

Past, Present and Future: Tense

I'm a Jane. Another Jane said – when she heard me use the past tense a few years ago – “No. Once a Jane, always a Jane; it's not something that passes. We are Janes.” Immediately, I knew she was right. I've been dealing with abortion, one way or another, since October of 1970, when I went to a meeting in a small neighborhood church and joined the Abortion Counseling Service of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (most often called JANE – though mostly called “the Service” by Janes) .

One of the ways I deal with abortion now is explain to folks much younger than I am that people in the USA used to think, feel and talk about abortion – and contraception and motherhood, for that matter – quite differently from the way they do now. That difference is the great achievement of the anti-abortion movement in the USA.

That difference is perhaps most often cited in relation to elections, contests in which people running for office must include their “position” on abortion access as part of their credentials. A far more important difference, though, is in the new default decision: Now, because of the cultural changes orchestrated through anti-abortion politics, women and girls are likely to think that if they become pregnant by accident, they should give birth (unless the pregnancy is a result of rape – including incest, or is likely to kill them). Now, being pregnant *always* has to mean having a baby, even if that's not a good idea for the pregnant woman - or for the child she believes she must have. For many pregnant women and girls, deciding not to have a baby means they are bad, shameful and selfish – even, sometimes, that they are murderers.

Before this time, women with unintended pregnancies generally said, I don't want to have a baby – or, I don't want to have a baby now – or, I just can't have this baby. Forty years ago, women and girls didn't think they needed a dire excuse to abort. What they had to do was make judgements, make decisions based on whatever their lives showed them – what they wanted and planned and hoped for, what the life of that child might be, unplanned and unchosen. I do all this explaining most often in classrooms or libraries or bookstores or cafés or living rooms. Sometimes people want to know what we did, pre-Roe. Sometimes they want to talk about what to do now, this very minute, when Roe has not yet been overturned but has been eviscerated.

We talk about how it's always been necessary to resist bad laws – and about what resistance might mean. Many don't know about the extensive damage already done to abortion and contraception access in the USA. They may know about

clinic defense work – or even do it, and may work or volunteer for Planned Parenthood or NARAL. They may be medical students, nursing students, midwifery students and herbalists. Many are learning about and working for Fund Abortion Now! – the National Network of Abortion Funds. They may want to talk about ways to raise money – and consciousness.

I try to point out that even people who consider themselves “pro-choice” have absorbed the nearly-omnipresent concepts and language created by the anti-abortion movement. The most successful language achievement of the anti-abortion movement surely is their creation of the term “pro-life” – which must always be challenged, civilly, when used ignorantly or deliberately by others; it should never be used to describe the anti-abortion movement.

Words – as a medium, a connection and a method – are enormously important to me. I’ve written stories, essays, poems and books about mothering, and sometimes I perform that work as part of the “explaining” I’m talking about here. Sometimes I show the useful documentary video about the Service (made by Nell Lundy and Kate Kirtz), and point out three relevant historical moments: when the Service was working (1968-73), when the doc was made (1993-95), and the present (now the second decade of the 21st century). I direct folks to the [JANE](#) page on this website, so they can click links to resources.

My explaining almost always includes me saying I want people who support abortion access to talk and write more about emotions, female sexuality, ethics, morality, motherhood, religion – even about killing – in relation to abortion. Mostly we’ve left all that to the other side, and they’ve gained power with it because abortion’s not only or even mostly about medicine and law, and everybody knows that. So when we refuse to, or are unable to – or have decided it’s politically inadvisable to – deal with emotions, female sexuality, ethics, morality, motherhood, religion, and killing in relation to abortion, the anti-abortion movement is happy to portray us as the selfish bitches popular media so often like to suggest women (especially feminists) are.

I argue for thinking and talking among ourselves in small groups (they were good, those little 20th century groups of women struggling toward truth and honor – flawed as everything is, but in the main, good). I urge small groups to talk about what abortion *is* – its thousands of years of history, its many ways and methods, how it actually works, and about what abortion *means* in the life of a particular girl or woman as well as the life of the community and nation. Though I do want us to talk about how deciding to abort entails conscious acceptance of responsibility for the decision, I don’t particularly want us to talk about “choice,” a term often used to sell insurance, cars, and cell phone service.

We need to remind ourselves: there's still no contraceptive that's both 100% effective + 100% healthy, so abortion-as-backup is a necessity. We need to actively question the assumption that birth is, in virtually all circumstances, the best thing a woman can give to an embryo, a fetus. We have to consider the folly of oppositional arguments in which, when antis talk about "the life of the baby," abortion access advocates talk about "the life of the woman" – thereby creating a dreadful contest which is neither accurate nor useful as a description of unintended pregnancy.

We need to discuss our positions and opinions with colleagues and friends to learn how to articulate our ideas and define our actions. No aspect of this complex issue can be set aside when we're training volunteers, staff and clinicians, doing community organizing and consciousness raising, and teaching – talking and working with women and girls who're struggling to take responsibility for their own lives. We need a coming together of those for whom access to abortion and contraception in the USA still appears to be unthreatened and those whose lives have already taught them that jeopardy and vulnerability are chronic. And when we're called upon to behave strategically or tactically in public, we need to have prepared ourselves by doing the internal, small group work that helps us speak with assurance, intelligence and compassion.

One of the many useful things about being a Jane is that my "explaining" can include this: I already know women can do what has to be done. Even when we hardly know each other, even if we don't especially like each other, even when we have to learn everything new from the ground up – and in secret, women can do what has to be done.

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