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Protecting Privacy, Preserving Choice Keynote Address
Massachusetts Choice Coalition
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35 years. 35 years!

Could we possibly have realized, 35 years ago, that we'd be here today? Maybe – to celebrate those who had worked so long and so tirelessly to win the right to control and care for our own bodies, lives, and destinies – the doctors and other providers who, sometimes illegally and at great personal risk, cared for the women who needed them; the clergy, like my friend and colleague Howard Moody, then of Judson Memorial Church in NYC, who built modern Underground Railroads to help women find and get to safe providers; the friends and families who raised money and provided transportation and support; the lawyers who filed suits and argued cases; and, of course, the women who, as women have done since the dawn of time, found ways to do what was necessary and then dared to tell their stories to give life to the court cases and to fuel the conscience of the nation. Perhaps we could have imagined we'd be here today to celebrate this vast community that gave us Roe.

Or perhaps we might have imagined that it would be more like the right of married women to have credit in their own names, and divorced women to keep their credit (won about the same time as Roe – or even a few years later). Perhaps we would have imagined that the rights and responsibilities of bodily integrity were at least as basic as the rights and responsibilities of credit and that by now we'd have all but forgotten that this had ever been in doubt.

Unfortunately, neither is the case. 35 years after Roe we have not been allowed to forget, nor can we come together only to celebrate. We celebrate in order to sustain ourselves for a fight that should have long since ended but has not. We fight, even when weary, frustrated, and spent. We fight because our work is not done.

In the Congress and the Courts, in legislatures in virtually every state of the union, people struggle in myriad ways to deny women the basic human dignity of reproductive justice. Ask NARAL or the legislators in this room, they'll tell you – our work is not done.

In 87% of the counties in the United States there are no abortion services available. 87%! In 87% of the counties in the United States of America in 2008 there are no services available! Ask the Abortion Rights Fund or Tapestry Health, they'll tell you – our work is not done.

And when a *Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States* can argue, as Justice Kennedy recently did, that women are not capable of making our own informed moral decisions, that we need men to help us so that we won't make mistakes that we later regret; *as long as a Supreme Court Justice can deny the moral agency of women simply because we are women – and can do it without being laughed off the public stage forever – our work is not done.* What has happened to us that he could even think he could get away with publishing such an opinion? Ask any woman or man who has even a modicum of respect for women, they will tell you – our work is not done.

Finally, as long as women, acting as responsible moral agents, taking responsibility for their own lives and for those who depend on them, have to contend with guilt and shame, have judgment and contempt heaped upon them, rather than the support and respect they deserve, ask the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice or anyone with a heart and a conscience and we'll tell you – [wait for the crowd to say it] – our work is not done.

So what is this work still before us? You each have your own piece of it about which you can, no doubt, speak far more knowledgeably than I. So let me talk a bit about my, and the religious community's, role in the work. Even if you have no use for, and no interest in, religion, I want to suggest that a look at its role in our work might be useful – even necessary – not only as a counter to the undue influence of the Religious right but also to help us think more clearly about the benefits, and the dangers, of the language of morality that pro-choice politicians and activists are now adopting. More about that in a moment.

Let's start with responding to the purportedly religious arguments used against us. For 25 of these last 35 years I've been going around talking at events like this about the fact that the Religious Right does not have a corner on morality in this debate. In fact, the vast majority of religious people, and of denominations and faith groups, are pro-choice, and have been since before Roe. We're pro-choice not in spite of our faith but because of it.

I've talked about what the Bible says about abortion. We all know that the Bible ought not to determine public policy. In fact, those of us who know and treasure the Bible also know that "the Bible says" may be a starting point, but should never be an ending point, in any debate. Nonetheless, we do often have to confront Bible-based arguments and it might be helpful to us to have some idea of what it actually says. So, if you'll get out your pens [pull out and uncap my pen – hold it up], I will, as quickly as possible, run through for you *everything* the Bible says about abortion. [Put cap back on my pen and put it in pocket]. That's right – nothing. Not one word. We could talk more about why people are unclear on that concept, but that's another speech.

And anyway, things have changed a bit, the focus has shifted. One of the turning points was the '04 elections when pollsters and pundits attributed Rightwing victories to "values voters." The problems with those polls and their interpretations have since been exposed (just for example – I, if asked, would have identified values as the most important factor in my vote. But my values led me to vote for pro-choice, pro-gay rights, anti-war candidates). But, for better or worse, the results did lead both parties to focus on values

and morality – or at least the *language* of values and morality. And where the parties and politicians go the activists are seldom slow to follow.

And, from where I stand, a little application of moral wisdom doesn't seem like such a bad idea. So I'd like to speak briefly about three areas where I think such moral analysis is helpful and one area where I fear the unthoughtful (dare I say opportunistic) use of moral language is harmful.

First, the three areas where good moral analysis is critically important: Abstinence only education; conscience, or refusal, clauses; and the erosion of integrity in science and public discourse.

Abstinence-only education

We've said that we oppose this because we don't want government trying to take over the job of teaching morality to our children – especially given what we've seen of the morality they practice. We also object because abstinence only education simply doesn't work.

Study after study (17 national and international studies) has shown that comprehensive sex education – sex education that teaches about abstinence *and* contraception and sexually transmitted diseases – works. It increases the age at which young people become sexually active, reduces the number of partners they have once they do, reduces teen pregnancy rates, and saves lives. It works. There are no credible studies – none—that show that abstinence only education accomplishes anything. It doesn't work.

But even if it did work we would still oppose it. And not just because we don't want government deciding what values to instill in our children. We would oppose it because it is wrong to try to get our children to do that we want them to by manipulating them with lies and half-truths.

When I talk to young people about the value of abstinence, about the importance of being emotionally and spiritually, as well as physically, ready for sex and of being able to accept the risks and responsibilities that go with being sexually active – about how to say no, when I talk to them about these things I want them to respect me enough to hear what I have to say. But I fear that I will not get, nor will I have earned, that respect if I'm not telling them the whole truth.

And if we don't respect our children enough to tell them the truth how can we expect them to respect themselves enough to say no to things that might hurt them or that they're simply not ready for?

Our children deserve better of us than withheld information and distorted truth.

It is not OK to win an argument by lying, withholding information, or distorting the truth. If our children learn that we are doing that to them they will stop hearing anything we say

– but they’ll continue to learn from what we do. We will turn them into liars who can’t be trusted and don’t know how to participate honorably in public or private debate. Honest public discourse has become nearly impossible to find. We certainly don’t need to be training a new generation to follow us down that perilous path.

It is too easy to sacrifice integrity on the altar of expedience. The stakes are so high it seems we cannot afford to lose – no matter the cost. Yet we abandon integrity at our peril. In the long run the cost to our souls and our cause will be more than either can bear.

Conscience/Refusal Clauses

When doctors and pharmacists try to opt out of providing medical care, claiming it’s an act of conscience, *our work is not done*.

Let me say a bit more about that, because the religious community has long been an advocate of taking principled stands of conscience – even when such stands require civil disobedience. We’ve supported conscientious objectors, the Underground Railroad, freedom riders, sanctuary seekers, and anti-apartheid protestors. We support people who put their freedom and safety at risk for principles they believe in.

But let’s be clear, there’s a world of difference between those who engage in such civil disobedience, and pay the price, and doctors and pharmacists who insist that the rest of the world reorder itself to protect their consciences – that others pay the price for their principles.

This isn’t particularly complicated. If your conscience forbids you to carry arms, don’t join the military or become a police officer. If you have qualms about animal experimentation, think hard before choosing to go into medical research. *And, if you’re not prepared to provide the full range of reproductive health care (or prescriptions) to any woman who needs it then don’t go into obstetrics and gynecology, or internal or emergency medicine, or pharmacology. Choose another field!* We’ll respect your consciences when you begin to take responsibility for them.

The Erosion of Integrity in Science and Public Discourse

Public debate, at its best, rises to the art of rhetoric. Such rhetoric can:

- introduce us to new ideas;
- dazzle us with new possibilities;
- seduce us into exploring, and even embracing, the best wisdom that experience and inventiveness can offer.

But, distorted, un-truthful, misleading rhetoric not only fails to do its duty, it has a corrosive effect on our public discourse and our common life. We don’t know what or whom to believe and, consequently, don’t know how to act or even how to think.

We in the pro-choice movement, and especially in the religious pro-choice movement, are familiar with this problem. For example -- I was doing the Congress, TV, and lecture circuit back when Clinton was vetoing the first so-called Partial Birth Abortion bans. The women I met had not made some casual choice not to be pregnant anymore. These were women who longed for children. They had named the baby, decorated the nursery, and rearranged their lives to make room for an already-loved addition to their families. And then, in those last months or weeks of expectation, they learned that something had gone tragically, horribly wrong. Brains never developed, organs grew outside the body. These babies-not-to-be were bundles of conditions, any one of which would, alone, be incompatible with life.

These women were grieving. And they were devoting their lives to opposing legislation which would deny other women who might find themselves in similar circumstances the options they would need to spare their fetuses suffering, to attend to their grief, to protect their fertility, and, sometimes, to save their lives.

The stories told by those working to pass these heartless restrictions dishonored these brave women and families who had already suffered so much. And they dishonored those who have spent and, too often, risked their lives to care for those women.

I remember, in those early days of the debates, hearing constantly about women who had aborted in the eighth month because of cleft palates or clubfeet. I'll confess that those struck me as small reasons for such a momentous decision. But, on the other hand, I had never actually heard of anyone making the decision for such reasons. I wondered where my opponents got these stories. And then one day, while on a flight to yet another debate, I was reading through a briefing book loaned to me by a PPF affiliate and I found it. I found a case where the fetus that was aborted in the 3rd trimester had a cleft palate and a clubfoot. Now that fetus also had no brain beyond the brain stem and several vital organs either had not developed or were growing outside the body. There was no way that fetus would survive and delivering it would almost surely, at the very least, compromise the mother's ability to bear children in the future -- but there were a cleft palate and a club foot involved.

Lies, half-truths, and manipulation trivialized the lives and griefs of those who wrestled with all too real and all too difficult decisions.

And when people are willing to lie -- and to manipulate and distort the truth like that -- they render impossible the civic discourse on which a free and a just society depends.

No one knows, any longer, how to evaluate what they hear. Do you assume everyone is telling the truth -- in which case you believe that manipulative nonsense? Or do you believe that everyone is lying -- in which case, all our speeches, articles, explanations, and exhortations are useless?

Now we see even science treated as if its only value were political.

We've dealt for years with the so-called study on post abortion stress. Long discredited, it is still being cited as if it were scientifically legitimate. Now it's joined by the government's perpetuation of another discredited claim – that abortion leads to breast cancer. In some places doctors are being required to tell their patients of this link. They are required to lie to their patients – to choose between committing malpractice or a crime. Others continue to push for the FDA to revisit over the counter access to Emergency Contraception. Each of these is an instance of a political agenda masquerading as science, infusing the conversation with so much dishonesty that reasoned conclusions become ever more elusive.

By all means, put our values and convictions on the table with the facts and then let's disagree about the moral and policy implications of that data. Let's disagree passionately – an indicator of how seriously we take it all. But let's disagree honestly. Otherwise we salt the ground that has, through the ages, led to astonishing new discoveries as well as moral enlightenment.

If politicians want morality and values language to bolster their campaigns, tell them this: Lying to our children, refusing services to those who depend on us, compromising the integrity of science and public debate are immoral. These must stop!

So – those are some of the ways values language could, perhaps, help us. But there's another way I fear it's *hurting* us.

In an effort to appeal to the so-called “values voters” we've adopted apologetic language. Language like -- “safe, accessible and *rare*,” or “prevention first.” Inasmuch as that enables us to win votes and achieve legislative victories I suppose it's a good thing. It's pragmatic – in the short term, anyway – and that does matter. But I fear the longer and larger effects.

See, I think that we think that one of the benefits of this language of moral complexity is that it takes seriously the ambivalence some women feel – it addresses the grief or guilt some report.

Maybe. But one does have to wonder how many of those feelings stem from some deep intrinsic moral intuition and how many have been planted by 35 years of hearing that they *ought* to feel guilty and to grieve.

And this is only made worse when we join the chorus decrying abortion as a necessary evil or a tragedy. Let's get clear about this:

When a woman finds herself pregnant due to violence and chooses an abortion, it is the *violence* that is the tragedy; ***the abortion is a blessing***.

When a woman finds that the fetus she is carrying has anomalies incompatible with life, that it will not live and that she requires an abortion – often a late-term abortion – to protect her life, her health, or her fertility, it is the shattering of her

hopes and dreams for that pregnancy that is the tragedy; ***the abortion is a blessing.***

When a woman wants a child but can't afford one because she hasn't the education necessary for a sustainable job, or access to health care, or day care, or adequate food, it is the abysmal priorities of our nation, the lack of social supports, the absence of justice that are the tragedies; ***the abortion is a blessing.***

And when a woman becomes pregnant within a loving, supportive, respectful relationship; has every option open to her; decides she does not wish to bear a child; and has access to a safe, affordable abortion – ***there is not a tragedy in sight -- only blessing.*** The ability to enjoy God's good gift of sexuality without compromising one's education, life's work, or ability to put to use God's gifts and call is simply blessing.

So, what's next?

We have plenty to fight against: doctors scared away from their practices by the fear of violence; onerous burdens on the poorest, youngest, sickest, and most vulnerable among us; the atrocity of so-called Partial-Birth Abortion bans that threaten the lives of women who are already contending with shattered dreams. Anyone with a heart and a conscience cannot help but be enflamed by this. Let's acknowledge that these atrocities fuel our passion for the work. And that can be a necessary and a good thing.

But outrage burns fast. Its heat is a powerful force but a finite one.

Under-girding that outrage, sustaining our passion ... sustaining *us* ... we need a vision. We need, in our despair and rage and busyness, not to lose sight of the vision we yearn for and the values that make us who we are.

I don't *just* want them to stop closing down clinics and wearing out providers. I want a world where every woman and man and child has full access to all the health care they require – provided conveniently and compassionately. Where people are respected as individuals, who, because they *are* unique individuals will, necessarily, see things differently from one another; will make decisions I don't agree with or even understand. And where it is assumed that they have the right to information and support and respect as they decide on the course of their own lives.

I don't just want abortion to be safe and affordable and accessible and legal. I want women who face troubling pregnancies and wrestle with their options and make, and live with, difficult decisions to be respected – *honored* – for their struggle and their integrity.

I want a world where people have enough faith that they don't need to hang on to the patently ridiculous and faithless notion that there is, or can be, a rule for every occasion and that knowing and enforcing enough rules will somehow spare us from the difficult work of making complex ethical decisions. Where people are prepared to do the best they

can and manage the consequences. Where women who wrestle with decisions about childbearing are respected not because we know that the decisions they make are the right ones but because we understand that that is not something we ever *can* know. Where we understand that faithfulness and honor and courage require not pretending the complex ethical issues are really clear cut, but living into ethical ambiguity with open eyes and open hearts.

I want to live in a world that values cooperation over competition; compassion over punishment; respect over control; and the dazzling diversity of creation over conformity.

I want to live in a world where women have real choices. Not just women with plenty of resources but all women. Where child care, and health care, and a living wage, and contraceptive availability, and family leave, and the social safety net, *and the moral climate* allow all women real choices. Where bearing children and not bearing children are both viable options and all women have access to the things they need to realize either option.

I dream of a world where we can disagree passionately but honestly; a world where our public discourse on the issues most important to us is marked by integrity and a charitable respect for one another.

And as we build and embrace such a vision we will find diverse allies. Remember that the same precarious judicial balance that puts our reproductive rights at risk also threatens the environment; protections for minorities, workers, the elderly, the disabled; virtually every civil rights gain of the last 50 years. Fighting *against* their assaults on the common good and common decency will often find us in temporary coalition with those other affected groups. We'll join together to fight this or that bill or appointment that threatens to gore both our oxen. But fighting *for* a vision – *that* moves us from an occasional *coalition* to an ongoing *movement*. And in that movement, though we may fight on different fronts, we fight the same battle to achieve the same goal.

We can craft a vision worthy of our commitment, broader than any one cause, bigger than our individual imaginations ...

and, you might say, beyond our grasp.

But I'm not so sure. 104 years ago last month two bicycle repairmen from Ohio went to the Outer Banks of NC and did the impossible. They flew an airplane. Not very long (12 seconds) and not very far, but they flew it. In those early years people used to go to air shows to see what the trick was – how those guys made it look like they could fly – for they knew that no one could really do that.

My grandmother was 6 years old when the Wright brothers made that first flight. Before she died five years ago year she had seen men walk on the moon and women go into space, return, and use the ship to go back again. She saw the advent of indoor plumbing

and telephones and electricity and of refrigeration and microwaves and cell 'phones and the internet.

We have seen unimaginable advances in science and technology. Why would we expect less of the human spirit?

William Sloan Coffin said, "Socrates had it wrong; it's not the unexamined, but the uncommitted, life that is not worth living."

We have a vision worthy of our commitment – of our passion and our best efforts. I am Ruby Parrish Hancock's grand-daughter and I do not believe in the word impossible.

And I know that if we continue to commit ourselves to this noble cause, if we continue to fight not only *against* oppression but *for* a vision, -- a vision big enough to serve and protect and care for all of us, and those not yet at the table as well; if we bring to the front all our skills and our integrity, the faithfulness that sustains us, our vision, our voices, our solidarity then we will, as a community, achieve things we could never have dreamed of and, as individuals, when our time on this earth has run its course we will know that our lives have been worth living and we will be able to go on in peace.

Thank you for your partnership on this grand adventure.