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# Going Beyond the Politics of Abortion

By: Stephen Henderson

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**Thirty years after "Roe v. Wade", some say the focus should be on the women who confront the issue.**

The words come to her slowly. And even now, nearly three decades later, they don't come painlessly.

When Leslie Graves talks about the abortion she had in the late 1970's, the language of complex emotions is the only one that allows her to describe her experience: Isolation. Trauma. Abandonment. Self-healing.

They aren't the words typically associated with the rancorous national debate over abortion. But for Graves, they're the only words that make sense.

Pro-choice? Pro-Life? She has heard those phrases as often as anyone else, and understands what power they have in a society still deeply divided over women's reproductive rights.

"But those are political terms", said Graves, a Madison homemaker. "And politics doesn't offer the right vocabulary to talk about what I've been through. The political discussion doesn't really offer room for people who have actually had abortions to talk about how they feel, or to get help sorting out those feelings. It never has."

Wednesday, *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, turns 30. For all the maturity that age implies, some health professionals, women who have had abortions, and even constitutional law experts say the argument over abortion remains callow, even primordial in nature. They say it's a conversation whose participants too often worship extremes to the exclusion of a vast and untapped middle ground.

The debate's most visceral tones will blare loudly in Washington and at marches and rallies around the country Wednesday. Planned Parenthood in Westchester, NY is marshalling supporters to oppose the Bush administration's

“Taliban-tinged fight against self-determination for women”. The Life League, by contrast, plans to unveil a “Deadly Dozen” list of U.S. senators who the group thinks are hypocrites because they are Roman Catholics who support abortion rights.

“It has all been a narrowly defined discussion about one side versus another”, said Chris Whitman, a law professor at the University of Michigan. “Both sides want it all, and the goal has not been to acknowledge the legitimacy of any part of the other side’s position”.

The political debate’s intensity and inflexibility have made it nearly impossible to move beyond its simplicity to discuss abortion as a physical and mental health issue.

“The women themselves aren’t really the focus at all”, said Lovisa Stannow, former executive director of the Pacific Women’s Health Institute in Los Angeles. “There are so many political, religious and personal agendas tied up in it that I think the public debate has turned into a stack of sound bites. But people don’t feel in sound bites”.

Stannow is traveling the country to collect the views of ordinary Americans, those who support abortion rights and those who don’t. What she is finding, she said, is an extraordinary ability by most people to pick up on the nuances involved in the debate.

“We’re finding people who are pro-choice, but abhor the idea of abortion, and consider it murder, and we’re finding people who profess to be staunchly pro-life, but then say they aren’t sure their views should be imposed on others”, Stannow said. “I think it shows the complexity behind this issue, but that gets lost in the black-and-white discussion.

“I can imagine how hard it would be for someone who had complex feelings about their own abortion to understand the public debate”.

It certainly was for Graves. Sitting in her living room, she told stories with seven other women who had abortions, and two themes dominated: intense emotional reactions and a disconnect with the national tug-of-war.

In 1977, Graves was 21, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin. When she got pregnant, she and her boyfriend thought little of the choice before them: She was from a family that supported abortion rights, had helped women obtain illegal abortions in the 1960’s, and had fought to change the law. She scheduled her abortion moments after the doctor told her she was pregnant.

When it was over, she and her boyfriend even celebrated over dinner.

"I remember feeling liberated", she said.

But it didn't last. Soon she found herself "lost, and without purpose".

She dropped out of school, married the boyfriend, and had a daughter with him. But the marriage didn't work out, and the depression endured.

"I couldn't imagine what was wrong, though", Graves said. "I mean, I was taught that abortion wasn't that big of a deal, so it couldn't have been that. But at the same time, I was definitely having feelings of loss, and some guilt".

She remarried and enlarged her family. One day on a field trip to Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, she came across an exhibit about the development of the human heart. It included depictions of prenatal development. When she encountered one of an 8-week-old fetus, she broke down.

"That's when it hit me", she said. "I was reacting to the decision I'd made".

Ultimately, long-term, solitary thought and introspection led her to attend a religious retreat that helped her sort out her feelings. But still, she struggles to find the right words to describe her emotions or to tell her story without tears.

For the record, she now thinks her decision was wrong, and she would never recommend that another woman have an abortion. In that sense, she considers herself antiabortion.

But she also thinks that making abortion illegal would not stop it from happening, so her interest is focused on helping other postabortive women. In that sense, you could call her a supporter of abortion rights.

But that misses the point.

"This was an intensely personal experience", she said, "and only women who have been up on that table with their legs in the stirrups can truly understand that".

The other women in Graves' living room had similar experiences. The circumstances that led to their abortions are diverse, but all confronted difficult emotions afterward.

One married woman who had an abortion during a potentially life-endangering pregnancy is having trouble conceiving again and is wondering whether she made the right decision.

Another had an abortion in college to hide a pregnancy – and the fact that she was sexually active – from her strict Catholic family. Twenty-three years later, she is still facing feelings of guilt and remorse.

Not all women experience these kinds of feelings after an abortion, but the women in Graves' living room show it happens in any number of different circumstances.

Stannow said things would not change until both sides recognized that abortion was not a political question, but a personal one.

"I think that very often, people who have had abortions talk about how profoundly life-changing that decision was", she said. "It was something that was not at all easy to make. That pain, and the magnitude of the decision, is something that is not often taken into account in the abortion debate".

At least one anniversary event might offer the chance to shift focus.

Typically, antiabortion and abortion-rights demonstrations at the Supreme Court building are scheduled about 2½ hours apart, to keep participants from one another's throats.

Wednesday's schedule is no different, but in the lull between the two, a group of women who have had abortions will gather to tell their stories.



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