

When abortion is mere abstraction

What's missing from the debate is the wisdom of first-hand experience.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [July 27, 2022](#) issue



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Most—but not all—of the people reading this have never had an abortion. In any given year, roughly 2 percent of American women age 15 to 44 have had one. And, a lot of the Century's readers don't have uteruses. So just playing the odds, it is a decent assumption. That means that when we talk about abortion or think about abortion or reason morally about abortion in these pages, we are doing so with a significant amount of necessary, but often unnoticed, abstraction. The conversation is less about anybody's abortion itself than it is about how we understand the social fabric or the nature of human life in general.

Perhaps this is why abortion has become the quintessential question of opinion in our culture: pro or con, would you or wouldn't you, life or choice. We take the conversation in philosophical directions or public policy-oriented directions. But we

don't, most of us, talk about our own bodies, our own lives, or the lives of our loved ones.

For me that changed when my cell phone rang on an August evening. I was at a retreat center, sitting on a porch as a thunderstorm rolled in.

"Can you come?"

I looked out over the gardens and the swaying trees. "Of course, I can come."

There was no question about it. The person on the other end of the phone was a young woman with whom I had a close relationship. She was going to have an abortion, and she wanted me by her side.

At that moment, my opinions about abortion and anyone else's opinions about abortion mattered exactly zero. She needed me there. I would be there. I changed my flight home and drove to meet her at the clinic.

Among the many things I remember about that day was the quiet clarity that came over her, her mother, and me. While there was deep sadness about many things, there was no sense of panic. An organic wisdom rose up in us that was intimately connected to our hearts. We knew what we were doing. We felt the moral burden in its complexity. We rooted ourselves in all the love that we could muster.

The wisdom that we encountered that day was both unflinching and responsive to the situation in which we found ourselves. Wisdom sat at the table with us. Wisdom held my young friend's hand. This wasn't the abstract wisdom derived from any court or legislature. It wasn't the abstract wisdom that comes from an opinion or even a conviction. It was the wisdom that was available for our discernment in that particular circumstance, a specific and loving presence that met us at a difficult time.

The wisdom that we encountered was life-loving, but it was not coterminous with my young friend's reproductive system. It wasn't dictative. It was discursive and holistic—much more than we were. What it asked of us was to show up with our whole hearts and to stay present.

Unfortunately, the US Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision is intended to work against this kind of discernment. It does not trust women as moral agents. There are millions of people who think they know better what we should have done or not done

in that circumstance. And a lot of people—male and female alike—would do just about anything to avoid the discernment that God asks of us as human beings who are, whether we like it or not, in the process of shaping life.

I am writing this in response to [the *Century's* editorial in this issue](#). When we write an editorial, we are almost always in the business of abstraction. The finished piece is a document that all the *Century* editors agree to. This means that we go through a process to come to a common understanding of an issue or topic. Most of the time, it's easy to come to agreement. Everyone on the team agrees that children in poverty should receive governmental help to raise their standards of living and to feed and house them properly. Everyone agrees that climate change is a serious, human-caused problem that requires an enormous amount of collective action.

But there are other issues where consensus is harder won. Abortion is one of those issues, which is one reason we have rarely editorialized about it. Our latest editorial is the result of a careful process by which we talked through our individual experiences and beliefs and wondered together about what we could agree on. That means that what is said there isn't everything that we could say, nor is it everything that any one of us might have wanted to say.

For me, what is missing from this editorial is personal experience and the wisdom that accompanies it. When I am approached with the question of abortion, I remember immediately and viscerally how quickly my opinions and ideas dissolved on that day that someone I loved asked me to be by her side while she had an abortion. Because of this—and other stories of other people that I have heard throughout the years—I have come to see abortion as irreducibly personal: almost always a woman in a set of circumstances that are very much unique to her. There are a thousand small moments, questions, and realities that influence any decision that any individual woman might make about her particular circumstances. Any attempt to abstract that baseline reality into policy or philosophy almost instantly loses sight of that discernment and that woman's moral agency.

In conversations about abortion, discernment is often reduced to "choice." Choice is necessary, but by itself it is reductive. It's often a stand-in for individual rights—whether or not a woman has the right to make this decision. But this conversation too often locks a pregnant person and a potential child into some kind of battle for ascendancy—and it denies the complexity of a woman's consent to a pregnancy.

Whether you think you do or not, you probably know personally, even intimately, people who have had abortions. These women and trans men are of all ages and religions. They are of all races and income levels. There are women who had sex exactly one time in their lives, used birth control, and still got pregnant. There are women who have other children and others who do not, women who are married and unmarried. They have physical health concerns, mental health concerns, financial stresses, family stresses. They may be in abusive relationships or in loving ones. There are women whose partners supported their abortions, whose partners didn't, and whose partners were ambivalent. There are partners who never know.

Some people cannot imagine themselves in a circumstance where they would say yes to an abortion. Others cannot imagine a circumstance where they would say yes to a pregnancy. Many stand between these two poles.

The *Dobbs* decision will allow many states to decide that this level of moral agency does not belong in pregnant people's hands. But throughout time, this moral agency has been a part of pregnancy. There's no stopping it now.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The right to discern."