

## Past, Present and Future: Tense

I'm a Jane. Another Jane said – when she heard me use the past tense a few years ago – *No. Once a Jane, always a Jane; it's not something that passes. We are Janes.* Immediately, I knew she was right. I've been dealing with abortion, one way or another, since October of 1970, when I went to a meeting in a small neighborhood church and joined the Abortion Counseling Service of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union (often now called JANE – though mostly called “the Service” by Janes) .

One of the ways I deal with abortion now is explain to people much younger than I am that people in the USA used to think, feel and talk about abortion – and contraception and motherhood, for that matter – quite differently from the way they do now. That difference is the great achievement of the anti-abortion movement in the USA.

That difference is perhaps most often cited in relation to elections, contests in which people running for office include their “position” on abortion access as part of their credentials. A far more important difference, though, is in the new default decision: *Now*, because of the cultural changes orchestrated through anti-abortion politics, people are much more likely to think that if they become pregnant by accident, they should give birth – even if the pregnancy is a result of rape (including incest), or might kill them. They think, *now*, that deciding not to have a baby means they are bad, shameful and selfish – perhaps even that they are *murderers*.

Before this time, women with unintended pregnancies generally said, I don't want to have a baby; or, I don't want to have a baby now; or, I just can't have this baby. Fifty years ago, women and girls didn't think they needed a dire excuse to abort. What they needed to do was make judgments, make decisions based on whatever their lives showed them – what they wanted and planned and hoped for, and what the life of that child might be if it were born, unplanned and unchosen as it was.

I do all this explaining in classrooms or libraries or bookstores or cafés or living rooms. Sometimes people want to know what we did, pre-Roe. Sometimes they want to talk about what to do now, this very minute, when Roe has not yet been overturned – but has long been eviscerated.

We talk about how it's always been necessary to resist bad laws, and about what resistance might mean. Many don't know about the extensive damage already done to abortion and contraception access in the USA. They may know about clinic defense work – or even do it, and may work or volunteer for Planned Parenthood or Pro-Choice organizations. They may be medical students, nursing students, midwifery students and herbalists. Many are learning about and working for the National Network of Abortion Funds. They may want to talk about ways to raise money – and consciousness.

I try to point out that even people who consider themselves “pro-choice” have absorbed the nearly-omnipresent concepts and language created by the anti-abortion movement.

Their most successful language achievement surely is the creation of the term “pro-life” – which must always be challenged, civilly, when used either ignorantly or deliberately by others; it should never be used to describe the anti-abortion movement.

Words – as a medium, a connection and a method – are important to me; after all, I'm a writer. I've written stories, essays, poems and books about mothering, and sometimes I perform that work as part of the “explaining” I'm talking about here. I suggest they check out the JANE page on my website, so they can find links to resources – notably the recent batch of books and movies that focus on JANE work ([juditharcana.com](http://juditharcana.com)).

My explaining almost always includes me saying I want people who support abortion access to talk and write more about emotions, female sexuality, ethics, morality, motherhood, religion – even about killing – in relation to abortion. Mostly we've left all that to the other side, and they've won power with it, because abortion's not only or even mostly about medicine and law, and everybody knows that. So when we refuse to, or are unable to – or have decided it's politically inadvisable to – deal with emotions, female sexuality, ethics, morality, motherhood, religion, and killing in relation to abortion, the anti-abortion movement is happy to portray us as the selfish bitches popular media so often like to suggest women (especially feminists) are.

I argue for thinking and talking among ourselves in small groups (they were good, those little 20<sup>th</sup> century groups of women struggling toward truth and honor; they were flawed, as damn near everything is, but in the main, good). I urge small groups to talk about what abortion *is* – its thousands of years of history, its many ways and methods, how it actually works, and about what abortion *means* – in the life of a one particular person, as well as the life of the community and nation. Though I do want us to talk about how deciding to abort entails conscious acceptance of responsibility for the decision, I don't particularly want us to talk about “choice.”

We need to remind ourselves: there's *still* no contraceptive that's *both* 100% effective *and* 100% healthy, so abortion-as-backup is a necessity. We need to actively question the knee-jerk assumption that birth is, in virtually all circumstances, the best thing we can give an embryo, a fetus. We have to consider the folly of oppositional arguments in which, when antis talk about “the life of the baby,” abortion access advocates talk about “the life of the mother” – thereby creating a dreadful contest which is neither an accurate nor a useful description of unintended pregnancy.

We need to discuss our positions and opinions with colleagues and friends to learn how to articulate our ideas and define our actions. No aspect of this complex issue can be set aside when we're training volunteers, staff and clinicians, doing community organizing and consciousness raising, and teaching – talking and working with people struggling to take responsibility for their own lives. We need a coming together of those for whom access to abortion and contraception in the USA has conventionally (and luckily) been unthreatened, and those whose lives have already taught them that jeopardy and vulnerability are chronic. And when we're called upon to behave strategically or

tactically in public, we need to have prepared ourselves by doing the internal, small group work that helps us speak with assurance, intelligence and compassion.

One of the many useful things about being a Jane is that my “explaining” can include this: I already know we can do what has to be done. Even when we hardly know each other, even if we don’t especially like each other, even when we have to learn everything new from the ground up – *and in secret*, we can do what has to be done.

© Judith Arcana (Earlier versions of this essay have appeared in other places and publications, starting with *ON THE ISSUES* in February 2012.)