

## **BODY & SOUL: REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE – NO EASY ANSWERS**

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UUA General Assembly, 2014  
Providence, RI

In the year 1916, a Unitarian nurse named Margaret Sanger set up the first birth control clinic in the United States – and was promptly arrested for “creating a public nuisance.” Actually, she was arrested many times for acting on her belief that women should be able to control their own reproductive health. That belief led her to invent the very term “birth control.”

By 1927, Sanger helped organize the first World Population Conference in Geneva – through which the organization we know as Planned Parenthood came into being in 1942.

In 1963, the Unitarian Universalist Association became the *first* religious tradition to officially endorse a woman’s right to reproductive choice. Then in 1967 the UU Liberal Religious Educators Association developed resources for parents and youth, addressing real-life sexuality issues emerging for UU young people – a program we’ve come to know as OWL, or Our Whole Lives – a faith-based sexuality education curriculum.

The UUA then passed Reproductive Justice related resolutions again in 1968, 1970, 1973, 1975, 1978, 1980, 1985, 1987 and 1993.

Now here we are nearly a century after Margaret Sanger dedicated her life to preserving women’s sovereignty over their own reproductive lives – and the Unitarian Universalist Association once again has officially taken up the issue - or dare we say “*mission*” – of Reproductive Justice.

Nearly a century later! Why? Because the work is clearly not yet done. Each of those resolutions we just mentioned were passed by our Association in response to repeated

attacks on reproductive freedom. Just this last election cycle, deep-seated and often highly disturbing prevailing determination on the part of some to deny reproductive justice surfaced yet again.

In 2011, legislators in 24 states passed a record 92 anti-choice laws. In 2013, there were 235 bills intended to restrict access to reproductive choice started making their way through state legislatures. **235!** Which resulted in 22 states adopting 70 different restrictions in 2013 alone, including bans on insurance coverage – as we watch for the Supreme Court’s ruling on the Hobby Lobby case – and limits on medication abortion, and pre-viability bans that defy Supreme Court precedent, and unwarranted doctor and clinic regulations that set off a wave of women’s clinic closures across these United States. Including North Alabama’s very last one which is closing right now, today, June 27<sup>th</sup> as we speak – which, from its location in Huntsville, also served women from Mississippi, Georgia and Tennessee who had no access in their own areas.

How does this keep happening?

Well ... one way is by folks like you and me continuing to let the political and religious powers-that-be continue to frame this fight in terms of a biology-based morality dilemma -- when at the core it is an issue of JUSTICE.

It is not *only* about freedom of reproductive choice, but rather a complex cluster of issues of economics, racism and classism – and education and poverty and access to the power systems of the dominant culture, or more to the point, *denial* of access to such power.

While the framework of reproductive rights remains the right to choose when and whether to have a child, which was preserved in the historic Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision of 1973, this right to choose does *nothing* to address the social inequities which impact the choices women may or may not be able to make. Marginalized communities – immigrants, people of color, the poor, the young, the disabled – very

often lack the resources to exercise the their right to govern their own reproductive lives *at all*.

It is essential to note that the term Reproductive Justice and its framework came from the 1994 Black Women's Caucus in Chicago to work against "reproductive oppression" – the exploitation of women, girls, and others through their reproduction, labor, and sexuality. For as you might surmise, the societal inequities that allow for reproductive oppression suffer communities of color the most. It was the 1994 Black Women's Caucus that declared that though *choice* is essential, reproductive *justice* goes far beyond the right to choose alone.

"Choice" is the legal concern. "Justice" is social issue. Reproductive *Rights* and *choice* advocacy maintain *legal* protection for reproductive healthcare by targeting legal processes, policy-making and elected officials. The Reproductive *Justice mission* challenges the societal structures that impact not only the right to choose, but the fundamental right of persons to be who they are and live as they will.

The Reproductive Justice mission has four goals: (a) the raising of children in safe and healthy environments, (b) planned and healthy pregnancies, (c) ending or avoidance of unwanted pregnancies, and (d) expression of sexuality.

Maintaining legal protection and access to reproductive healthcare and choice requires constant diligence, as the number of new restrictive – or rather "oppressive" -- measures being enacted attest. But the achievement of reproductive *justice* requires nothing less than a paradigm shift in cultural consciousness, and a radical transformation of society.

That is to say, fighting for reproductive *choice* tends to work from the *outside in*, sourced in law; while reproductive *justice* works from the *inside out*, sourced in our very humanity.

And that is why our Association of Congregations once more took up the issue of Reproductive Justice as the 2012-2016 Congregational Study/Action Issue at our General Assembly. Because Unitarian Universalists are about transforming ourselves and our world *from the inside out*.

A Study/Action issue challenges congregations and districts to take a topic of concern and engage it, learn about it, reflect, respond, and take action on it—each in their own way. This Reproductive Justice Study/Action Issue contains ten questions for consideration, such as:

- *Why is focusing on individual choice inadequate?*
- *How do power structures limit individuals' access to reproductive justice?*
- *How can eliminating racism, classism and sexism reduce the need for abortion and enable families to care for the children they do have?*
- *How do economic justice and reproductive justice intersect?*

Notice here that the Study/Action Issue is not framed as a declaration, but rather as a question. A question to be taken up in the heads and hands and hearts of UU congregations, committees and individuals. A question with no easy answers.

We UU's are famous for that, you know – taking on questions with no easy answers. Historically daring to have no answers at all, only the opportunity to work through questions together -- not as an intellectual exercise, but as a call to action in our lives and our world.

Such is the matter of what reproductive justice is, why it matters, and what it calls us as Unitarian Universalists to do. It is a matter larger than a Sunday morning, larger than a congregation, larger even than history. It is a deep and complex matter of social, cultural, political and religious significance. It is a matter of biology and psychology and philosophy. It is a matter with no easy answers. It is a matter of body ... and soul.

Four themes fundamental to our Unitarian Universalist tradition are central to a fuller understanding of Reproductive Justice: conscience, justice, sacred sexuality and reverence for life. Here is how the Study/Action Issue considers these, in part:

**Conscience:** *our Study/Action issue states that women, and all people, are moral agents who possess dignity, freedom of conscience, and the capacity to make decisions according the sacred within them. We carry the wisdom from our religious ancestors that coercion, particularly over the most precious and intimate circumstances of our lives, is not only wrong, but also breeds hatred and bitterness. [...] Both Unitarians and Universalists, historically, have rejected ideas of predestination or original sin, perpetuating instead a theology of sacred human choices between right and wrong.*

Sacred Human Choices. Choice is certainly a right. For too many it is a privilege. For all it is sacred. Your power and my power to choose to live and act in accordance with our own conscience, a conscience educated and enlightened by the facts of our own experiences. The political policies afoot in our world at this very moment aim to violate the sanctity of every person's Sacred Human Choices. This is why we take on the issue again.

**Justice:** *our Study/Action issue states that in congregations and the public sphere, Unitarian Universalists work for justice, equity, and compassion in ways that create respect from tolerance and transforms simple diversity into the beloved community, through ideas of power, privilege, oppression, and love. [...] Unitarian Universalists know that in the interdependent web of life, no lives are independent of another. Universalist theologians of the past [...] refused to believe that suffering and violence were simply part of "God's plan," over which humans had no control. Instead, humans are responsible for taking care of one another, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized. People are responsible for "saving" each other.*

What could be more just, more true, more essential to our walk together through this world than recognizing, accepting and taking responsibility for "saving" one another.

Suffering and violence are painful realities of our world. They are facts. But they are not truth. Truth calls our burning yearning hearts toward compassion, toward courage, toward equity that we may not rest until we put our own backs into building a more just and peaceful world.

**Sacred Sexuality:** *our Study/Action issue states that Unitarian Universalism holds that sexuality is a sacred and powerful gift. Sexuality provides people with opportunities to grow in intimacy with each other and the sacred, as well as opportunities for harm and exploitation. As a powerful force that contributes to love and justice, as well as to intense discord and pain, people are responsible for being stewards of this tremendous capacity. Unitarian Universalists take great joy and pride in teaching comprehensive sexuality education to all age groups within their congregations and in advocating for the same in the public sphere.*

A little story: I grew up in a denomination that forbade pre-marital sex because it might lead to dancing! Though I was also raised by farm folk who invited us kids to help deliver Granddad's prized boxer pups, or pull a calf, or watch a horse foal. Still, there was something forbidden, something hushed about human sexuality. Some things we had to learn in hard ways. How much healthier it might have been to just ... dance!

**Reverence for Life:** *our Study/Action issue states that Unitarian Universalists draw spiritual sustenance from the experience of being human, from "that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves [us] to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." Because Unitarian Universalists believe they are **a part** of life, not **owners** of it, they are called to be responsible and wise [stewards of] the web of life. Unitarian Universalists do not agree on the precise moment in which life begins or continues. They are, however, united in their affirmation for the well-being of women and others, and their interest in requiring public policy to be concerned with the same.*

The moment life begins. The moment life ends. We cannot know the hour of either.  
But in between ... in between *we revere every breath.*

Conscience, Justice, Sacred Sexuality, Reverence for Life. These are core to our faith. These are what moved our foremothers and fathers to give their bodies and minds and hearts and souls to transforming their world, even as we would transform ours. These made Margaret Sanger willing to go to jail repeatedly for the rights of women to govern their own bodies, their own health, their own parenthood.

And these are what motivated our own UUA to take up this mission again as Study/Action issue, and what inspired the Service and Social Justice Committee of the congregation I serve to join our national movement in this cause – that a hundred years after Margaret Sanger, we should do no less for the sake of Reproductive Justice in our own time. If you too want to get involved talk to your own congregation's Social Action committee, read the materials on our association website at [UUA.org](http://UUA.org), or just put "UU Reproductive Justice" in Google and get started.

Don't expect to find easy answers. There are none. We Unitarian Universalists seem to prefer it that way. In this remarkable, restless, determined and demanding faith, we rise and roll to struggle and strive and sing and shout and stand for the fundamental power of persons to search out their *own* answers -- and *live out* those answers in flesh and in spirit. There is nothing more basic to our heritage, our humanity – and our hope.

It is a matter of body and soul.

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