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The Two Lists: A Former Pro-Choice Atheist Reflects on Sex, Abortion and Anger

Commentary by Jennifer Fulwiler



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January 28, 2010 ([InsideCatholic.com](http://www.insidecatholic.com)) - Of all the things I remember about the Texas March for Life in Austin last January, the memory that stands out the most is the look on the faces of the counter-protesters who followed us along Congress Avenue and down to the capitol that frosty morning. When I glanced over to see the source of the epithets that were being screamed at us, I met the eyes of one young woman wearing a black bandana over the bottom half of her face. She happened to look over and meet my gaze, and in her eyes I saw one thing: hatred.

I was caught off guard when my gut response to her rage-filled glare was one of sympathy. In fact, I realized as she turned away to continue yelling angry pro-choice slogans that I knew the source of the rage behind her eyes and had even felt it recently.

Until a couple of years ago, I was militantly pro-choice. When I heard people make anti-abortion statements, it filled me with a white-hot anger that I could barely contain. Behind my views was a buried but unspoken sense that there was something inherently unfair about being a woman, and abortion was a key to maintaining any semblance of a level playing field in the world.

My peers and I were taught not that sex creates babies, but that unprotected sex creates babies. We absorbed through cultural osmosis the idea that every normal person will have sex at some point in his or her life, and that the sexual act, by default, has no significance outside the relationship between the two people involved. In this worldview, when unexpected pregnancies came up, it was seen as a sort of betrayal by the woman's body. My friends and I lamented the awful position every woman was in: Unexpected pregnancies were like lightning strikes, and when one of these unpredictable events did occur, there were no good options for dealing with them. Abortion wasn't ideal -- even we acknowledged that it was a violating procedure that was hard on a woman's body -- but what choice did anyone have? To not have the option of terminating surprise pregnancies when they came up out of nowhere would mean being a slave to one's biology.

My staunch support of these views did not soften until a few years ago, when a religious conversion after a life of atheism led me to the Catholic Church. I began researching the ancient Judeo-Christian understanding of human sexuality, in which the sexual act is seen as being inextricably entwined with its potential for creating new human life. The more I considered this point of view, the more I questioned my long-held views. In fact, I started to see the catastrophic mistake our society had made when we started believing that the life-giving potential of the sexual act could be safely forgotten about as long as people use contraception. It would be like saying that guns could be used as toys as long as there are blanks in the chamber. Teaching people to use something with tremendous power nonchalantly, as a casual plaything, had set women up for disaster.

The gravity of this error became clear to me when I came across research that Time magazine published in 2007, citing data from the Guttmacher Institute that showed the most common reasons women have abortions. It immediately struck me that none of the factors on the list -- not feeling capable of parenting, not being able to afford a baby, not being in a relationship stable enough to raise a child -- were conditions that we encourage women to consider before engaging in sexual activity.

It was then that I could finally articulate the source of the anger I'd felt all these years. In every society, there are two critical lists: acceptable conditions for having a baby, and acceptable conditions for having sex. From time immemorial, the one thing that almost every society had in common is that their two lists matched up. It was only with the widespread acceptance of contraception in the middle of the 20th century, creating an upheaval in the public psyche in which sex and babies no longer went hand-in-hand, that the two lists began to diverge. And now, in 21st-century America, they look something like this:

Conditions under which it is acceptable to have sex:

- If you're in a stable relationship
- If you feel emotionally ready
- If you're free of sexually transmitted diseases
- If you have access to contraception

Conditions under which it is acceptable to have a baby:

- If you can afford it
- If you've finished your education
- If you feel emotionally ready to parent a child
- If your partner would make a good parent
- If you're ready for all the lifestyle changes that would be involved with parenthood

As long as those two lists do not match, we will live in a culture where abortion is common and where women are at war with their own bodies.

Considering the disparity between the two lists made me begin to see the level of damage that contraception and the mentality it produces have done to women as individuals and as a group. I thought of the several friends whom I'd helped procure abortions, how each was scared and caught off guard, overwhelmed with a feeling of "I never signed up for a pregnancy," angry at a faceless enemy. They had followed all of society's rules, yet still ended up in a gut-wrenching position. We hated the anti-abortion zealots because we thought they tried to take away women's freedom; what we didn't understand is that women's freedom had already been taken, when society bought the lie that sex is primarily about bonding and pleasure, and that its life-giving potential is tangential and optional.

In an article published by the Guttmacher Institute's Family Planning Perspectives, John A. Ross estimates that a woman using contraception with a 1 percent risk of failure has a 70 percent chance of experiencing an unwanted pregnancy over the course of 10 years. Guttmacher also reports that more than half of women seeking abortions were using a contraceptive method when they got pregnant. As soon as we as a society accepted contraception, a large-scale game of Russian roulette began, with women and their unexpected children as the players with the guns to their heads.

Austin's March for Life was this past Saturday; I wonder if the girl with the black bandana was there again this year. I wish I could offer to buy her a cup of coffee and tell her that I think she's right to sense that something deeply unfair is afoot in our society, and that nothing less than women's freedom is at stake.

(Note: This article reprinted with permission from www.insidecatholic.com. Jennifer Fulwiler is the author of ConversionDiary.com, where she writes about her experiences with Catholicism after a life of atheism.)

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