

Lori Whittemore

This is For the Choosers

1.23.22

A Ritual For Reproductive Freedom , adapted from Julie Hamilton

This sanctuary that we create together is a container for all our stories – the ones we share and the ones we hold close and quiet in our hearts; the stories that bring us joy and fulfillment and the stories that break us open; the stories that change and grow with us, and the stories we outgrow and leave behind. Each and every one of you carries a lifetime of stories every time you enter this space.

This morning, there may be stories from your life that surface in unexpected ways. I would like to invite you into a ritual to hold space for your story, whatever it may be.

As we light a series of candles for the different paths we have taken, if you recognize yourself in one of these prayers, I invite you to put your hand over your heart, wherever you are, and know that you are not alone – there is someone else in this gathered community holding their hand over their heart too.

The first candle is lit for those whose story includes the choice to end a pregnancy. The circumstances vary, the timelines of our lives are diverse, but each and every end is also a beginning, and so this candle is lit for all who have aborted a pregnancy or partnered someone in an abortion, for whatever reason, under whatever circumstance.

And let the congregation say “May the beginnings and endings in our stories be held in unconditional love and acceptance.”

This second candle is lit for those whose story includes the unwanted loss of a pregnancy or a struggle with fertility. The circumstances vary, the timelines of our lives are diverse, but the pain of infertility, miscarriage, and stillbirth are too often held in silence. And so we light this candle for all who have travelled this path of loss, for whatever reason, under whatever circumstance.

Let the congregation say “May the beginnings and endings in our stories be held in unconditional love and acceptance.”

We light the third candle for those whose story includes the choice to give birth. The circumstances vary, the timelines of our lives are diverse, but the choice to bring a new life into the world is a powerful one, and so we light this candle for all of who have given birth or partnered in the birth of a child, or those who have adopted a child birthed by someone else, for whatever reason, under whatever circumstance.

Let the congregation respond “May the beginnings and endings in our stories be held in unconditional love and acceptance.”

We light the fourth candle for those whose story includes the choice not to conceive or have children. The circumstances vary, the timelines of our lives are diverse, but the freedom to

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chart the course of our own reproductive life is sacred. We light this candle for all who have made the decision not to conceive or bear children, for whatever reason, under whatever circumstance.

Let the Congregation Respond “May the beginnings and endings in our stories be held in unconditional love and acceptance.”

We light the fifth candle for those whose story includes a forced choice, or no choice at all, or who have encountered violence where there should have been tenderness and care. The circumstances vary, the timelines of our lives are diverse, but not everyone has been in the position to control their own reproductive choices. We light this candle for all who have found themselves unable to exercise their own sacred reproductive freedom, for whatever reason, under whatever circumstance.

Let the Congregation Respond: “May the beginnings and endings in our stories be held in unconditional love and acceptance.”

We light the sixth and final candle for those whose reproductive story is still being written. The circumstances vary, the timelines of our lives are diverse, but the future unfolds in surprising and unexpected ways, that can be both beautiful and heartbreaking. And so I light this candle for all who are at the threshold, who have agency and choices still to make about their reproductive lives, for whatever reason, under whatever circumstance.

And let the congregation respond. “May the beginnings and endings in our stories be held in unconditional love and acceptance.”

May the flames of these candles and the many stories they represent remind us of the fire of commitment we carry inside, to ensure that all people have freedom and agency over their reproductive choices, and that reproductive justice is upheld as a fundamental right for this and future generations.

Sermon

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This is the anniversary of ROEvWade. It is a marked event of importance in the UU calendars. It is a matter of freedom and justice for women. This year it comes at a time when the ruling is literally in peril. While I had not planned to speak about it, the article in last week's paper authored by a former professor of mine, Marvin Ellison and by Jane Fields, the ED of Maine Council of Churches made me realize I had to. I had planned to approach this through facts and figures. But that seems secondary to the real impact of this discussion. The justice, freedom and care that this discussion merits

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As I thought long and hard about what I would say, how I would talk about this today, What struck me was the Buddhist idea of Right Speech, which is part of the 8 fold path to end suffering according to Buddhist doctrine. Let me put this in context of Buddhist thinking. Perhaps many of you have heard about the 4 noble truths in Buddhism. First that everyone suffers, second that the source of suffering can be known. Third, through contemplation of one's own suffering, the suffering can be understood, and fourth, by following the 8fold noble path, suffering may be lessened. Part of the 8fold path is Right Speech. It is a part of the way to eliminate suffering The idea of right speech compelled me and informed me as I sat with this topic. I will explore how I honor the choosers with right speech.

There are Five Keys to Right Speech

"It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken kindly. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will." — AN 5.198

So today, I ground myself in those 5 keys to right speech.

It is spoken at the right time. This is clearly the right time to address this issue for the choosers.

We are at the anniversary of ROEvWade the law that protects women's right to a safe and legal abortion. And it is in peril. Despite the majority of Americans' consistent support for *Roe v. Wade*, there are state legislators and Governors with laws on the books to make abortion illegal, the moment RoevWad is overturned. And here we are with courts packed with conservative anti abortion judges and a supreme court poised to take this freedom away from women. It is the right time to speak for the choosers, it is Right Speech

It is the truth

Many states have existing abortion bans or trigger laws from before *Roe v. Wade* that could ban abortion immediately if *Roe* were overturned. These are also states with politicians hostile to abortion, who are in power and have an established history of passing abortion restrictions. Right now, 31 states have legislatures with majorities hostile to abortion, and 19 states have governors who want to outlaw abortion. I know I said I would stay away from facts and figures but for the choosers sake.

The truth needs to be spoken and That is the truth, the second criteria of Right Speech

We are on the cusp of losing rights for women, minorities, underserved populations. On the cusp. Even though the majority does not believe this right should be taken away. We are on the cusp of having women's freedom, minorities freedom taken away. If we cant talk about this civilly in our communities of faith, to examine our consciences and stand in support of our women and women in general and their partners of women who are examining their own consciences with faith. Stand with them and behind them as they make their own choices.

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Where we can kindly affirm their path with unconditional love and acceptance, where to do we expect that to happen? If not here

I speak from a place of kindness and support, for those with their hands over their heart. Kindness being third criteria of right speech. well as this speaking out with support to them personally. reaching out and supporting their dignity, their agency, their choice, is beneficial to women, to their partners and to society at large and fifth principles of right speech.

And finally spoken with a mind of good will for both those we support and those who would take their rights. Because those who would restrict rights are not moved for the sake of the lives they disrupt and the bodies they legislate. Yet I don't believe we repair malice with malice. We repair malice and oppression, because that is what it is, with kindness and respect. The last leg of the right speech stool. This is a conversation in these walls that should be had with kindness and respect for all.

I personally can't and won't tell anyone what to think about this. I have been touched by all those scenarios mentioned in the candle ritual, in one way or another. So I am confident that all of you have been at least touched by one. I am confident that all of you could have or did put your hand over your heart at some point. While I can't or won't tell you what to think or do about this topic, I will, however, invite you to think about the fifth UU principal. The Right of conscience and the use of democratic process within our congregations AND IN SOCIETY AT LARGE. It is not a democratic process when the will of the few, dictate the freedom of the many.

This conversation that we open today can be significantly uncomfortable. There are very passionate beliefs about this. Impassioned people are not convinced by statistics and shouting matches. Our conversations in this place and in larger society should be entered into with kindness and respect despite any difference of opinion.

Because we are speaking not only for ourselves. We are holding justice and freedom as our torch for others now and in the future. And we are offering care and respect for those needing reproductive care of one sort or another.

We are finding ways to support and care for the choosers among us.

And may the beginnings and endings in our stories be held in unconditional love and acceptance."

May it be so

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Worship preparation

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/litany/ritual-reproductive-choice>

The Heart of Buddha's Teaching, Thich Nhat Hahn

Portland Press Herald, Sunday January 16, 2022

<https://www.pressherald.com/2022/01/16/breaking-their-silence-on-abortion-bless-them-every-one/>