

A Woman's Right to Choose or Whose Life is it, Anyway?

January 22, 2003 will be the thirtieth anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade*. This upcoming observance will be a marked contrast from the day the ruling was initially announced. Former president Richard Nixon had been re-elected to a second term and his inauguration was scheduled for January 23rd. Chief Justice Warren Burger set Monday, the 22nd as the date for revealing the court's decision. Ironically, this announcement was relegated to a spot somewhere inside newspapers because former president Lyndon Baines Johnson died that same morning.

From the beginning, *Roe v. Wade* has been a lightning rod, dividing people across social, religious, political, economic and racial lines and levels. At its core are two fundamental issues: one defining "life" and the other, a woman's right to choose. And it is precisely this right to freedom of choice that is so maddeningly obscured by the heated discussion over abortion. The ongoing debate has been pared back to two opposing positions: one is either "pro-choice" or "pro-life" with no shades of grey in between.

A woman's right to choose, like race, racism and race relations in America is a subject worthy of a serious conversation. A rational, intelligent, and balanced dialogue on this subject could lead to a better understanding of what it means to be a woman in these United States of America, particularly a woman of color. Perhaps one way to characterize this raging debate over a woman's right to choose is to see it as a burden. A burden made more onerous because it is also a dichotomy. Why should there even be such a debate? Is the right to abortion a moral, legal or religious matter? Is a woman who has an abortion a murderer or is this something between her and her God? Does a woman have the right to choose, whether it's life, freedom of choice or something else? Why is a woman's right to choose such a conundrum?

The furor over abortion rights camouflages an unspoken but ever present reality: *fear of a woman's right to choose*. This fear plays itself out across the landscape of every woman's life, whether she *chooses* to acknowledge it or not. And it goes something like this: fear of a woman's right to choose whether she will or won't marry and have children. Fear of a woman's right to choose to be single. Fear of a woman's right to choose to educate her self, achieve personal and financial independence; lead a life of self-sufficiency fueled by personal ambitions. Fear of a woman's right to choose employment outside the home. Fear of a woman's right to demand access. Fear of a woman's right to demand equal pay for equal work. Fear of a female president of the United States, women as chief executive officers of large companies, women as decision makers in roles traditionally held by men.

The abortion rights debate obscures and tends to drown out other issues affecting the collective well-being of women such as access to mammograms, pap smears and general health care; education, gainful employment and decent, safe and sanitary housing. The burden of being a woman in this great nation of ours has been defined by whether or not she's willing to play

second fiddle to men, be a mother and know her place. We are treated, daily, to media images of what the ideal woman looks like, acts like and aspires to. Choice doesn't seem to be an option. Outspoken, articulate, intelligent and ambitious women are often pilloried for just being who they are. Senator Hilary Clinton comes to mind. She was roundly and soundly put down for trying to develop a national health care program during her husband's presidency. Although widely respected outside the United States, she was often depicted as difficult and unattractive. Laura Bush, on the other hand, has been widely hailed as a great first lady, mainly because she doesn't have much to say and doesn't say it much better than her incredibly inarticulate husband. Ironically, she let it be known in a televised interview that she is pro-choice. Thereafter she was effectively muzzled except when needed to translate her husband's rambling and disjointed discourses on the unbearable lightness of being an airhead.

The drama surrounding a woman's right to choose has been carefully stage managed, as is the case with many critical issues of major concern to Americans, by the media, the judicial system, politics of race, place and class, and religious institutions, to name a few. This is done to ensure that issues of culture, ethnicity, income, education and gender are never taken into account. Consequently, the so-called dialogue never advances beyond the comfort threshold of the participants, usually experts in the field who haven't talked with real people in quite a while. Accordingly, we, as a nation, are seemingly hopelessly locked into a superficial, artlessly contrived act of pretending to understand viewpoints and perspectives we don't agree with and never will. Such is the lack of concern that the players come to the table with their opinions firmly in place and clear instructions to adhere to the party platform. The bottom line: a thoroughly politicized situation offers less likelihood of being resolved so we continue with business as usual. *After all, the court says a woman does have the right to choose.*

The abortion rights debate blurs the role of women in American society. Magazines, government statistics, institutionalized gender discrimination; sexism and terrified men from all walks of life conspire to create the blueprint for what women should be, from infancy to old age. A woman's right to choose is reserved for the hardy few with the resources, savvy and determination to break out and be their own person. Just enough, if you will, to call into question the notion that a woman's right to choose everything else, but say, an abortion, is entirely within her control.

The assault on a woman's right to choose isn't entirely in the domain of others, i.e., men and institutions. Human nature is a strange phenomenon. There are women who work tirelessly to undermine their right to choose life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in whatever form. These are women who chose, have chosen, or will choose to surrender *their* identities to be *Mrs. John Q. Public, mother of Jim, Jack and Jane*. These women see themselves as extensions of their spouses; not as individuals in their own right. They do not sympathize or empathize with other women burdened by responsibilities of caring for families they can barely support. They blithely believe the indignities these *other women* experience will never ever intrude on their carefully constructed lives. They have bought into the hype that their duty in life is to surrender for the sake of procreation in the biblical sense. They take this curiously ingrained propaganda and inculcate their own children without stopping to question the efficacy of it. They don't ask the all-important question, "*will I be less of a woman if I exercise my right to choose- whatever those choices involve?*"

As long as we women, all sisters in the fight to be what we feel called to be, permit, allow, encourage and submit to man made options of who and what we should be as opposed to what we, ourselves believe ourselves to be, our minds *and* bodies will be held hostage to the mass hysteria abortion rights and the concept of a woman's right to choose provoke. Motherhood isn't something all women aspire to, and there's absolutely *nothing* wrong with that. It is, after all, a woman's right to choose. A woman who knows she doesn't want children and consciously avoids having them is one who has embraced her own emotions and dealt honestly with them.

The abortion rights furor and a woman's right to choose have sparked debates over sex education in public schools, dispensing of birth control pills and condoms to teen-agers as well as the "morning after" pill. Regrettably, the results often deepen wounds, inflame rhetoric and widen the chasm between opposing parties. The need for a substantive discussion on women's needs, vis-à-vis their minds and their bodies remains unmet. The battle lines, now more than two hundred years old, and continually intensified, remain painfully visible and appear to be beyond détente. Yet all is not lost. Even as the debate rages on, even as supporters and opponents of *Roe v. Wade* make their plans for the thirtieth anniversary observance, women are talking, quietly, with a sense of purpose and determination. One inescapable reality of life is that the passing of time brings about change. As women around the world work together to address issues of concern, coalitions will find common ground on which to build support for consensus in addressing the universal theme of a woman's right to choose...whatever, whenever, and however she so desires.

ECLECTIC ELECTRONIC SKETCHES