

# Empathy

*Helen B. Cannon*

SEVERAL TIMES A YEAR, I give one of the Relief Society's supplemental lessons. Jokingly, I call this my token Church job; in truth it means a great deal to me. I deeply value the opportunity and the trust given me. The measure of trust, in fact, is all the more significant and touching, since my Relief Society presidency give me free reign to choose the subject. I don't take the responsibility lightly. Thoughts well up in me; and in these lessons, I can let them spill over.

Usually I center lessons around subjects that I, myself, need to probe—areas where I know I should improve. Not long ago, aware of my own insularity, I challenged myself and my ward sisters toward greater empathy for others. We talked of our difficulty or inability to perceive the experience of others—those who differ from us in age, economic circumstance, education, health, race, creed. Borrowing from Indian wisdom, I counseled, “Walk a mile in another's moccasins before you judge.” I came home feeling quite good about the lesson, thinking I'd somewhat shaken myself, as well as others, from narrow, closed views.

In this self-congratulatory mood, I picked up the local newspaper, turning first, as I often do, to the Letters to the Editor. There, predictably, I found yet another anti-abortion tirade written by a Mormon sister. The tone of the letter was so angry that I could easily visualize its author being first in line to cast stones at any woman who might contemplate an abortion—the “enemy” here faceless, but the hatred palpable and terrifyingly real. For the moment, though, this strident woman had pocketed her verbal stones and contented herself

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with wishing that those who choose abortion had “themselves been aborted.” A woman hating her sister that much. . . . My own words about empathy rose up then — “. . . walk in another’s moccasins . . .” Suppose I wore the shoes of a woman who had chosen abortion; suppose I were the enemy. I would not quite fit the stereotype envisioned by most pro-lifers, if they visualize anyone at all. I would not be the selfish yuppie or the feminist career woman who chose abortion so I could get on with my life; I would not have been the callow teenager. No.

I thought back to the darkest period of my life, when, in my mid-forties, I found myself in a terrible period of sickness and depression. I remember those days when I cried from morning to night and often far into the nights, when I wished for death, when my only fantasies were black ones, imagining ways I could stop my life. Only the fear that death would not assure oblivion kept me from trying to find a way out. But once, empty of faith and in utter despair, I took my chance at oblivion. A handful of swallowed aspirins brought no eternal sleep, nothing but retching, wrenching sickness and ears ringing with despised life. I fully understood then poet Anne Sexton’s lines in “Wanting to Die,”

To thrust all that life under your tongue!  
that, all by itself, becomes a passion. (1966, 58)

Suppose, in those dark days of my forty-fifth year, I had discovered I was pregnant. Empathize with that, I told myself. Certainly I know I would not have feared for my life, though my husband might. What I would have feared, I’m sure, were the consequences for my living children and for the emotional and physical well-being of the new life to be given to my care.

What did that woman who might have been me know of the issue, having come up through Church education in the days when abortion was a taboo subject? I can’t remember, in all my days of MIA and Sunday School, Seminary and Institute, study groups and sacrament meetings, when our Church’s doctrinal position on abortion (if there were one clearly defined) was ever discussed. Sometimes in study groups we did talk about birth control, in terms that were vague, if not euphemistic. I can’t remember that abortion was ever mentioned, but I do remember that what we observed about birth control was that the Church position didn’t appear to be carved in stone. It had moved from the early unqualified injunctions to multiply and replenish the earth (even if that meant a woman bore a child a year for all of her childbearing years), to President McKay’s softening (1969) statement:

It is the policy of the Church to discourage the prevention of conception by any means unless the health of the mother demands it. It is also the policy of the Church to regard *marital relations of husband and wife as their personal problem and responsibility, to be solved and established between themselves as a sacred relationship.* (in Bush 1976, 28; italics added to the part by which I was then most impressed)

How many women of my generation walked with me in ignorance, unaware of the issue's potential volatility? The fact is, five and ten years ago the subject was relatively invisible. Faye D. Ginsburg's excellent *Contested Lives* (1989), an anthropological case study set in Fargo, North Dakota, typifies the development of the abortion debate in the 1980s—and is not unlike a parallel development in Mormon culture. Until the opening of an abortion clinic in Fargo, women there were not at war among themselves. While the opening of the clinic did not, of course, mark the beginning of abortions in Fargo, it did mark the time of polarization when people, forced by deeply entrenched moral constraints, began to take sides. Early anti-abortion campaigns in Fargo, Ginsburg shows, did not try to establish “personhood” for the fetus.

Looking back, I'm sure that the question of when the spirit enters the body is something I didn't spend much time thinking about either. If I had, I would probably have let a beloved Book of Mormon scripture float to the surface to supply my answer. I would have remembered thinking about the revelation to Nephi on the night before Christ's mortal birth. “Lift up your head, and be of good cheer,” came the voice of the Lord himself, not from Mary's womb, I assume, “for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world” (3 Ne. 1:13).

In a subconscious way I had taken this touching passage as scriptural support for the idea that the spirit does not enter the physical body until the magical moment of birth, inhaled perhaps like the first gasp of air filling each new child with light and life. But in truth I didn't consciously think of it. Maybe many of my sisters didn't either. It's true, a woman of my generation could have ferreted out strong but puzzling and contradictory statements of Church positions on abortion and birth control, but the fact is, most of us didn't. Most of us were quite blithe, tending conscientiously, if sometimes unhappily, to home-making and Church responsibilities. Comparatively few Church women would have read Lester Bush's provocative 1976 essay in *DIALOGUE*. It is one of the few Church documents I can think of which dared to examine abortion and birth control within the Church.

In 1976 when I read it, the problems seemed remote—a matter of curious interest only. Some few details did stick with me though, one relating to Brigham Young's half-contradictory stance on the issue of

when life begins. His stated belief had been that the spirit enters the fetus at the time of quickening or later. But in a funeral sermon for a dead child, President Young cast some doubt on his earlier view: "When some people have little children at 6 & 7 months pregnancy & they live but a few hours then die they bless them &c. but I dont do it for I think that such a spirit has not a fair chance for I think that such a spirit will have a chance of occupying another Tabernacle and developing itself" (in Bush 1976, 15).

Three years later, a DIALOGUE Notes and Comments article dropped no bombshell either, though if printed today it might. Three BYU biologists posed questions that most of us were unprepared to consider. They asked, for instance, questions about the phenomenon of identical twinning. "Identical twins begin as a single embryo which at some point in development splits in two. At what point are two spirits present?" The question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin seemed almost as relevant to me then. And what of spontaneous abortion, which is far more common in humans than most people realize? Most of these natural abortions occur in the first few days or weeks of pregnancy and are therefore not noticed by physicians, or even the pregnant woman herself. The authors indicate that "somewhere between twenty percent and well over half of all conceptions end in spontaneous abortion. . . . If one were to assume that every embryo is a human soul, the simplest conclusion would be that many (perhaps most) of our brothers and sisters never experience mortality in a meaningful way" (Farmer, Bradshaw, and Johnson 1979, 72-73).

As Mary Gordon points out in a recent *Atlantic Monthly* article, our language itself reflects conventional wisdom that I would have known even then. I likely would have been informed by our language differentiation between *miscarriage*, occurring early in pregnancies, and *still-birth*, occurring very late. A spontaneous abortion at six weeks would never be called a stillbirth, and the issue of an early miscarriage would not be given a name, buried, or blessed. In a vague, intuitive way, I would have known this.

But my sick self surely would not have remembered or pondered any of this. Instead, pregnant and ill, I would have turned to my husband—a former bishop, a faithful man, a loving father. Suppose, knowing so well the circumstances, loving me and fearing for my life, he had counseled me to have an abortion. Suppose he had, through my LDS doctor, made the arrangements and helped me through it, and driven me sadly home, the windshield wipers beating out the words of Anne Sexton's poignant refrain, "Somebody who should have been born is

*gone. Someone who should have been born is gone*" ("The Abortion" 1961, 20). But before that, in a clinic where no happy people entered, he would, I know, have held my hand—would have cried with me.

Empathize with that woman who might have been me, I tell myself. How was it for her, then; but more important, how would it be for her now? How would she feel as she read this letter to the editor, branding her as a "murderer," "Nazi-like," participating in a "final solution." Think of this woman, recovered, loving life and family once again, trying to live a kind and giving life. Crises often effect great shifts in the way people perceive and understand their world. Healed, perhaps, she would now welcome a child—sacrifice her life for its birth, even. Could she, in the current rain of accusation, function again in church or community or family? Once uncertain and unthinking about the ethics of abortion, she now no longer moves in blessed uncertainty. Thought has become her burden. Her hidden scarlet letter "A" stands for abortion rather than adultery. It brands her soul with sin. "Post-abortion syndrome," they say. Would it have come to wreak its natural course, or would it be thrust upon her by sure and accusing voices from every sector?

Suppose this woman sat in my class today. Had she a right to ask for understanding, even for love and acceptance, and, if need be, forgiveness? Perhaps it's easier to sympathize with cases removed in time and space than to withhold judgment upon those in our midst. Who but the stony-hearted would not respond in sympathy to a poignant recollection by an old Jewish woman, as recorded by anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff in her deeply moving study, *Number Our Days*? Listen to Sonya recalling the plight of her mother in the old country:

I remember my mama also with pain. I must have been about five years old. My sister just died, a very slow death, and we didn't have enough food for her. The whole city cried. She was a beautiful girl, about twelve years old. Already there were six of us and my mother didn't want no more children. I heard a funny sound and crept out in the middle of the night. My mother was lifting up a heavy barrel full of pickles and dropping it again and again. Somehow I found out it was to get rid of her baby, so she would have a miscarriage. You know how many marriages this ruined, because even if she loved her husband, she wouldn't let him go near her. In those days they had abortions, like I wouldn't describe them here. My mother's sister died of that, she had fourteen abortions and eight children at forty. They knew none of the children would have a chance in life if they kept on that way, so she wouldn't go to her husband any more. From this he lost his manhood. I heard her tell my mother that if she wasn't a Jew and it wasn't against the law, she would hang herself. (1978, 232-33)

It would seem easier to muster compassion for those long ago and far away women; but in fact, those who hate seem unable to imagine beyond their perception of a faceless contemporary American stereo-

type—that selfish career woman or the teenager who “asked for it.” This free-floating hatred seldom confronts a real-life woman who could, in fact, be the pro-lifer’s own mother, sister, daughter, or friend. Certainly the strident crusaders seldom visualize beyond an insular American image. Do they imagine the average Russian woman who has in the course of a marriage fourteen abortions? (du Plessix Gray 1990, 67). Do they visualize Rumanian women, who under Ceausescu’s disastrous natality program were policed, “receiving gynecological check-ups in their workplaces. Once a woman was found to be pregnant, ‘demographic command bodies’ were called in to monitor her. Any miscarriages were investigated and illegal abortions were punished by prison terms for both the woman and the physician” (Echikson 1990, 4).

But we needn’t turn to other times and other places to exercise empathy. Sisters in our midst have need of our sensitivity and understanding and acceptance. In Utah, 4,149 resident women sought and received abortions in 1988 (*Induced Abortions* 1990, 1), among them the teen who was incestuously raped, the woman whose childbearing years had seemed over, the sister who was ill in mind or body, another who found no counseling voice to suggest adoption or to raise philosophical doubt as to when an immortal spirit assumes mortality. Surely that woman moves among us, sits in church beside us, walks with us as our friend. “[She] that is without sin among you, let [her] first cast a stone” (John 8:7).

I put the newspaper down and in my mind embrace my sister through waves of empathy. I will not judge her. I will only love and try to understand.

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