

Elinor Curry

Professor Fellingner

EN150

14 October 2014

Abortions Happen, Let Them Be Safe

Caroline was poised to enter her senior year in college when she discovered her pregnancy and knew that a child could ruin her life. In 1963, the choices were to have the child out of wedlock and be labeled a slut or rush into a miserable marriage. The third, unspeakable option was abortion. Illegal before the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision, which legalized abortion in the fifty states, abortions were dangerous and women gambled their lives on them (“Foreword”). Caroline was raised Catholic, and at first she did not even think about abortion because of the church's position. Her partner was willing to marry her, but she knew that the marriage would be unhappy, and the child would likely suffer. She considered going to a home for unmarried mothers, but she was terrified of the social stigma and of how the time away from school would ruin her chances at having a career. So, she eventually chose to get an abortion (“Caroline”).

The procedure was carried out by an old man who was likely not a licensed doctor; it cost her one hundred dollars cash and took several days to finish. In a dirty room, he injected her uterus with saline and told her the abortion would happen within the day, when in reality, the forced miscarriage took days to begin. When it did, she was alone in her dormitory, laboring in extreme pain for twelve hours. She was left with a bucketful of blood and a small fetus. Terrified of being caught and prosecuted, she had no other choice but to flush it down the toilet. After that, Caroline bled for months, exhausted and anemic, until she finally confessed what had happened to a friend, and he got her the medical attention she desperately needed. Caroline nearly died because she did not have access to a

safe and sterile abortion (“Caroline”).

Caroline's story is featured in *Back Rooms*, an anthology of stories from the Illegal Abortion Era. Many people, identified only by first name, confess what they did or what happened to them during that time, and what society was like then. Caroline, Kathleen, and Lila all said that premarital sex was an accepted part of society, as long as you never spoke of it. Pregnancy out of wedlock, of course, was not accepted or discussed at all, except in whispers and rumors. Kathleen and Lila also obtained back-alley abortions—Kathleen tried to abort twice, as the first attempted did not succeed, and Lila had a wire coat hanger shoved up her vagina for a day and a half (“Kathleen” and “Lila”). Thousands of other women died, and this was life before the legalization of abortion. This reality is what pro-life activists want to go back to; they want society to regress and women to die. Pro-life activists market themselves as protesting for unborn children, but the reality is that they are staunchly anti-women.

Abortion and arguments about it have existed as long as human beings. There are records of ancient Greeks and Romans performing abortions, and even Plato and Aristotle were actively pro-abortion, both speaking and writing in its favor. Early Jewish prophets and rabbis “didn't have much to say about it,” while authorities in the Christian church were divided on the issue. The Christian church did not make a decision until 400 A.D. when St. Augustine wrote that abortion was a sin. This judgment was solidified in the thirteenth century, when St. Thomas Aquinas also said that abortion was a sin—but only if the fetus already had a soul. Souls, according to him, entered the fetus forty days after conception, in the case of male children, and eighty days after conception in the case of female children. Most women continued performing abortions anyways. In 1803, England declared abortions performed after the mother felt the fetus move—a phenomenon referred to as “quickening”—a crime (McCorvey 7-8).

In post-revolutionary America, abortion was a “normal though somewhat undercover part of

society” (McCorvey 9). Some states had laws against abortion, but they were very rarely enforced. Most practitioners were simply men or women who knew how to induce miscarriage. There was no standard for who could call themselves a doctor until 1847, when a group of young men who had graduated from medical schools formed the American Medical Association. In essence, the doctors created a licensing system, and these “licensed” doctors did not want “unlicensed” doctors practicing any form of medicine—including abortion. The war against unlicensed abortions picked up pace during the Civil War, and by 1900, abortions were declared illegal altogether. Illegal, “back-alley” abortions were available, but they were highly dangerous operations performed by people with no medical training (McCorvey 9-10).

In January of 1973, the Supreme Court decided the landmark *Roe v. Wade* case. Jane Roe—later revealed to be Norma McCorvey—filed suit in Texas for the right to terminate her pregnancy. The Supreme Court ruled in her favor, saying that the “constitutional right to privacy 'is broad enough to encompass a woman's decision... to terminate her pregnancy.'” The decision made any laws outlawing abortion unconstitutional, making them legal, safe, and more accessible, and set a legal precedent for over 30 more Supreme Court cases related to abortion. Although there were still limits and issues surrounding abortion, and many more cases to be heard, the first big step was made in protecting women's reproductive rights and—more importantly—their lives (*Roe V. Wade*).

Although exact abortion and death rates from before *Roe v. Wade* are unknown, they are estimated to average 1 million a year before 1973, with 100,000 women hospitalized from complications and another 5,000 deaths. Since then, the average number of abortions per year has fluctuated between 1.3 and 1.5 million, with a slight downward trend starting in 1988. That decline is easily explained by the rise of more reliable birth control. Legal abortions have made women safe; they have kept 5,000 women a year—205,000 women since 1973—from dying of complications from botched

abortions (Blanchard 30-33). Abortions happen, independent of their legal status. Anti-abortionists would rather women die than let them have safe and legal abortions; their stance is purely anti-women.

WORKS CITED

- Blanchard, Dallas A. *The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right: From Polite to Fiery Protest*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994. Print.
- McCorvey, Norma, and Andy Meisler. *I Am Roe: My Life, ROE v. WADE, and Freedom of Choice*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. Print.
- Messer, Ellen, and Kathryn E. May. *Back Rooms: Voices from the Illegal Abortion Era*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1994. Print.
- “Caroline.” Messer and May 3-10.
- “Kathleen.” Messer and May 11-15.
- “Lila.” Messer and May 18-24.
- Piercy, Marge. “Foreword.” Messer and May ix-xiii.
- “*Roe V. Wade: Its History and Impact*.” PlannedParenthood.org. Planned Parenthood, January 2014. Web. 18 September 2014.