

The following remarks were delivered by Reverend Beth Marshall during the Women's Sister March in Erie, Pennsylvania. This historic gathering was held on Saturday, January 21, 2017 in cities and towns all over the globe, drawing millions of people into the streets to voice their support for kindness and equal rights for all citizens, regardless of gender, faith, orientation or disability. We are proud to be represented by the clear and decisive voice of our minister and friend, Beth Marshall.

Thank you Rev. Beth!

Long before I was a grandmother and an ordained minister, I was a young woman and a young mother -- with many questions and concerns about my own reproductive health. Fortunately, my faith community respected me enough to teach me early and comprehensively about sexuality in ways that were based in fact, expansive in their scope, and radically inclusive (even back in the 1970s). Since then, the program has evolved into the one currently offered to children, youth and adults in many Unitarian Universalist congregations.

We believe that sexuality is one component of the human experience, that we need different levels of information at different times in our lives, and we need a safe place to ask our most embarrassing questions. Comprehensive education about human sexuality was, and continues to be a sacred gift, and in my mind a right.

Beyond "the facts," I learned that I had the capacity to make my own decisions regarding reproductive issues. Over the years, I sought counsel from professionals, friends and respected elders, but ultimately I learned that my body has always been my responsibility. I believe it is also my right -- a right I do not want taken away from me or from anyone else.

I am blessed to be part of a faith tradition which is grounded in respect -- respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people. We believe that genuine respect is core to the health of all relationships. Not just for Unitarian Universalists. Not just for women. For all people.

As a woman, as a mother and grandmother, and as a minister I share my belief that a woman's right to make decisions regarding her own health and reproduction is hers and hers alone. Respect of this kind acknowledges the complexity of each situation and does not presume that one answer is appropriate in all situations. Respect of this kind means not imposing my opinions on someone else, nor presuming that I know what best. Respect of this kind means being open to listening to diverse opinions and being willing to learn from others with whom I may vehemently disagree.

I wasn't yet in middle school when the Supreme Court made their decision on Roe vs Wade. If memory serves, a number of the older girls in our school were running around with student surveys for the school paper: Were we for abortion? Were we against abortion? Seriously?

My classmates and I were 11 years old, which in 1973 terms was pretty darn innocent. Most of my friends hadn't gotten their first periods. None of us had been kissed yet. Pregnancy was an abstract concept at best. In fifth grade, we didn't know how to frame the bigger questions. We didn't have the capacity for a nuanced conversation that addressed individual or family circumstances, failed birth control or the health and well-being of the mother. Those early questions and conversations were cut and dried, you were for abortion or against abortion.

Back in 1973, I thought it was a simple question. I didn't know better.

I know better now. And, it is no longer 1973.

Today, as informed adults we understand better the complexity and nuance. And, we still have much to learn. We understand that no two situations are identical. We understand better that the conversation includes a spectrum of issues and questions around reproductive health and sexuality.

We understand better the relationship between accessibility to sex education and affordable birth control, and a decrease in the need for safe and legal abortions.

Which bring us to today, as we stand together at a fragile moment in our nation's history.

Many women and immigrants and refugees and people of color, many who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer, many who are poor, who live with health conditions and accessibility issues, and many who struggle with mental health issues feel we can no longer trust that our best interests or our constitutional rights, or our most personal decisions will be protected or respected by new restrictive legislation or some of our elected officials.

We know this is not OK. And we are here to speak up!

We are a time when the level of community discourse is slipping with frightening speed back to a time when insults were the norm, when racial and sexual slurs were acceptable, and when discrimination was legal based on the color of our skin or who we loved.

We know that is not ok. And we are here to speak up!

Among us and around us are individuals who fear for their very lives and the lives of their spouses and partners and children. Some fear losing their access to affordable health care and birth control. Others fear deportation. The fears are real.

We know this is not OK, and we are here to speak up.

The preacher in me will tell you there is hope, that there is always hope.

Those of us gathered here, and all our sisters and brothers marching in rallies across the country, and all those who could not march today but are with us in spirit, are the people who can do the work that is needed in this moment.

We are the ones who can speak up when we hear words of hate.

We are the ones who can step in to protect those who are vulnerable.

We are the ones who can remind our co-workers and neighbors and family members that the conversation around sexuality and reproduction is far more complicated and nuanced than it was on those schoolyards in 1973.

We are the ones who can write the letters to our elected officials, and who can walk beside our friends and sisters as they wrestle with some of the most difficult decisions they might ever make.

We are the ones whose task it is to create safe, healing places -- sanctuaries for the body and spirit.

There will always be work to do for those who are in a position to do it.

To quote beloved author and poet Alice Walker, "we are the ones we have been waiting for."

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

But the time of waiting is over. We are here. The time is now. There is work to be done and we are here to do it.

Thank you, and Amen.