

# Life Choices

*The Teachings of Abortion*

Linda Weber

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# Introduction

It is 1970 in New York City. The laws are changing and it is no longer illegal to have an abortion. Clinics open almost immediately to provide services. I begin counseling in one of those clinics a few months after legalization. Women come for abortions from every part of the United States. Each of them is referred to the clinic by a local clergyman where they live. Some of the women travel long distances; some are young, some older; some are married, most are not; some come with a partner or a friend; many come alone. The women come with stories of their lives. They share them with us. Each story I hear gives me pause to think. As I listen, an underground, hidden aspect of women's lives rises to the surface of my understanding. I am fascinated and drawn in like a wave to the shore.

Something important is happening.

In 1973, the United States Supreme Court ruled, in the now well-known *Roe v. Wade* decision, that women could freely obtain abortions legally as long as certain basic stipulations were met. I was living in Colorado by that time. In the middle of that year, I joined with a small group of women and men to create the Boulder Valley Clinic, which became Boulder Valley Women's Health Center and is now called Women's Health. It is the first freestanding abortion clinic in the state. We opened for services on the first of November of that year. I worked there for fourteen years.

In 1970, little was known about the psychology and spirituality of abortion. The word abortion was rarely spoken, its illicit reputation having followed it into the legalized light of day. The subject was shadowy, and the feelings, thoughts, and personal circumstances of the people involved were shrouded in ignorance and mystery. The medical techniques of abortion procedures had not yet been perfected, since most had been used only in clandestine, illegal

operations. Most of the highly trained obstetrician-gynecologists who came to work at the New York clinic had to be retrained to do first trimester vacuum aspiration abortion procedures. The first medical director of the clinic had been a reputable, though illegal, abortionist in another state. He had perfected a safe outpatient procedure, which he taught to the other physicians. Within its first year of operation, the clinic was bought by a prominent ob-gyn who changed its name to the Center for Reproductive and Sexual Health (CRASH).

Those of us who accompanied women through their abortions were not called counselors at first. We were trained as medical assistants to the physicians. Our job was to organize the medical supplies for abortion, tell each woman what was going to happen to her, and prepare her for the medical procedure. Then the doctor would come in and perform the abortion, which was completed within fifteen minutes.

We noticed right away that most of the women who came to us as patients needed more than that. They needed to talk about what they were going through and how they felt emotionally. They needed to talk about their fears, their families, and their relationships. Many of the women wondered about their relationship with God. They needed reassurance that they were making the best decision they could.

And, we needed to listen. Most of us were part of the burgeoning women's liberation movement. Women's stories were at the center of our lives. Whatever a woman had to say about her life was interesting to us. We believed that we could "raise the consciousness" of women by encouraging them to tell their stories, and that it was healing for them to open up about their lives. We had been doing that ourselves, meeting in small groups—consciousness raising groups—to bear our hearts about our most intimate concerns about being women.

The women who came as patients to the abortion clinic were from all over the country and from all walks of life. We wanted to help them understand what they were feeling and to know that their feelings were good, normal, natural, and acceptable. Most of us had no formal training in psychology. Our willingness to listen and be supportive came from our politics and our personal experience. Later on down the road, many of us became professional counselors, but that's not the way it started. We invented ourselves through necessity, and created abortion counseling, a combination of medical and psychological counseling that gives women a chance to review their pregnancy decisions and explore their thoughts and feelings about having an abortion.

When I left New York I had counseled upwards of 1,200 women and accompanied them through their abortion procedures. I moved with my two young daughters to the mountains near Boulder, Colorado, and began to take stock of what I had been through. With some extended time for reflection, I could begin to face the flood of personal feelings and questions I had about the powerful nature of abortion. My devotion to women's causes was deepening, and I needed to know more. I needed to understand why abortion was full of swirling energy, why it touched people at their core, why it changed people's lives. The underground river of women's reproductive experiences that surfaced with legalized abortion sometimes raged over rough waters. The endless flow of stories was a torrent of unknown proportions. What was happening here? I needed to know.

I've been gathering my thoughts and organizing my questions in the years since then. I've been exploring philosophical and spiritual truths and doing what I can to gain understanding about the relationship of abortion to the rest of Life and what it has to teach us. The result is this book, which I offer to you now. It is written primarily for women, but is also for anyone who has an interest and concern about the direction in which the world is headed and about the quality of our relationship with the Earth.

The feminist urge to bring women's issues to the forefront of human life has been a principal motivator for me. At the same time, spiritual concepts that reveal the interrelationship of All Life beg to be seen as the basis for understanding the place of major issues like abortion in the life of society. The essentially pro-life nature of abortion and its spiritual teachings will help us learn to integrate different levels of consciousness about Life. This book addresses many levels of the abortion issue, including the personal, the political and historical, the psychological, and the spiritual.

The perspective I am bringing through is large and inclusive. It shows how reality dances between the personal and the collective and between nature and culture. My intention is to make it easier for us to see our daily lives and personal issues in the context of our ongoing planetary evolution. It is challenging to try to capture the patterns of the dance on paper. One way I do this is to capitalize Life when it means the same thing as All Life. Nature, Earth and Spirit are also often capitalized. Using language this way allows me to bring attention to the spiritual importance of these concepts.

When an all-inclusive framework is added to the abortion debate, func-

tional political categories like pro-choice and pro-life start to dissolve. This is natural, but there is a danger in it. It would be worse than foolish to set aside the struggle to keep abortion safe and legal simply because we want to challenge simplistic slogans.

I believe abortion is essentially pro-life, because my experience has shown me how it can enrich women's lives. Large numbers of women could not have succeeded as lawyers and doctors, scientists and engineers, without the availability of abortion. Women have a greater degree and sense of safety in their lives because they know they can control the number of children born from their bodies without risk to themselves. The changes we have seen in the status of women in the last forty years in this country have happened because it has been possible for significant numbers of women to obtain abortions when they needed them.

I see Life in a simultaneously timeless and time-bound way. It operates in the spiritual place of soul and in the physical, time-based dimension in which we live our daily lives. While we explore spiritual and philosophical realms, we remain committed to the improvement of life in the physical realm, the relative world in which we move through our days. Legal, freely chosen abortion is an enormous stepping-stone to authentic empowerment and autonomy for women. Our commitment to women's health needs, one of which is the availability of safe abortion, must stay strong while we argue thorny issues and concerns. Anyone who is realistic about the slow progress of consciousness about sex, and the economic instability in which most people live their relationships, will conclude that we must keep abortion legal if we are to move forward in our lives. It would be immoral to do otherwise. History and society give us no choice but to be "pro-choice." We have nothing if we do not have reproductive freedom.

I find it curious that some in the "pro-choice" movement have bought into the propaganda of the "pro-life" movement, and have become defensive about abortion. I've heard, from people who should know better, that "no one wants an abortion." My experience says otherwise. Women who are pregnant and who feel strongly that they don't want to be pregnant want abortions. Need and want merge in the unwanted pregnancy situation. There is no difference between them. We shouldn't be apologetic about wanting women to be able to have abortions when they want them.

Those of us who make specific choices about life exercise responsibility for

Life. Conscious decisions about pregnancy bring us into direct contact with primal cycles of Nature and our own nature. Cycles, by their very nature, can upset our equilibrium and put us in a state of chaos because they are full of transitions and changing conditions. Pregnancy decision-making is more basic than beautiful, more like a mudslide than a meadow. When we make decisions to bring pregnancy forward or to turn it back we merge our basic intuitive instincts with our ability to reason, but it's easy to feel stuck in the heaviness of conflicting pressures.

The current psychology of abortion is rooted in historical realities and in the pernicious alienation of our culture from the natural world. Consequently, we are estranged from our own bodies. Sometimes we think we are separate from our bodies, that we can manipulate them, as we would some machine outside of ourselves. A pregnancy crisis can explode these untruths and rearrange our thinking to the core.

Death and Birth conspire together in abortion. Their unity defies conventional perception. It makes us rethink our ideas about Life. I have sat with many hundreds of women as they unraveled the tangled web of misunderstanding that confounded their hearts and minds. They were in touch, often unknowingly, with a deep stream of female experience. This historical and spiritual stream contains the millions of women who came before. They and we embody the regenerative power of the Earth.

Life on Earth is full of life-death-life cycles. What is our place in all that? How does our consciousness fit with that? As women, how can we achieve greater autonomy, while at the same time serve our legacy of relationship? How can we be sure that the freedom we seek is consonant with the love in our lives? Can we learn to care for others and ourselves without sacrificing ourselves? Can we reduce our suffering without destroying that which is closest to our hearts? What does it mean to live from power?

Most of what I now know about women's experiences with abortion I learned from the women for whom I was a counselor. Some of these women were in groups; most were individual clients. Women who have come to me for psychotherapy have shown me the depth of perspective that can be obtained by exploring private fears and vulnerabilities over time. All of them displayed uncommon moral courage by opening their hearts and minds to self-examination.

The Women's Liberation Movement has sustained my hope for a better world. I salute those feminists who have stuck with it, stayed on track, forged

new paths, and broken new ground. When I began counseling in abortion clinics there were no safehouses, no rape crisis centers, nowhere for battered or assaulted women to go for shelter or care. Belief was widespread that if a woman was hurt by a man “she had it coming,” she must have “done something” to provoke the assault. Worse, if she was married, her husband’s violent behavior was excused as natural, even normal. After all, she was his. Jokes about “wife beating” were common. If a woman became pregnant “out of wedlock,” her status in the eyes of society automatically dropped. Married women were expected to have all babies they were impregnated with. Single women were expected to be chaste. Heterosexuality was assumed. No one spoke of any other way to be. For millions of women around the world, it is still this way.

The widespread use of birth control methods had not permeated society yet. Anything related to sex and sexuality was hush-hush, taboo, off limits, not to be talked about openly, and in some places illegal. “Living in sin” was a popular phrase to describe an unmarried woman and man who lived together. More likely than not, an unmarried couple would have to fake marriage in order to rent an apartment or stay in a hotel together. “Shotgun” marriages were commonplace.

No universities had women’s studies departments and many of the most prestigious schools did not admit women at all. Organized sports programs for women were rare and never required. There were no sexual harassment laws. Women earned half as much as men for the same work. (This has improved only a little.) The word sexism was just being born in popular language. Mankind described humans of both sexes. Male pronouns were used to make universal statements and included female people, or so it was claimed.

Today, there has been some movement towards meaningful change in the quality of women’s lives. Women have more legal protection on the job and more choices in employment. Male supremacy is no longer assumed to be the natural way in all circumstances. In many quarters, sex is more openly discussed and both women and men feel freer to admit their vulnerabilities and needs. The use of birth control is widely recognized as a good idea for sexually active people, married or not. AIDS has brought a new understanding of the need to be vigilant and self-protective. Legal abortion has made it clear that women are determined to control reproduction and the direction of our lives.

But these and other changes, while encouraging and good, are just the beginning, and they are precarious and uneven. There are too many people, women

as well as men, who are still afraid of full equality for women. Narrow religious concepts still have great influence over the minds and hearts of people. The feminist movement and the magnitude of the changes it advocates regarding self-definition and family roles continue to be regarded with suspicion. Most of all, the fabric of society is still dominated by patterns of exploitation, both economic and cultural, that limit the ability of most people to be secure that their basic needs will be met.

Most people in the United States depend upon the whims of large corporations for jobs that often don’t pay enough to live comfortably and may suddenly disappear if their company finds a cheaper source of labor in another town or country. Adequate housing and health care are increasingly less easy to come by for a growing number of people. Our society views its citizens as consumers rather than as citizens and creative beings. We are encouraged to sell ourselves to get jobs, almost as if we were products rather than people, just to make enough money to survive.

The sea of exploitation in which we all swim is bolstered by fear—that we won’t “make it,” that we are powerless to take charge of our lives, that we are “not good enough.” This is especially true for women, because centuries of subordination have installed in us an ingrained, shared inferiority complex. Freely chosen abortion challenges this because it asks each woman who considers it to step into her personal power and take charge of her life. It asks us as a society to recognize that the act of saying no to unwelcome intrusions is courageous and good.

By revealing the teachings of abortion, I hope to give vision to what needs to be done to assure a better life for all people.

The spiritual perspective I put forward here is one I’ve gained by spending a great deal of time in the wilderness of the Colorado mountains. Befriending and opening to more-than-human Nature has been my way to heal my own imbalances and understand the interconnectedness of All Life. My spiritual perspective begins and ends with Spirit in Nature.

A few years ago I went on a personal, contemplative retreat to meditate on the writing of this book. The setting was an abbey on a portion of mountainous land in northern Colorado.

On my drive to the abbey from Boulder, a large bird of prey appears in the sky overhead and flies ahead of my car for a few miles. On the third day of my retreat, I am swept up by a compelling urge to climb as high as possible. The

energy pushes me intuitively to go higher, to place myself above everything else, to get to the highest point on the land and then to look down and out to see all that I could see.

Climbing steadily up the mountainside, I pray for perspective, for deeper vision, for a point of view that takes in the whole picture and sees from a higher place. I want to write the book from that perspective, in a way that makes sense to people. The edge of the steep rock hillside overlooks a small canyon that drops hundreds of feet into a roaring creek below, water that had cut through the canyon for eons. Here was Earth, showing itself to me in slow geologic time, history in layers of rock. A higher, deeper perspective on abortion is indeed possible, according to the guidance I am receiving from the land. The many layers of the issue would be revealed if I find the right vantage point and learn to see with the eyes of an eagle.

Nature shows us in no uncertain terms that Life is a never-ending flow of experiences. Some of these are pleasant and easy, like a sunny summer day, and some are turbulent and frightening, like a sudden avalanche on a seemingly serene mountain. Some are significant while others are not. All are valid and legitimate. Abortion shows us the underbelly of Nature, like the decomposing rot of a fallen tree covering rich, dark soil. It is a compelling experience that directs us to be in alignment with our true nature and the cycles of our lives. Abortion is inherently moral when we see it in the context of our responsibility to Life.

As history moves and Life evolves we are pressed to expand our awareness. Facing issues of life, death, and rebirth, intrinsic to the abortion experience, mandates us to adopt an attitude towards Life that recognizes death and change as legitimate and even good. This perspective is one that takes life and death seriously. It maintains a respectful and vigilant attitude towards the flow of life energies. It balances freedom and responsibility in our life choices.

Inside personal pain is power. Inside the pain of abortion is knowledge about death and rebirth, about change, about relationships, about Life. When we put our knowledge and power together, we grow in ways that are true to our essential nature.

Take a moment. Close your eyes and see the whole Earth with your inner eye. Ask yourself for a higher perspective; one that is not bogged down in narrow concerns, but that shows you the All of Life and the Soul of Humanity. Ask yourself to be open-minded, to be willing to look at human events with curiosity and compassion. Try to look at abortion that way.

## The Spirit of Abortion

“What does it mean to accept spiritual responsibility in our lives? How can we be still enough or clear enough or compassionate enough to let the deep truth emerge?” – Sherry Ruth Anderson & Patricia Hopkins

Tali sat on the other side of the waiting room in the bright daylight of a nearby window. I walked towards her and smiled. “Hi, I’m Linda,” I said. “I’m going to be your counselor today. Let’s go upstairs.” She rose and followed me up the comfortably carpeted stairs of the old house our staff had converted into a women’s clinic. We entered one of the cozy counseling rooms, the size of a walk-in closet, and settled into the simple, tan, upholstered armchairs, facing about three feet across from each other. A diminutive end table to the side of our chairs completed the furnishings. On it was a plastic model of the female reproductive system and the paraphernalia of surgical and contraceptive props and educational handouts that would help me explain reproductive anatomy, pregnancy, birth control, and abortion.

The initial form she filled out when she arrived for her appointment asked her how she felt about having an abortion. This is what she wrote:

For me, abortion is like pinching the leaves off the mother plant to let it grow.

Her words took my breath away. They resonate still. Her spirit-filled, poetic insight captures the essence of abortion, its innate creativity, and its underlying life-enriching dimension. It reveals hidden aspects of the experience of abortion. It offers a perspective that digs below surface conflicts to display a deeper truth, for it allows us to see how the act of abortion is part of the Web of Life, the connectedness that, like a rhizome, binds us all.

Pinching leaves, the intentional killing of some of the new growth of a plant, is an act that nurtures and strengthens the plant as a whole. The buds that are pinched and the timing of the act of pinching contribute significantly to the di-

rection of growth and to the final shape of the parent plant. Tali's simple metaphor suggests that the way to understand and heal conflicts about abortion is to look to the natural world, and understand that our lives are part of an intricate pattern of interdependent relationships that make up all of Life.

Tali's decision to have an abortion was made mindfully. She was clear that it was in her own best interest. She believed that the bud of her pregnancy should not progress any further, so she ended the pregnancy. Tali believed her body was like the bodies of other animals and plants in Nature. Few of us think of ourselves that way. Most women are pained about having an abortion. They are caught up in a storm of emotions and conflicts and are scared and unhappy. Tali showed me that another way is possible. She inspired me to develop a holistic understanding of abortion, and to perceive the pain of abortion in light of what it can teach us.

### **A Holistic Perspective**

Tali saw her pregnancy and herself as parts of social and spiritual ecosystems—living entities operating within living entities, like trees in a forest. This is a truly novel way to grasp the complexity of the interdependent environment in which we make choices about pregnancy. Tali's goal was to preserve the equilibrium of her personal ecosystem—the body-soul-mind-spirit of her being—in order to have a say in defining the terms of her relationships and the direction of her life.

A tree that drops its seed too close to itself will not see that seed flower. The ground will not support it. The forest will nurture the offspring of one of its trees only when the placement of a seedling serves the forest as a whole. It's hard to think of the death of a seedling in a forest as a death at all. It seems more like a cooperative surrender to the greater whole.

Of course, human consciousness is different from plant consciousness. We are aware—of the world around us, our history, and ourselves. We experience our relationships in uniquely human ways. We treasure them. We have ambivalence and grief about them. We have free will, reason, and choice. We have trouble letting go. More than anything, we want to make the right choices in our lives.

Abortion is a collection of some of the most difficult issues related to human growth and development, both individual and societal. One of these is the struggle of women for freedom and autonomy in the context of the patriarchal

paradigm—that ocean of living history in which we all swim—where men and the male way is dominant and women and the female way is subordinate. The avenues open to women have been littered with limitations imposed on us by laws and customs that authorize our inferiority. One of the most fundamental of these is the expectation that having children is more important for us than anything else, and that we will subordinate ourselves to make that happen.

The intensely personal spiritual and psychological task of self-development is also an historical task, as personal life always takes place in the context of human history and the life of the planet. Nothing that happens to us personally happens in a vacuum. It is always surrounded and contained by larger social and spiritual realities.

Permission to have choices in pregnancy, especially the choice of abortion, suggests that we have to change the way we are in our most intimate relationships. We have to become proactive, assertive, clear about our own needs, and willing to take the lead in relation to how things go.

This is not easy and can be scary. Yes, we want to flower as individuals, but not without our most cherished relationships! Yet, some relationships stand in the way of our best chance to grow into ourselves, and we find ourselves pinching the leaves off our mother plant selves. Underneath the many valid reasons for having an abortion—reasons prompted by necessity and life circumstances—is the pulsing of a new way of being in our lives, a way based on self-respect, autonomy, safety, and equality.

The part of us that has agreed, even tacitly, to be subordinate has to die in order to make this possible. But this self-sabotaging part does not die easily. It tries to convince us that we need to be dependent, that we do not and should not have the power to freely create, and that we should sacrifice ourselves to limited ways of living. The main way women have done this is by having children we don't want to have. That we typically learn to love these children in spite of ourselves makes this no less true.

A holistic perspective on abortion recognizes that abortion is a gateway for women and men to learn to make conscious, life-enhancing choices, and to gain awareness about the nature of Life. Abortion as a considered choice asks that we adopt a strong commitment to our own freedom and throw off history's beast of burden yoke. This is true whether the decision is to have an abortion or to go ahead with a pregnancy and have a child. The clash of opposing expectations, feelings, and obligations in the consideration of abortion pushes people



to gather their strength and claim their personal power, like a giant wave in a rising tide.

### **Wholeness**

Wholeness is a natural state of balance that encompasses constantly shifting patterns of living and perceiving. It is achieved by becoming conscious about all aspects of self. The road to psychological wholeness is paved with difficult experiences that challenge our ability to be active in our own interest, as well as our ability to understand how our lives connect to the lives of others. Wholeness includes all aspects of our lives: physical, psychological, mental, and spiritual, “good” and “bad.” It embraces all levels of experience—personal, collective, and universal.

Just as trees follow their natural pathways toward growth, so, too, do human beings. As we live our lives, events occur that give us opportunities to gain the awareness we need to become whole. When a life experience comes along like a big wind and sweeps us into its embrace, we are forced to surrender to its power and allow it to toss us around until we land on our feet. When the experience comes from the shadow side of life, it provokes fear and a sense of a descent into darkness. Abortion is often this kind of experience.

The shadow is that which is not in the light. It is part of Nature, like night and things associated with night, or being underground. Our collective fear of the dark has made what dwells there problematic for us. Instead of welcoming the mystery of the night, we try to light it away. For example, our cities are now emitting so much artificial light at night that many of us are suffering from sleep disorders caused by “light pollution.” Our lives are out of balance because we try to drive away the darkness.

The psychological shadow is full of unconsciously disowned parts of ourselves that have been pushed away in order to meet the expectations of our families, churches, and schools. It contains a compost of possibilities for the growth of wholeness. For example, if I have squirreled away my ability to say no when a friend or family member asks me to do what they want, the perception of myself as powerless, and the gnawing feeling of being controlled by someone or something else will haunt my daily life. If I become pregnant at a rough time of my life and turn towards considering abortion, I will be forced to face my inability to assert my own needs and opinions. My autonomous self will be pressed to step out of the shadow.

The natural quest for wholeness invites experiences that will rectify imbalances and give us knowledge and comfort about the power of aspects of our lives that have been pushed out of our awareness. Sex and death, two of the most essential aspects of abortion, reside in the shadow of modern life as well as in our personal psychic shadows. Life events that have their source in sex and death are profoundly transformational.

### **Right Relationship**

The inner experience of conflict around a pregnancy often revolves around perceptions of relationship. Women generally tend to be focused on relationships. A pregnancy that leads to abortion often leads us into a close examination of how we are living our relationships, both personally and in the larger scheme of things. A common example of this is the tendency among women to “shrink to fit,” i.e. make ourselves smaller and less significant in relation to men. Facing her options in pregnancy can make a woman question this behavior.

The urge to live in a balanced way is natural for all individual life forms and for the life of the Earth as a whole. Earth organizes Life around right relationship and the interrelationship of all beings and things. The balanced state of being in Life is a state of right relationship and is necessary for wholeness.

The urge to be in right relationship usually governs a woman’s process of choosing abortion, even if she is not consciously aware of it at the time. She will feel sure that having a baby at an inopportune time in her life is wrong. She will express concern for the welfare of her potential child if she is not able to relate to it in a nurturing way. Self-examination in terms of right relationship can change the course of a person’s life.

Right relationship is a cultural concept that can be found in the beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples around the world. It is helpful to remember that the heritage of all peoples is originally indigenous. Every human on the planet is descended from other humans whose ancestors were native to a landed place. Even now there is no avoiding the fact that each of us is indigenous to planet Earth in spite of the fact that we might feel disconnected from the land on which our lives depend.

The idea of right relationship leads naturally towards a morality that is centered in individual and collective existence, rather than individual rights. This morality is about the existence of individuals in right relationship with other individuals and with the environment. The whole and parts of the whole are

seen together. They are never separated. It emphasizes the importance of context in assessing individual behavior and need. The movement towards sustainable communities incorporates this kind of morality. So does public health policy that puts the needs of people in a compassionate framework.

A morality of right relationship allows forms of life to come into being and pass away without judgment and without valuing one form over another. It requires strong powers of observation and a willingness to be objective in matters that are intimately subjective. It also requires a sense of compassionate responsibility to oneself and one's relationships. To be in Life this way one is asked to take an active part in one's destiny and to develop the skills of responsible choice.

### **Responsible Choice**

Responsible choice emerges when we recognize the direction of our development and move in ways that are consonant and harmonious with the realities in which we live. When we exercise responsible choice in pregnancy we determine whether to bring life through our bodies. This plays itself out as one woman chooses to have a baby and another woman chooses to have an abortion. Each woman's perception of her life circumstances is her own. Our sense of relationship to a pregnancy is part of our sense of relationship to all the elements of our environment.

### **Conscious Creation**

When pregnancy choice-making is a conscious process, a woman is likely to come to grips with emotionally painful aspects of her life. If it is unconscious, as is often the case, a woman may feel unsafe, threatened, and overwhelmed.

Individual identity and development—the process of wholeness—is completely dependent on interactions with others and with historical forces that contribute to what is possible and likely at a certain point in time.

Identity is also formed by awareness of the spiritual reality of timelessness and how that connects us to all that has gone before, all that is, and all that ever will be. When we become consciously involved in our own development, we are faced with making life-determining choices.

This is easier said than done. Many of us find it so difficult to face ourselves that we engage in self-destructive behavior that prevents us from becoming self-aware. Avoidance of the call to consciousness may take the form of alcohol

and drug abuse, or obsession with another person or with work. But Life will continue to throw complicated experiences our way that if deeply examined, can provide us with knowledge that holds keys to our creative selves.

Abortion is this kind of experience for many people.

In the chapters that follow, I show how a crisis pregnancy that ends in abortion can catapult a person into learning to make conscious, life-serving, self-enhancing choices. Within the context of a morality of right relationship, responsible choice strengthens a sense of wholeness.

As we play out our life course in the context of different events which link us to one another, and which are themselves linked, we gain respect for our integrity. This newfound self-respect is the key to being able to develop the ability to consciously create.

The purpose of pregnancy is creation. Its meaningfulness is unquestioned in our culture, for without it no one would exist. However, because women and all things female have been devalued in the last five thousand or so years, pregnancy as a positive expression of female power has been distorted. Instead of reverence and respect for women, in whose bodies pregnancy takes place, society has relegated women to subordinate positions where duty and service to men have taken precedence.

This is changing. Controversy and conflict about abortion in the body politic and in the lives of women is indicative of the natural historical push to rectify centuries old inequalities and omissions in the fabric of human life. Human evolution is moving towards organizing human life around the concept of conscious creation.

This has never happened before.

Up to now, human societies have based their organization on economic necessity. Societies struggle with economic realities that contain brutal polarizations of wealth and poverty. The majority of the world's people struggle just to stay alive, while a minority enjoys the fruits of capitalist production and accumulation.

As slow and heavily muddled as it is, the world economy is lifting out of patterns of oppression and exploitation, and moving in the direction of providing peace and plenty for all people. The presence of legal abortion in this process is freeing up the energy of the world's women to play a more active role in the change.

As world economic development reaches a point of abundance, it will be-

come possible to shift the focus to live in terms of creativity and relationships. Paving the way for this change is the tension of world crises around issues relevant to this monumental shift of life on Earth.

One of these issues is human reproduction, particularly abortion. Abortion is a source of conflict in most countries and in most major religions, as well as in the hearts and minds of individual women and men. The resolution of this conflict is key to becoming consciously creative, because abortion brings to light the need to be conscious about sexuality, the life-giving energy of creation. Sexuality is expressed through pregnancy as well as through choices about relationships and the direction of our lives. It powers the human family.

Physical creation—sex and pregnancy—has been considered throughout history to be “natural.” Being natural—close to Nature—has been associated with women. It has also been associated with being unconscious. The process of resolving a crisis pregnancy challenges the idea that being natural means being unconscious. Making mindless decisions about pregnancy is becoming a thing of the past.

When we consider abortion, we bring conscious awareness to the natural physical process of creating life. A pregnancy is an organic part of a woman’s body. When it becomes part of a conscious process, who she is as an integral person becomes as central as the physical changes in her body. The focus shifts towards a holistic body-mind-soul-spirit perspective, rather than an exclusively physical one. As we confront the possibility of death in pregnancy, we face possible changes in ourselves. These changes have the potential to reorder our entire sense of self. We transform, from passive vessel containing pregnancy to active creators of our own lives.

However, due to the nature of our cultural institutions, a woman might not feel comfortable with being an active creator of her own life. She may not be comfortable with her body, her sexuality, or herself, and may resist the expansion of awareness and creative power that can come from the abortion experience. She may realize that something important is happening for her, but she may not realize how profound it is. If this is the case, and she tries to return to her previous way of living, she is likely to continue to feel disturbed and unresolved about having had an abortion.

Conscious creation is birthing itself in the human community. The emergence of intentional ways of being is a necessary part of the evolution of life on Earth. What more powerful metaphor could there be for this than the process

of making choices about pregnancy? The presence of abortion as a social and personal issue is provoking people to examine themselves and their societies. It raises fundamental issues of life and death, freedom and justice, equality and selfhood, sex and sexuality, family, and the nature of creativity.

If the act of abortion, the pinching of the leaves, is perceived only as a wounding, we blind ourselves to understanding the full nature of the experience. The process deserves more consideration than that and so do we. Both personal and global healing requires a consciousness that takes all aspects of life into consideration as the world reorganizes itself. To help move this along we must learn the larger meaning of abortion both as a social issue and as a personal experience. Then we as a global community can move beyond abortion to the conscious, creative living of our lives.

### **My Mother, Myself**

My mother was eighteen when she had an abortion. That was in 1930. She told me about it in 1960 when I was sixteen. It had been illegal. She almost bled to death.

I watched her eyes grow wide and fill with tears as she told her story. She breathed deliberately, her chest rising and falling with a heaviness that was incomprehensible to me. There didn’t seem to be enough air in the room in which we sat. She described her wrenchingly lonely state of isolation, her fear that she would bleed to death, and how she had been ambushed by strong feelings of loss that she had not known were possible. She remembered an older woman friend of hers who had found her lying on the kitchen floor after the abortion. The woman took my mother to the hospital and saved her life.

What impressed me about my mother’s story was her clear, ever-present emotion, as though her abortion had happened yesterday rather than thirty years before. Her emotional honesty and willingness to be open was a great lesson for me about what it is to be human. It was my first glimpse of woman’s reproductive pain, and it laid the basis for my understanding of how to heal that pain.

Three years after hearing my mother’s story, I became pregnant and had an abortion. I was nineteen and attending college in the early 1960s in New York City. Though I used a method of birth control most of the time, I wasn’t using any at the time I became pregnant. To this day, I don’t know why I took that chance.

Almost right away I had a strong sense that I was pregnant. When I missed my period a low level of panic set in. It wasn't legal to obtain an abortion at that time, and it wasn't okay to speak freely about it either. The word abortion was taboo.

Neither my boyfriend nor I had any idea what to do. We consulted an older friend who suggested I get a pregnancy test. I remember going to the Margaret Sanger Clinic in New York to get the test. Mostly what I remember is the agony of sitting by the phone in someone's apartment while I waited for the result. It was a nightmare.

When the call came and the voice on the other end said the test was positive, I felt confused. Positive. That means it's the way you want it to be, right? But no, positive meant pregnant, and that's not what I wanted. My skin felt clammy. My head was spinning. Everything felt like it was going much too fast. I was terribly frightened.

For a split second I thought about having the baby. As I thought about it I became more and more clear that having a baby at that time was the last thing in the world I wanted. Actually I wasn't thinking in the usual sense. I was bodythinking—behaving as a whole organism. Bodythinking is a natural, non-judgmental merge of body and mind. Thoughts and behavior fuse into an intuitive stream of action on our own or another's behalf. It is the way we often respond to compelling, unexpected life events.

Over the next several weeks I found myself seeking a way to end the pregnancy. I knew in the deepest place in my heart that having a baby would be the wrong thing for me to do. Seeking an end to that pregnancy was the most natural thing in the world for me. It was something my body and mind, acting as one, told me to do.

My friend's sister gave me the name of a woman to go and talk to about an abortion. It was eerie, the strangeness and peculiar terror of sneaking around. The woman gave me two options. She said that she could try to "do something" to me, or that I could go to the outpatient clinic of a large hospital and request that they insert an intra-uterine device, without telling them that I was pregnant, of course. She said having an IUD inside my uterus would induce an abortion. I chose the hospital route.

At the hospital I had to tell them I was married and that I had children to get the IUD. I wore a fake wedding ring. I made up a different menstrual history. I waited in a crowded waiting room for what seemed like an eternity. Finally my

name was called, not my real name, of course.

The doctor examined me and asked several times, "Are you sure you're not pregnant?"

I tried to play it cool. "Of course not, there's no way I could be pregnant," I stammered, hoping he wouldn't see through my distress and frightened words. I was so scared—terrified that he wouldn't give me the IUD. To this day I don't know if he believed my lie about not being pregnant or if he sensed my desperation and was trying to help me.

Several hours after the insertion of the IUD I began to have uterine cramps, which became progressively more severe. It took five days for my body to complete the abortion process. Five days of agony. Five days of fighting off a fever and an infection. Finally it was over. My body began to heal. I felt numb—and relieved.

My abortion took place in an atmosphere of fear and desperation. I didn't know how to help myself feel strong and confident. I had little personal support and no societal support. Determined to end the pregnancy, I did what I needed to do.

I know how lucky I was to have survived that ordeal, how lucky I was not to have suffered a bad infection from that IUD, how lucky I was that I did not die. I know other women were not so lucky.

Through my personal experience of abortion and knowledge of my mother's experience, I have a visceral understanding of the experiences of other women. I can feel what they are going through. Not that their experience is exactly the same as mine, but it is similar enough to bond me to them.

I don't want what happened to my mother or me to happen to one other woman. I don't want either of my daughters or granddaughters to experience the fear and desperation I went through, nor do I want them to be subjected to physical and psychological indignities and dangers, or to be forced to bear children they don't want.

Women need the care and respect of the society in which they live. We need to be empowered and protected by society's laws—for childbirth, and for the reality of undesired pregnancy. This reality includes the sometimes painful, often difficult process of deciding whether to continue a pregnancy.

Throughout history, women have borne the responsibility for bearing and raising children. This has included responsibility for deciding that not all pregnancies should be brought to term. It is unlikely that this will change any time

soon, unless and until women's needs are recognized and met by society. The truth is that we face many decisions about life alone.

### **Moral Responsibility**

To bring life through the body or to turn it back is an awesome power of female human beings. It does not follow that because it is awesome it is to be feared. That women have internalized the patriarchy's fear of the power of physical processes, particularly pregnancy, is a sad commentary on female oppression.

The continuum of creative life includes death on all levels—intellectual as well as emotional, spiritual as well as physical. It is helpful, and perhaps essential, to adopt a positive attitude towards experiences that are transformational. Abortion is such an experience. Resistance to what is happening, or to what one is afraid will happen, deprives a person of the opportunity to be a willing partner in the transformation.

This is not by any means easy. Most people resist being in the center of their experience, fearing judgment and punishment. Often we don't trust our ability to discern and discriminate and make choices. We are unaccustomed to treating "bad" experiences as legitimate and important, as well as possibly meaningful to who we are and who we are becoming.

The nature of a woman's existence changes when she is pregnant. Shifts in her perception of herself and those around her may occur, which affect her ability or desire to function in her daily life in the same ways she functioned before becoming pregnant. She may not see things the same way she did. She may become aware of new ways to see and understand what is going on in her life and what she believes about that.

The personal context of a crisis pregnancy occurs within the larger social context of a woman's life and society. It is unrealistic and a distortion to separate the morality of abortion from other moral and ethical issues.

Deciding to bring through or turn back a pregnancy is a female moral responsibility. We are charged with negotiating the ethics of relationship at the most primal level. A pregnant woman must face this because she is pregnant. To learn to exercise her responsibility a woman needs personal and societal support and respect for her authority to make procreative decisions. Scarcity of social support is the most significant contributor to psychological distress and confusion around abortion, especially in relation to morality and spirituality.

Pregnancy crisis confronts a woman with her personal psychology, with all

the constructs that influence the female personality in patriarchy. The belief that women shouldn't make decisions and shouldn't be in charge reinforces the difficulty we have making decisions.

Often our sense of ourselves as powerful beings is at odds with our self-image. We might try to reject it. As we learn to accept the legitimacy of our power we begin to attach a positive value to caring for ourselves as well as caring for those around us.

We learn that it is all right to make life decisions that favor our own growth. We grow to accept the idea that it is moral and ethical for us to benefit from having an abortion or a baby. We move from self-sacrifice to the conscious assertion of our personal power.

Conscious living means conscious choice making. Conscious choice making in pregnancy goes beyond biological realities. It encompasses the vastness of Life. An essential task for women is to learn to care about ourselves as individuals, drop the bias we hold against ourselves, a bias we have internalized from a culture that is fundamentally anti-woman.

A society and culture that is anti-woman is anti-human. Male dominance in the reproductive life of our species distorts and limits the possibility for living life in peace, guided by love of life and people. It separates people instead of bringing them together. It denies men as well as women the truth of their identities as human beings. It is time to turn this around.