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Commentary

Who Are the Heroes in Abortion Narratives and What Role Do They Play in the Movement?

Sujatha Jesudason†

This is an excerpt from a presentation given at a symposium titled Speech, Symbols, and Substantial Obstacles: The Doing and “Undue”ing of Abortion Law Since Casey. The symposium was held at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, on October 4, 2013, and was sponsored by the Center for Reproductive Rights and Justice at Berkeley Law, the Center for Reproductive Rights, and the Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice. The presentation was part of a panel titled Abortion Narratives: Women as Agents, Victims, Heroes, and Harlots.

The story of CoreAlign started several years ago when Tracy Weitz1 and I met for lunch one day, and we both bemoaned the current state of the reproductive rights movement. We wept over the 2011 U.S. legislative cycle, when pro-life advocates had introduced more than one thousand pieces of anti-abortion legislation. While only nine percent of these successfully passed, it still meant that more than ninety new pieces of legislation restricting access to abortion became law that year. In that same time period, the pro-choice movement had introduced only two pieces of pro-choice legislation. Tracy and I shared a painful moment of awareness that the reproductive rights movement had come to what was essentially the political gunfight of our lives, and we were not armed with guns, knives, bats, chains, or even rocks. Instead of proposing legislation, our movement had been focused on testing messages on abortion in ways that would appeal to our opposition, without burning bridges or allies. Across the country and within the network of hundreds of pro-choice organizations, we were still struggling to construct a politically effective

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abortion narrative and we were getting our asses kicked in the process.

At lunch that day, we decided to go on the offensive and work to change the policies, culture, and conditions in a way that would support every person’s autonomy in their sexual and reproductive lives. We knew that it had taken pro-life advocates more than thirty years of work and strategizing to achieve their current victories. The pro-choice movement needed to do something similar. This was the genesis of CoreAlign, an attempt to bring together as many people as possible to fight for and win resources, rights, and respect for all people’s sexual and reproductive lives.

As we gathered people for this project, we started researching social movement literature, civil rights literature, and any literature that was about social change, innovation, and leadership. We were particularly interested in anything related to the power of storytelling and narrative. And that is where this conversation comes in.

Marshall Ganz, one of the leading scholars on social movements, says: “Movements have narratives. They tell stories, because they are not just about rearranging economics and politics. They also rearrange meaning. And they’re not just about redistributing the goods. They’re about figuring out what is good.”

According to Ganz, storytelling is one of the most powerful tools organizers can use to unite a movement. The story is the “why” of organizing—the art of translating values into action. It is an ongoing discussion process through which individuals, communities, and nations construct their identities, make choices, and inspire action. Each of us has a compelling story to tell that can move others to action.

The story of Rosa Parks is a great example of how one story can propel one action into a movement. For those of us who know the background, we know that Rosa was active in the NAACP for ten years and that she trained at the Highlander Center: her refusal to give up her bus seat wasn’t a spontaneous movement moment. However, there was something in her story that allowed people to say, I, too, can be that everyday woman who decides not to give up her seat on the bus. It doesn’t matter that there were many, many more before her who had done that same thing, but had not quite ignited a movement. Every person who had ever ridden a bus could say, I can be that person, too. And her story gave all the people around her a role to play in the movement. You didn’t have to be a Martin Luther King and give inspiring and brave speeches; through one action, you could be a part of a movement bringing about radical change in this country. In the action of boycotting buses, everyday people could translate their rage against racism into a shared act of resistance and solidarity.

To the extent that CoreAlign’s mission is to mobilize large numbers of people who share a vision and who are inspired to act on that vision, we realized

that we needed to study the kinds of stories we were currently telling within our movement—particularly the stories we tell about abortion.

In our research, we discovered that we do two things in our abortion narratives: we position women as victims, and we make abortion the focus of their stories. The victim narrative can be heard in our stories that position women as powerless in the face of the abortion regulations, and in the ways professional advocates talk about vulnerable women who need help, support, and better access. In our movement, our narrative is constructed around the most vulnerable and victimized women: young women, women of color, poor women, rural women, women who were victims of rape and incest, and women diagnosed with fatal and tragic fetal anomalies. Instead of telling heroic stories of women’s journeys of discovery and self-determination, we focus on their hardships and their powerlessness in the face of those hardships. We tell stories where the courts and the legislators and the clinics are the saviors that need to rescue women from the hardship, suffering, and burdens in their lives.

We don’t paint a picture of women seeking abortions as women on a journey of self-discovery and self-determination. Nor do we tell stories of women taking charge of their sexual and reproductive lives, or of making the best decision for themselves, their lives, and their families. We neglect to tell the stories of how women overcome challenges, what they learned about themselves and their society in seeking an abortion, and what meaning they derive from the need for an abortion and the process of accessing or being denied an abortion. We don’t talk about how seeking an abortion connected a woman—or didn’t—to other people, including her partner, her parents, her friends, or her family. Our stories do not explain whether she now understands the social and political context in which she sought an abortion, and the stigma she may or may not have experienced in the process.

Increasingly, in the face of this kind of legislation, we talk about clinic regulations and the exceptions for rape, incest, and fatal fetal anomalies. Most of our stories revolve around tragedy, extreme hardship, and how women are powerless in the face of these regulations. They are narratives that revolve around burden, suffering, and powerlessness. We don’t tell the “After My Abortion” stories where we capture the full complexity and power of women’s lives and their journeys. And we definitely don’t tell the inspiring or empowering stories of heroes in our movement.

What are the implications of reinforcing stories of women as powerless in a world where we are trying to empower them? We want women to be the leaders fighting for what they want in the world. How do we tell stories that inspire and empower women rather than just leave them at that place of burden and suffering? In our narratives, women are not positioned as agents and heroes in their lives or in our society.

Additionally, while the abortion journey for each woman may or may not be significant, we ignore the journey and focus on the abortion. Our stories end with the abortion, not with what a woman learned about herself and what she
wants in her life. We don’t talk about how women make meaning of that experience. Instead of telling stories where women are the reluctant heroes of their sexual and reproductive lives on a challenging journey toward a higher purpose, we tell stories of the barriers they face in accessing abortion, as if abortion is the end of the story, the moral of the story, and the discovery at the end of the journey. We tell stories as if abortion is the solution, savior, and takeaway of the story.

Based on uncovering these victim narratives as the sole focus on abortion, Tracy and I decided that in CoreAlign we would start the process of shifting the abortion narrative through storytelling. We would bring people together in our movement, learn about heroic storytelling, practice storytelling, tell the heroic stories of our own sexual and reproductive lives, and then pull out the meta narratives to weave together a new heroic narrative for our movement.

However, what we found when we brought people together to tell their stories was that they didn’t want to tell their own stories. The first thing they would say was, “Oh, but I’m not here to tell my story; I’m here to tell other women’s stories.” They wanted to tell the stories of poor women, women of color, rural women, and the young women who don’t have access to abortion. They wanted to tell the stories of women victimized by rape and incest—any story but their own personal story of accessing abortion.

As an immigrant woman of color, I found this storytelling on my behalf to be particularly disturbing. I would much rather have the space to stand up and tell my own story, to construct the narrative of my life, than to have some professional advocate do it on my behalf without including me. And I’m sure that many poor women, young women, rural women, immigrant women, and women of color feel the same way.

What would it mean to build a movement based on other people’s stories? Is it even possible? Movement building is risky business. It’s about social change, about disrupting the status quo. We all have to have skin in the game. When we are telling other people’s stories, it is not about our skin in the game. It’s not about what we have at stake. In order to organize and mobilize effectively, we need to be able to tell our personal stories so that we can make meaning and fight for what’s personally at stake for us.

CoreAlign then started opening all events and meetings with the request that each person share a current concern or success related to their own sexual or reproductive life. Not a previous concern, not a concern in somebody else’s life, but a current and personal concern about their life.

In this conference room, take a few seconds right now and think about how you would answer that question. What is a current concern or success related to your sexual or reproductive life? In inviting people to share their stories, raise your hand if your story today has something to do with abortion. Thank you to the three people, in this room of two hundred, who raised their hands.

This is a powerful and visceral reminder. If we want to build the supportive culture and political will for abortion rights, we need to have stories and
narratives that connect to all of our lives in inspiring ways. All of the people in this room and at this conference: we are the heart and soul of this movement. We are the inspiring leaders and the workhorses, and we need to be able to make meaning of our lives and make the connections between our policy advocacy for abortion access and our intimate sexual and reproductive lives.

At CoreAlign events, this question creates powerful moments of making meaning and connection. When people start sharing stories of their current sexual and reproductive lives, they share incredibly touching, tender, and lovely stories. They talk about menopause, IUDs, and polyamory; about wanting children and grieving lost children; about their anxieties surrounding marriage, partners, and work/family balance; about how and when to have children and how surprised they are to still be enjoying sex; and about lesbian bed death. They talk about all kinds of things that should be, but are not, a part of our agenda when we focus solely on abortion in our advocacy. When people share the stories of their sexual and reproductive lives, the energy in the room shifts. People see each other as human beings. They connect with each other, not based on organizations or policy priorities, but as comrades in a shared struggle. They fall in love with each other.

Additionally, as we think about our abortion narratives, laws, and policies, what are we communicating about our priorities and values? Are we deeply invested agents and actors in our lives or just professional advocates who might more often lean toward less risk and more compromise?

Our public policy and cultural agenda should not just be an agenda for abortion access for poor women and women of color, but an agenda for all women. Otherwise we will never be able to mobilize the public in support of all our lives. It needs to be a narrative that illuminates and calls out what we all have to gain and lose in this political and cultural gunfight over sex and reproduction.

On this panel, we’ve heard about the political and cultural challenges of mobilizing people around an abortion-centric agenda. If abortion is not a current concern or success in many of our lives, then we are going to need a broader agenda and narrative that reaches beyond abortion in order to have a successful movement.