

Observing the Rachel Sabbath March 6, 2011

Dateline: March 4, Austin, TX (Reuters):

Women seeking an abortion would have to first get an ultrasound under a measure approved Thursday by the Texas House of Representatives.

The proposal, the first significant bill considered by the House this year, was designated by Republican Governor Rick Perry as an emergency priority. A similar measure has already been approved by the State Senate.

Women would have to get an ultrasound between 24 and 72 hours before an abortion, the bill says. They would view the sonogram, hear an explanation of the image and listen to the heartbeat, if it is audible.

“We want to make sure that they’re fully informed, that they understand the medical consequences, the psychological consequences and everything involved in the procedure,” said the bill’s author, Republican State Rep. Sid Miller.

Opponents said that the requirement would traumatize women already in a difficult situation. During debate on the House floor, bill opponent Rep. Carol Alvarado held up a trans-vaginal probe used for sonograms early in pregnancy to illustrate what she called “a very intrusive process.”

“This is not the jelly on the belly that most of you think,” said Alvarado, a Houston Democrat. “This is government intrusion at its best.”

The Reuters article, written by Carry MacLaggan, goes on to note that:

Democrats tried unsuccessfully to add a series of amendments to the bill. One of those said that if a woman agreed not to go through with the abortion, the state would have to pay for the college education for the child. Another, which would also have applied to cases in which the woman decided not to have the abortion, would have allowed women to get a court order to require the father of the child get a vasectomy.

Beloved Wildflowers, welcome to church. You may wish to fasten your Sunday-go-meetin' seat belts, and to at least figuratively hold on to whatever part of yourself that may feel it needs protecting. For today's sermon does not promise to be an easy one, nor a sanitary one, to hear. To talk about women's maternal and reproductive rights is uncomfortable at the least and in some people's minds, taboo--which is why so many women, for so long, from all over the world, suffer alone. Historically, as Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wu Dunn point out in their book, *Half the Sky*, for others to willingly and proactively share the burden of both childbirth and birth control has been the global exception, rather than the rule. This passage from *Half the Sky* is not for the faint of heart. But it does illustrate one group living by the exception, rather than the rule. It reads:

In most societies, mythological or theological explanations were devised to explain why women *should* suffer in childbirth, and they forestalled efforts to make the process safer. When anesthesia was developed, it was for decades routinely withheld from women giving birth, since women were supposed to suffer. One of the few societies to take a contrary view was the Huichol tribe in Mexico. The Huichol believed that the pain of childbirth should be shared, so the mother would hold on to a string tied to her husband's testicles. With each painful contraction, she would give the string a yank so that the man would share the burden. Surely if such a mechanism were more widespread [Kristof and Wu Dunn conclude], injuries in childbirth would garner more attention.

Now, in these two passages I've shared are woven many different threads--partisan politics, opposing views on abortion, questions of funding for higher education, the pain and risk of childbirth, slightly audacious proposals for men to take a more active role in both birth control and childbirth, religion, laws, customs, cultures. But the one common thread tying all the others together is women--their bodies, their rights, their integrity.

International Women's Day being this Tuesday, and such recent rapid-fire anti-women legislation happening on both the state and federal level, it seems only right to spend this morning talking about the place and power of

women in the world today, and how we all must take seriously the lives at stake when women's maternal health and reproductive rights are jeopardized. For, as the Religious Institute's open letter to religious leaders says, "Our sacred texts...call us to love our neighbor, promote healing and wholeness, challenge injustice, and be faithful stewards of creation. They compel our commitment to the poor, the most marginalized, and the most vulnerable among us.... Too many people of faith, particularly in the developed world," the letter reminds us, "are simply unaware of the tragic scale of maternal mortality. We call on leaders of all faiths to raise a prophetic voice to address maternal and reproductive health--globally and in their own communities..."

While I don't presume my own voice is one among the prophetic, I will share with you my belief that we must be courageous enough and *faithful* enough to learn the facts about women in the world--in Austin, in Atlanta, in Rwanda, in Thailand, in India, in Pakistan, in Sudan, in Somaliland, and elsewhere--so that we do not inadvertently cover ourselves with our own burkas of ignorant bliss, protecting our eyes from the horrific reality so many women and girls live. By opening our eyes, by educating ourselves, by listening to our consciences, we may not be able to save the world, but we might be able to save a life.

In fact, we already may have. At the very end of Kristof and Wu Dunn's *Half the Sky*, they share the story of how a collection of church children in Connecticut raised enough money to purchase six goats through Heifer International. "One of those goats," the authors write, "went to the Biira family in Uganda, near the Congo border." The story continues, "The Biira children drank the milk for a nutritional boost, and the parents sold some of the milk to raise a bit of extra income. They had not been able to afford to send their [nine year-old] daughter Beatrice to school, keeping her home instead to do chores. But with the extra income from the milk, the parents decided to send the girl to the village school." The story ends with Beatrice graduating from Connecticut College in 2008, and beginning work towards a Masters degree. So, with the goats and llamas and chicks and trees and bees and water buffalos we have purchased through Heifer International in the past few years, we may just be contributing to a revolution.

In my own life, I hope I am partnering in a minor revolution as well, as this winter, through the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council, I began to sponsor an eight year-old girl in the Philippines. For at least the next three years, I will be paying for this young girl's education. This next week, I will send her a birthday present, as she turns the big nine at the end of the month.

But I'm talking about education, when I said I would be talking about maternal and reproductive rights. How did I get off track? Or did I? In truth, education is essential in the struggle against gender inequality and high maternal mortality rates, as it transforms women's and girls' lives from financial, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual poverty to prosperity. Kristoff and Wu Dunn themselves note that, "One study after another has shown that educating girls is one of *the most* effective ways to fight poverty. School is also often a precondition for girls and women to stand up against injustice," they say, "and for women to be integrated into the economy." As Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea*, and builder of schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan says, quoting an African proverb, "You educate a boy, and you're educating an individual. You educate a girl, and you're educating an entire village."

Without such education, whole cultures know only what tradition has taught them. And too often those traditions are brutally inhumane. Take, for instance, this passage from Deuteronomy, chapter 22, verses 13-21:

If a man takes a wife and, after lying with her, dislikes her and slanders her and gives her a bad name, saying, "I married this woman, but when I approached her, I did not find proof of her virginity," then the girl's father and mother...shall display the cloth [that the couple slept on] before the elders of the town.... If, however, the charge is true and no

proof of the girl's virginity *can* be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of the town shall stone her to death.

To our modern, western, liberally religious ears, this may sound barbaric, primeval, and downright insane. But there is a reason that the Faith Institute's letter states explicitly, these thousands of years since that passage was first delivered, that, "Religious leaders have a moral obligation to challenge the use of scriptural texts to support cultural practices that harm or subjugate women and girls...." That reason is that such practices, and other equally horrific such practices, are happening today. In *Half the Sky*, Kristoff and Wu Dunn write about women and girls not only who have been stoned, but who have been kidnapped and sold into prostitution, have had acid thrown in their faces, had their eyes gouged out, their noses or ears cut off, been imprisoned in their own homes, been married off as children, been gang raped, been raped with sticks, endured genital mutilation, died in childbirth for lack of money to pay greedy doctors, and so on and so forth. And these acts are not committed by crazed individuals who are immediately thrown into jail never to see the light of day again. These are men, and women, who live in cultures where women matter only as possessions, property, producers of sons.

Among the more common yet preventable sufferings women have endured are fistulas--specifically rectovaginal and vesicovaginal fistulas. Fistulas are essentially holes created in the boundary between one part of the body and another--specifically in this context, again, between the rectum and the vagina, or between the bladder and the vagina. There are estimates that between 30,000 and 130,000 women in Africa alone develop fistulas every year. These are due largely to inadequate prenatal and natal medical care, but often as well they are due to rape. If a woman survives, she is the one who is ostracized, due to incontinence and odor, as well as the shame of her story.

Fortunately, hospitals dedicated completely to fistula care are appearing throughout parts of Africa, as well as other parts of the world. One fistula survivor, a poor, rural woman with only a third grade education, has now turned around and even learned to perform fistula repairs herself at the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital, in Ethiopia. All it takes for such turn arounds is at least one other person believing that a woman's life is worth saving.

In the story from Genesis that we heard Cathy read earlier, the message doesn't seem to be so much that Rachel, dying in childbirth, was worth saving. Instead, what seems important was that she was able to give Jacob a son before she did die. Even as she spends her last breath uttering the boy's name, Ben-oni, Jacob spends *his* energy not pleading for her to live, or

professing his love, but correcting her with the name. “No, not Ben-oni. Benjamin.” OK, yes, Jacob does erect a pillar over Rachel’s tomb to memorialize her, but even then the emphasis is on the phallic pillar standing over the more feminine, more womb-like tomb.

Thankfully, much of the world has come a long way since then. And many of the heroes in Kristof and Wu Dunn’s book, including Kristof himself, are men--husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, doctors, teachers, writers. As the authors remind us, “Helping women doesn’t mean ignoring men.” For just as women hold up half the sky, so do men.

So how do *we* women and men help hold up the sky? How do we, as people of faith, turn oppression into opportunity? We don’t necessarily have to travel across the world to help. Right here in Austin, nearly one in five people live in poverty, a rate higher than the rest of Texas, or the United States as a whole. The *child* poverty rate in Austin is nearly one in three, whereas in Texas it’s one in four, and in the overall U.S. it’s one in five. While 16.7% of all Americans are uninsured, in Austin, 25% of residents are so. Right alongside those statistics is the fact that Texas ranks 43rd nationwide in high school graduation rates and that 13% of teenage girls in Austin are likely to become pregnant. To top it all off, the Austin Independent School District is facing over

\$20 million in budget cuts. Lack of wealth, lack of health care, lack of education. It's all right here.

Also right here, across I-35, is the William Cannon Community Health Center, sometimes known as the Dove Springs Clinic. This center was almost single handedly created by Ofelia Zapata, a resident of southeast Austin, a leader with Austin Interfaith for twenty years, and a prophetic voice in her own right. Last fall, through second offerings, Wildflower Church was able to purchase a vaccine refrigerator for the clinic. But what if we were able to do more? What if we were able to develop a working, mutually supportive relationship with the people of Dove Springs to continue developing and sustaining this health care center? If we can't travel across the world to help improve women's lives, might we at least travel across the freeway?

Not that that is our only option. I will gladly tell anyone who is interested more about the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council, if you wish to sponsor a child's education in the Philippines, India, Burundi, or Transylvania. Or, right here again, I invite you to join us in putting on a luncheon on April 18th for about eighty refugees learning English as a second language. Perhaps that event might take us deeper into relationship with people from all over the world, so that we can learn of both their struggles and their humanity.

It may be that all you want to do is read the book I've been referring to, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wu Dunn's *Half the Sky*. That's fine. Once you're done though, if you want to talk, or brainstorm, or get rolling with a project, I'll be here. We're a small community, Wildflower Church. But remember what Margaret Mead said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever has." Taking her words to heart, may we show that women's lives do matter, and may we continue to commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice.

Amen

#1051 We Are....