of conscience, to promote the good of the individual, *and* the good of all...this will be incredibly demanding work.

Changing technologies foretell of fascinating and probably heartbreaking choices that we will all face. Choices about life and death, about the quality of life...choices in which we will weigh costs

and benefits of something as sacred and ethereal as LIFE. What an incredible future we hold in our hands and in our hearts.

Our hope is in intelligent, informed and free decision-making. So even as things change, we can approach the future with a confident commitment to education on ethical principles—learning not specific rules, but how to make wise choices.

In the meantime we live. We love. We work. We choose. And we express our gratitude to those who give compassionate care, day after day, both to those in distress, and to those with ordinary preventative health concerns. So may we offer community to each other in this difficult work, and may we generously support those institutions that work on and on, despite threats to their very existence, despite the power of shame and ignorance to live on in our midst.

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There are many theories about law, sexuality, obligation, and self-control. But ultimately our responsibility is to deal with the realities that we find at our doorstep.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

Tune: *Old Hundredth*

Creative love our thanks we give
that this, our world is incomplete
that struggle greets our will to live
that work awaits our hands and feet.

That we are not yet fully wise
that we are in the making still
as friends who share one enterprise
and strive to blend with nature's will.

Since what we choose is what we are
and what we love we yet shall be
the goal may ever shine afar
the will to reach it makes us free.