



FRANCES JETTER

## BY DEBORAH COOPER

Different reproductive roles represent the basic dichotomy of humankind. This difference has been used to rationalize all other ascribed differences and to justify woman's position as a second class citizen (if she is considered a citizen at all.) The idea of woman as nothing but a vessel has persisted throughout the centuries, with men making all the legal and moral decisions concerning reproduction. One indicator as to the amount of freedom allowed women has always been the amount of control we have been given over our reproductive functions, as evidenced by the availability of birth control and safe and legal abortion.

In early cultures, before the rise of patriarchy, procreation was not understood to be connected with coitus. Women, like the female deities these cultures worshipped, were thought to bring forth life alone and unaided. Women were highly respected for this and shared equal social and political power with men.

At some point a connection between coitus and procreation was made. This connection did not serve to enlighten both sexes but instead became a major factor in the subjugation and oppression of women. The theory arose that life not only did not originate with woman but that in fact she had little or nothing to do with it. Semen was thought to contain the essence of life and there was no notion of the part ova (eggs) play in the reproductive process. Women were reduced to the status of encapsulating amniotic sacs for the male's "seed of life." Women were quickly made the legal property of men and their sexual activity limited to their "owner" to insure paternity of the owner/father. Women were chattel, no longer respected or revered. On the contrary, they were considered less than human (read: male) and basically unclean menstruation, once celebrated as part of the natural cycle, came to be viewed as evidence of women's inferiority.

The rise of Judeo-Christianity echoed these themes and legitimized them. All women are said to pay for Eve's sinfulness with the "curse" of menstruation and the pain of childbirth. Mary, who is the holiest female figure in the Christian tradition, is little more than a vessel for God the Father's seed. Jesus is 100% God's son, Mary but a womb in which he resided for 9 months.

In classical Rome and Greece, where although women were not completely equal they were not chattel, birth control and abortion were widely available. A woman's body was considered her own, and hers the right to choose whether she would or would not bear children.

In contrast, punishment for abortion became so severe among Christians of the 11th century that the Holy Roman Emperor Henry II made it also a crime to miscarry, even unwillingly. The punishment was death by burning.

Abortion has been a legal right of American women since the Supreme Court ruling (*Roe v. Wade*) in 1973, but the right and power to control our bodies has been under attack since. In 1981, the Senate, for example, voted to eliminate all federal funding for abortions where the woman's life is not endangered, which would have made it impossible for poor women to get abortions even if they were victims of rape or incest. The most powerful campaign to eliminate abortion has been the attempt to define the fetus as a "person" (with all Constitutional rights) at the moment of conception. This simple definition made law would immediately outlaw all abortions and make any woman who had one guilty of premeditated murder. The penalty for this in some states is death. The death rate due to illegal abortions would be unprecedented. Because of fear of prosecution and the severity of the "crime," very few skilled medical people would be willing to perform abortions. If a woman had complications after trying to abort herself, she would be turning herself in for murder by seeking medical care in time to save her life.

If members of Congress, state legislatures and other leaders of what should be more accurately called the "Pro-Women's Death Movement" instead of "Right to Life" have their way, even women whose lives are endangered by pregnancy or are suffering from a tubal pregnancy could be denied medical help. A plea of self-defense would not even be applicable as this can be used only when the victim's conduct is wrongful and not in the case of a perfectly innocent fetus. And once again, as in the 11th century, women who miscarry could become liable for "wrongful death." Our eating, sleeping, smoking and drinking habits while pregnant could conceivably make us open to prosecution because of potential threat to the fetus, which in effect would have more rights than any woman alive.

Many would argue that if women would be more responsible and use birth control, abortion would no longer be an issue. The fact is that as of yet there is no 100% safe and effective form of birth control except celibacy. Even if there were, the so-called "Human Life" amendments and bills would outlaw the use, sale or manufacture of contraceptives that prevent implantation of a fertilized egg — or in their definition, a "person." The Pill could be outlawed since it may work as an abortifacient in a rare number of cases. The I.U.D. would definitely be illegal and any woman using it a criminal.

Celibacy or lesbianism would not make a woman free from the fear of an unwanted pregnancy, as every woman of childbearing age would still be subject to enduring a pregnancy as a result of rape or incest. Statistics show that victims of rape have a 17% chance of pregnancy and incest victims a 25% chance. Rape and incest have more than enough potential for damaging women's lives without the added horror of being forced to endure a 9-month (and possibly lifetime — if they keep the child) reminder of their victimization.

The last few decades have seen more and more women questioning patriarchal thought and practice. The movement for female emancipation has become broad and widespread. Now, just when many of us accept as fact that women are men's equals and deserve the same right of control over our lives and have left the battleground to tend to our personal growth, we face a backlash movement which has the very real and present potential of investing the state (read patriarchy) with a more

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destructive and thorough control over our bodies and lives than has heretofore been imagined. The myth of woman as but a vessel for male seed would not only be socialized, it would be legalized.

This movement ironically calls itself "Right to Life" or "Pro-Life," to which we may well ask — Whose life? So-called Right to Life forces have generally opposed the kinds of programs which would make abortion less frequent; childcare, sex education, contraception and so forth, while backing military spending, nuclear energy, and the industrial rape of the earth in the name of profit and national security. It is telling that these people who are supposedly pro-life are so concerned with the survival of an insentient mass of cells and accept war, a ritualized institutionalized form of mass murder, as normal, even justified human behavior. If they were to put the same money, time and energy into ending war there might be more hope for this planet.

Many think that abortion could never be outlawed. They should think again. Throughout history laws and opinions regarding birth control and abortions have fluctuated not on the basis of reproductive control as women's right, but according to the cultural climates of puritanism, so-called "sexual liberation," or the requirements of military aggression and the labor market.

This country has taken a swing to the right and although the majority still favors legalized, safe abortion, a very powerful minority realizes that the most effective way to squelch women's drive for equality is to take away our right to control our own bodies. Without the full capacity to limit our own reproduction other "freedoms" and "rights" are but tantalizing mockeries that could not be exercised.

We must not take our present rights for granted but fight to keep them. There is no time for complacency. Not only our freedom, but our very lives are a stake.

*Deborah Cooper originally wrote this article for the NCTE in 1979 under her favorite nome de plume 'Iris Wilde'. She lives in San Francisco.*

## FEMINIST HERO

I moved to Cannon Beach somewhere around 1977. I had graduated from Humboldt State University where I majored in psychology with an emphasis on Women's Studies. In Arcata, California, I had been one of the founders of a rape crisis center and shelter home, which exist to this day. I moved to Cannon Beach following the deaths of three members of my family, called to this beautiful place to grieve and heal. I was waitressing at the Tolovana Inn and soon began teaching a feminist consciousness raising class at Clatsop Community College, where I met Lee Ann Kelly Jones.

I hit it off with Lee Ann right away. She was a fireball of energy and had a vision of setting up a crisis center for women in Clatsop County. During the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, women began speaking about their lives, and by doing so, the prevalence of rape, domestic violence and childhood sexual abuse became no longer shameful secrets but something we began to organize together to prevent. Lee Ann spoke out about her own life and had a real knack for drawing others out as well. She could go into a working class bar, talk to everybody about the prevalence of women battering in the community, and come out with checks and cash to support our crisis line, along with new stories. I remember at that time meeting with her in cafes and restaurants to plot how we could raise money to fund a crisis line for women, with her small daughter Jodi always in tow.

Lee Ann hooked up with other women from around the state, and it felt like we were developing a kind of underground railroad to get women out of abusive situations and into new lives. We gathered a handful of volunteers — I remember clearly gathering at Sally Auel's house in Cannon Beach. Her daughter-in-law Jean had just got a hefty advance on her book, which Sally told us proudly was a feminist look at Neanderthal life. Money was raised steadily and surely. Bill's Tavern in Cannon Beach hosted a benefit for us, with the town showing up in full force to support us, with local musicians, poets and storytellers all providing entertainment. Michael McCusker was the editor of the *Times Eagle*, and he backed us by letting us write articles about feminism and running advertisements for free when we got up and running.

Somehow Lee Ann found us a great space in Astoria and it quickly got furnished with donations of furniture and what-not. I developed training for volunteers, but I must say that the bulk of the work of founding and running the crisis center/line was done by Lee Ann. She figured out a way to get a VISTA volunteer and she became a mover and shaker across Oregon helping domestic violence get recognized for the problem it is, and bringing the need for services into the public eye.

I moved down to San Francisco in 1980 to train and become a psychotherapist. I interned at a feminist mental health service and started the first program for women survivors of childhood sexual abuse in the city. I have been in private practice for twenty years now and also am a Wiccan priestess who teaches about feminism, spirituality and witchcraft internationally. I also am a writer who has been published in *Modern Pagans*, *The Pagan Book of Living & Dying*, and the *Reclaiming Quarterly*, as well as *North Coast Times Eagle*.

I feel blessed to know and have worked with Lee Ann Kelly Jones. She is a feminist hero to me.

~DEBORAH COOPER

## WHAT TO DO

~Send a telegram or write your congressman/woman and senator immediately.

~Donate time, energy or money to pro-choice groups such as the National Rights Action League.

~Educate yourself and then your friends and fellow workers — urge them all to get involved.

~Send "pro-women's death" leaders your menstrual blood every month (zip-lock bags are handy and convenient for such a purpose) with an appropriate note; for example: "Since you are so intent on interfering with the activity of my womb I will send you any product it issues on a monthly basis." Or: "I am sending you my menstrual blood every month as a symbol of my hopes that you will stop your efforts of creating a situation where countless women will shed not this blood of life but the blood of their deaths."

This gesture, while dramatic and extreme, is symbolic on many levels. And if it seems too distasteful, keep in mind the ever more distasteful actions of the anti-abortion forces, such as firebombing clinics and harassing women both going in and out from abortions. One thing is certain: if one hundred women did this it would have more impact than one thousand letters.

~IRIS WILDE

