

## A TIME OF DECISION

JUDITH RASMUSSEN DUSHKU

"YOU ARE 'PRO-CHOICE' AREN'T YOU?" mumbled the young legislator at his desk as he pored over my application. Anticipating my response, he wrote the label boldly across the front page. I asked why the label had to be so prominently displayed on my application for a seat on the Massachusetts Delegation to the White House Conference on Families.

"Come on," he replied sarcastically. "You know this game. When we had the state elections, the Pro-Lifers were so well organized they walked all over the delegate selection process. They bused in hundreds of voters every day. Almost all the delegates were from their slates. We checked them out. Some are reasonable people—an asset to the state—but some are real crazies. The Governor is upset. He is a Pro-Lifer, as you know, but he is embarrassed by this mob. Even he admits that the delegation needs balance. So now he wants a list to choose his appointees from. Probably he will name more Pro-Lifers, but he would like a list of decent minorities and decent Pro-Choice types to pick from. I just heard you were pregnant. Can I tell him? Pro-Choice and pregnant is easier to take than just Pro-Choice." He took a quick breath and began again.

"These right-wingers are so prepared for battle they had their buses loaded while we were still putting a staff together. I give them credit for enthusiasm, but they are the scariest people I've ever met. I'm a good Catholic with a clean Pro-Life record, but they call me names because I talk to people like you. Sorry—

"Anyway, *that* is why I have to know where you stand and I have to make it public." I started to protest but he went on. "Yeah, it's too bad. I know some people like to keep their thoughts on abortion to themselves. It's a heavy issue. But these days you have to take a stand—publicly.

"Hey, what's the matter? I thought you *were* a Pro-Choice person. Someone from NOW and from your university said you are a real civil-liberties type and a supporter of the State Women's Caucus. No?"

---

JUDITH RASMUSSEN DUSHKU, Assistant Professor of Government at Suffolk University in Boston, Mass., was one of the original contributors to the Dialogue's first women's issue and one of the founders of Exponent II. She is photographed on the previous page as part of Robin Hammond's essay, "In Context."

Of course I am Pro-Choice, I reminded myself. Hadn't I always believed in freedom and agency for all? I had been teaching civil liberties to my political science classes for thirteen years, working hard to impress upon students the value of guaranteeing this freedom. It was a philosophy that had never embarrassed me. Although it is a hard principle to apply in all situations, I have never questioned it as a good and right goal. Moreover, it is a basic tenant of my religion. Growing up a Mormon I had been taught the principle of free agency, and I have always taken it seriously. People—all people—have the right and the responsibility to choose.

Yes, I had read President Kimball's strong statement on abortion, and I felt that I understood his counsel. A society that encourages abortions does tend to lose sight of the value of human life and does begin to feel less responsibility for the conceiving and the bearing of children. But I had never understood his counsel to negate individual agency.

"Of course," I responded firmly to the legislator. "Put my name on the top of your 'Decent Pro-Choice' list!"

Although I was not appointed by the Governor of Massachusetts, I was picked by a White House team from a pool of at-large nominees and sent to the Conference on Families in Baltimore in May 1980, where I associated myself with the Pro-Choice faction.

I liked most of them. They were good people, seemingly dedicated to improving institutions that affect family life. Although this group constituted a clear numerical majority at the Conference, it incurred the constant wrath of the vocal and critical "minority representing the Moral Majority" who claimed mistreatment at the hands of everyone else.

I met several Mormons at the Conference. They were tentatively friendly but suspicious of my lack of the identifying buttons or banners of the Moral Majority. I had counted on my maternity dress to endear me to them. When two fervent women asked me how I could possibly refrain from endorsing a like-minded people committed to "all" the same things "we" were, I replied, "I don't believe that they *are* committed to all of the goals of the Church. In fact, I see some of their efforts as *conflicting* with the goals of my church." One woman shook my hand and left. Another discussed points of disagreement for a few minutes, frowned as if she were sure the Spirit had departed my soul, then backed away with a promise to send me some literature. I was left to my thoughts.

My thoughts had to do with choosing—choosing the best as opposed to the better, the bad as opposed to the worst, choosing the great over the simply worthwhile.

Speakers at the Conference clarified some of my thoughts and confused others. Each proclaimed some policy as essential, and each was convincing. Once preliminary policy recommendations had been agreed to, I and the other delegates had to mark ballots showing whether or not we "agreed strongly," "agreed moderately," "disagreed strongly" or "disagreed moderately." At first I tried to imagine myself in the place of those making the proposals, but I soon gave up on that. It was hard enough to decide what I would do for myself.

The more I thought about these choices, the more agonizing the process seemed. I began to favor policies that enlarged the scope of choice. It seemed important that each human being have the right to make his or her own choices without interference.

A handicapped delegate took the floor to propose that the conference go on record as supporting laws in all states that would keep a handicapped person from being institutionalized, even temporarily, against his will. That seemed right. Handicapped people also have the right to choose. But the parent of a severely handicapped child spoke in opposition. He described his difficulties in rearing a family of six children with most of the money and energy spent on the one handicapped child. Because of the problems of transporting this child, the family had never taken a trip together, had never found a suitable place to leave the child or a suitable person to care for him.

"We need a break," this father said desperately. "Our child will never agree to stay in an institution, even for a few weeks. We need someone to take him—against his will—and we need the option of a family vacation!" That too was reasonable. I felt so sympathetic that I formulated a standard in my head: "The greatest number of choices for the greatest number of people."

Feeling comfortable with this, I realized that it would require decent, even inspired people to make right choices. In any system allowing a large number of options there will be selfish, careless people who will insist on hurting themselves and others. But I wanted to believe in the people with imagination and compassion who were capable of doing great things for themselves and others. But I also believed that all the creativity and good will in the world are useless without the freedom to exercise them.

Our group decided to vote against the proposal on the handicapped because it would destroy too many options.

As I had expected, many speakers raised abortion issues. Since in Massachusetts the subject had been part of a long and angry debate, I thought I had heard all arguments both for and against it. But the tough questions I thought I had answered long ago were before me again. Listening to the speakers, I secretly prayed I would never have to make the decisions some of them had faced. I was to remember that prayer.

A woman with a disabled husband and four children had taken a job the week her youngest entered first grade. With her first decent paycheck she rented an apartment larger than the three rooms they had occupied for eight years. For the first time she looked forward to a pleasant life with her family. Then unintentionally she became pregnant. Unable to obtain a legal abortion, she used her second paycheck to fly out of the country for an illegal one: "I knew my family could not stand the burden of another child."

This woman's decision reminded me of an exchange after a stake meeting. Joan A. had said how sad it was that Sister Y. had not known she was carrying a severely retarded baby, a baby that was now bringing great hardship to its family. A listening stake leader sternly reprimanded Joan for implying that there might have been a righteous alternative to having the child. His own sister had also borne a retarded child and had benefitted from the situation. "It has been a marvelous learning experience for the whole family," he said.

When questioned later, however, he admitted that in some ways this “learning experience” had been disastrous. The father suffered a nervous breakdown; the two children went into therapy; the mother lapsed into depression; and the couple finally divorced. The stake leader allowed that the family might have been spared these unfortunate things if it had not been blessed with a handicapped child.

I pursued the discussion. The spirit in the handicapped body could have entered a different body with an alternative set of blessings. Parents are obliged to do all they can to provide for the spiritual as well as the physical well-being of spirits entrusted to them. Just as a parent should take advantage of medical science to protect the health of a child after birth, so should that same parent take pains to provide the healthiest possible bodies for the spirits of the unborn.

The leader’s testimony was unmoved. The Lord had intended his sister to bear her handicapped child. But he admitted that he did find my speculations troublesome and discomfiting. When I thought of all three sisters at once—the one in Baltimore with the abortion, the one in our stake with the new baby, and the leader’s sister—I too was troubled.

During the rest of my time at the Conference, certain truths came to me forcefully and unexpectedly, with new and deeper meaning. In the past I had heard and had repeated to myself a whole set of judgments on the importance of having children, the greatness of blessings bestowed upon women who participate in the sacred process of giving birth. Somehow, however, my experience seemed rather routine. To be sure, I had regarded the birth of a child, mine or someone else’s, as miraculous, but I had never given the event the reverence I was now realizing it deserved. The addition of each child to our family had never required significant sacrifice on anyone’s part, I thought. Imagining other circumstances was shocking me into a new level of awareness. The preparation—physical and spiritual—that must often accompany the bringing of a helpless child into a hostile world can be arduous. It is important to use wisdom in choosing if and when to have a child at any time or place. Granted the standards for making wise judgments may change, wisdom must prevail. For the first time I realized that part of being a wise and a good mother was choosing when to have a child and how many children to have.

Thinking again of the stake leader’s sister, I found myself respecting her for her efforts to make the birth of the child a growth experience for herself and her family. But I realized too that I would have respected her if she had chosen *not* to bear the child, thus sparing them the trauma that followed. Life had never seemed so complicated! Motherhood especially had never seemed so serious and so difficult. Neither my motherhood nor anyone else’s motherhood was as simple as it had seemed.

I was exhausted. From childhood I had anticipated a time when I might be challenged to step over a line and be counted. I had imagined myself bounding boldly to the Right Side, confident and proud, firm in my convictions. At this conference, I had taken a stand consistent with my deepest convictions. But the dramatic stepping over the line was far less satisfying

than I had imagined. I found myself longing for the comfort of my private life.

Five days later I was home. Instead of comfort, however, I found a stormier scene than the one I had left in Baltimore. After a week with the children and a week away from me, my husband had confirmed for himself what he had hinted at earlier. We must *not* under any circumstances add the baby I was expecting to our large and demanding family. He was sure he could not take it. He was sure I could not take it. "Make an appointment with the doctor immediately and terminate the pregnancy," he insisted. "Neither you nor I can possibly devote the time and energy to our other children nor to each other that is required if we have another baby. You must do this for the family." Although my husband is not LDS, he reminded me that a basic principle of my faith is the preeminence of the family. I was ignoring that principle.

I burst into tears as he went on. "What about the position you so boldly defended at the Family Conference?" he demanded. "You have spent all this time and energy fighting for the right of a woman to an abortion. Now you have the chance to take advantage of that right."

What followed were the most agonizing days of my life. I spent hours examining doctrines, arranging priorities, trying to understand fears and to analyze anxieties. Since I am not one to suffer in silence, I shared my ambivalence with others, men and women, friends in and outside the Church. Often my cries brought demonstrations of support. Just as often I was censured for even thinking about aborting a fetus which some claimed was like "killing a child." These friends trusted me with a large number of confidences, their tales only adding to my unrest. Some had chosen to abort; others had chosen birth; some seemed sad or angry. Most of them were caring people with whom I felt real kinship of spirit.

I spent intense hours in prayer and intense hours with my bishop. I discussed my dilemma with two therapists and several doctors and nurses. My sympathetic bishop thought I was worrying in the right way. The Lord, the Prophet, and he, my bishop, were concerned with nothing less than my eternal welfare and that of my husband—indeed of my whole family, born and unborn. President Kimball's strongly worded cautions against aborting a fetus without careful, even agonizing thought and prayer, reminded me of my responsibilities. I was accountable. I could not abrogate that accountability.

Assuming that the problem of whether or not we could "handle another baby" might be less complicated if we could be assured of a normal one, I decided to undergo amniocentesis. This was intended to relieve my husband of anxiety about a handicapped child. While I found the test an intellectual delight (I am impressed with the technology of modern science), and the results delightful (I was carrying a healthy girl, our first after three sons)—my husband was not comforted. For him the issue was not the health of the child but the fact of the child itself. He and I are both forty years old. I teach fulltime at a university, and he teaches and counsels inner-city children who make enormous demands upon him. We have always been committed to

doing as much as we can not only for own children but for the students we daily serve. He could not be the parent he wanted to be and still fulfill his commitments at school. I could not argue; his reasoning was sound, but I was realizing openly what I had always known secretly: I could not abort this child. Why? I certainly did not believe that to abort a fetus was murdering a child. Yet it was clear that I had already projected a lifetime of dreams, of mother-daughter intimacies upon it, calling it by name and talking to it. Was it because this would be my first daughter after three sons? Was it because of my age and the feeling that the end of my child-bearing years was near? Did I want one final chance to savor and cling to this ability? Obviously one cannot equate the long, involved problems of child-rearing with the self-contained glories of childbirth. Was I responding to fantasies of ghostly pioneer role models? Was my eternal optimism getting the better of me, leading me to disaster? Occasionally I felt inspired. My daughter was to fill a special mission in life, a mission that had been entrusted to my stewardship.

But more often I just felt unsure. It was hard to insist to my husband that the Lord was influencing me. Was I simply afraid of abortion? Yes, but not extremely so. In one ambivalent moment, I even decided to make an appointment for abortion. When I went in to see the doctor about it, the nurse asked me why. I explained that my husband felt strongly about it. She wanted to know how I felt. I admitted that I was not exactly thrilled with the idea. But it had to be; I was resigned. After describing the details of the procedure, she said, "You are a poor candidate for an abortion—at least this one. My experience has convinced me that women should not choose abortion to please their husbands or anyone else. It ruins relationships." My mouth dropped open as she went on. "It builds future resentments. You would be setting your husband up as the thief, the one who deprived you of your joy."

"Does my joy show so much?" I whispered.

"It certainly does. And your feelings of happiness are an important reason to reconsider." Although she went on to apologize for interfering, she ended with an emphatic, "Don't do it!"

By then I was sobbing. I seemed to feel several emotions at once: sadness for my husband, guilt and remorse for our relationship, terror at what I had almost done.

And joy! I realized then that I adored my unborn child in ways I could not name. I felt sure that the next few years would be harder than the last year had been, but in a strange way I was glad.

Ambivalence was to return and sleepless nights, but the clarity of that moment was to sustain me. And as an LDS woman, I desperately wanted to know whether that moment was the result of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. I earnestly prayed for this assurance.

Although my husband had always accompanied me to the delivery room and supported me there, he was not present for the birth of our little girl. For a few weeks after she and I returned from the hospital, he felt no genuine happiness in her presence. He finally warmed to her, though, and over the past months has fallen sincerely in love with her. But our year of animosity has left deep scars on our marriage, and I worry about our daughter, indeed

about our sons as well. Can we parents provide them with the spiritual sustenance they need?

Recently I met a man from the Massachusetts delegation to the White House Conference. "Ah, I remember you," he said. "You are the Pro-Choice lady."

Am I? I asked myself. Certainly I am a far different woman from the one he met in Baltimore, bruised and battered, but tougher, less naive yet less cynical.

Yes, I am still "Pro-Choice," I told him, but I now know that I am also "Pro-Life" and have been ever since that faraway time when I stood in the councils of heaven and actually volunteered for the suffering and the ambiguity of this earth.

