

# Return to Sender: the Spirit in Abortion

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**Jan Dworkin**

The following article is a personal account of a seven week pregnancy and an abortion. It is the story of the various extreme states which this experience brought on and the learning which came forth. I went through the entire experience with Robert King, my partner and lover, and all the learning came from the source between us. This is a deeply personal account. I am moved to share it because the dreaming world has indicated that my story is meant for the public. I am prone to altered and extreme states of consciousness, particularly through relationship experiences. I usually feel that these experiences are deeply private and embarrassing.

Those who suffer extreme states over long periods often feel isolated from the “normal” population and hide their experiences. However, Mindell (1988) shows that extreme states are extreme relative to a cultural mainstream.<sup>1</sup> Extreme states happen in part as compensation for a culture which disavows aspects of itself in order to preserve its identity. Hiding these extreme experiences supports cultural “splitting.” Those who conform to the Eurocentric style of living, loving and communicating are considered “normal” and inherit the right to describe and delineate consensus reality. Others appear unusual, crazy or simply deviant, and either remain closeted or spill onto the streets and into our families, unwanted and marring the clean mainstream image. This splitting results in a myopic mainstream which doesn’t know its own wholeness.

Although I appreciate so-called “sanity” as one spice in a very flavorful stew, I do not support the hegemony of the center or “centered,” including its rational, linear, academic and non-emotional

style. I cannot be a part of cooking, eating or serving a bland and one dimensional future. I cannot endorse a system which makes it dangerous to reveal unusual proclivities and extreme states.

I believe many of our most secret aberrations can be deeply meaningful and potentially spiritually enriching for ourselves and for our world. Sharing these deeply personal experiences and learnings is outside the cultural norm. I do so now with trepidation, knowing that I risk being judged for both my viewpoints and my person.

I recognize that abortion can be a very painful and traumatic process for women and men and in no way mean to undermine that fact in this article. Although abortions were common in ancient and pre-industrial societies, Christianity always considered abortion sinful. By 1880 the procedure was prohibited in the United States, except to save the life of the pregnant woman. When abortion became a crime, many women endured the pain, humiliation and risk of illegal abortions. Abortionists often forced women into sexual relations prior to performing an abortion. In the 1950s one million illegal abortions were performed in the United States and one thousand women died each year from the procedure. Approximately 75% of those who died were women of color. It was not until 1973 in the Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision that abortion became legal in the United States. We are all familiar with the worldwide movements which are attempting to criminalize abortion once again.<sup>2</sup>

I dedicate this article to all the women who have gone through abortions before me. I especially honor those who have suffered or died from illegal abortions or for whom abortion was not a

choice but a necessity dictated by social, economic or emotional constraints.

Although Robert and I experienced emotional turmoil and pain in choosing abortion, we had the time and resources to use the experience in order to learn and grow. This is a privilege which many women and men do not have. We want to use that privilege by sharing our learning with you. In addition, we will continue to work towards insuring that women retain the right to choose.

The viewpoints expressed in this article are mine exclusively and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the editorial board of this journal.

### **A public calling**

While I was pregnant, I dreamed about a pregnant woman with a shamanic calling. In the dream, she appeared as Shelly Tambo-Van Coeur, an oddball character from the television show "Northern Exposure." I identified with Shelly in my dream, and learned that my pregnancy itself was a calling, meant for an audience—the public.

In some indigenous cultures, shamans believed that when women became pregnant, their task was to discover if they carried an 80 year old baby or an 800 year old baby. The 80 year old spirit was the seed of an ordinary child, meant to be born to this world. If the couple discovered an 800 year old spirit, the woman was not to give birth to a human child—rather, a shamanic calling was indicated and the couple was given a task. They were meant to find their song and bring it back to the community as an offering.<sup>3</sup>

The dreaming world indicated that ours was an 800 year old baby. In this article, we offer our song: our personal learning and inner research. We also hope to bring a new voice to the controversial subject of abortion. Our perspective may not yet have been represented by pro-choice or anti-abortion viewpoints. It is one story of the discovery of spiritual meaning through an extreme state in relationship.

About five weeks into my pregnancy, I walked into a room full of people. A close friend asked the group gathered, "How many people think Jan should have the baby? Let's see a show of hands." Is that normal? To make a public spectacle of the most private and personal of decisions? Hardly a soul had known I was pregnant.

My life has seldom been private, my decisions have rarely been personal. I've always sensed something uncanny in the boundaries between

my private self and the public. As an art major in college, I painted huge portraits of myself and my closest friends, stark naked. They are still showing on the walls of my home today. And then there is the behavior of my purse, safekeeper of my identity. I misplace my purse once a week. I've been doing so for years, leaving it in public places: restrooms, restaurants, trains. It is always returned to me, intact: commonly it is handed to me as I frantically return to the site of its disappearance. I once lost it in the Chicago O'Hare airport, stuffed with five thousand dollars in cash. Detectives informed me that the airport was crime-ridden and whomever had stolen it had probably already left the country. Two days later I was contacted by airport officials. My purse had shown up in the lost and found, complete with all the money, passport and credit cards. I received it, via UPS, the following day.

I don't believe these events can be completely reduced to carelessness, extraversion or narcissism. I am slowly discovering that I am public property. My life belongs to a greater spirit. Among most feminists today, being the property of others is not popular; liberated women ought to demonstrate independence, self-reliance and autonomy. Perhaps some of contemporary sado-masochistic sexual practices compensate rigid demands of Eurocentric feminism by teaching us to relinquish control and give ourselves over to something greater, stronger and more powerful (Paglia 1992: 147). The more I identify with my bondage to the Spirit, the more liberated I feel to become the woman I am meant to be.

### **Pregnant with love**

Conventional wisdom told us that our pregnancy, this seed of life between us, had the potential to grow, to come to birth and to make us a family. It is said that having a baby and nurturing a child as she grows creates a bond equal to no other. Many say childbirth is a peak experience to which nothing can compare. "It is the ultimate." "There is nothing like it." "You aren't complete without it," I've heard. At this time, we said no to that. We killed it. And through that "no," we have begun finding our song, our 800 year old baby. The ancient and eternal soul. Our bond.

My personal decision not to carry the child occurred in the midst of lovemaking. It must have been about 9:30 am. And then it was 11 and 11:30. I was looking into Robert's eyes, and I thought, "I

couldn't have this. We couldn't make love all morning if we had to care for a child." And then I knew that this was my child. THIS. This moment. This feeling. This love. This bliss. This bond. This was the child which I want to have again and again to love and to nurture.

Of course, I want to make THIS into a permanent state—I want it to last forever. That's when I lose the baby. A few short hours later we were out of that extreme passion and into another one—a violent fight, a bad mood, the pits. THIS never lasts. It always turns into something else which we don't welcome. I'm learning to say yes to it all. Yes to love and yes to conflict!

Our baby was conceived on or around Thanksgiving, at a time when I had made a huge transformation in myself. One evening, walking along 23rd Avenue in Portland, in an unusually lucid and altered state of consciousness, I realized that I could accept certain people in my life who had hurt me. I felt a deep love for my own mother! Despite her mistakes and shortcomings and hurtfulness, I could love her. I saw that she needed my love. She would blossom from my love. I made a change. And I got pregnant.

We never thought we could get pregnant. Robert didn't think he was fertile. He was sure he was "shooting blanks" (metaphor of a true warrior). So he had a fertility test. He shot his wad into a cup, which he reported is no easy feat in a doctor's office with attendants waiting patiently for the sample. They tested it. His little soldiers were marching with their guns loaded! But we played with fate anyway.

I thought I must be the infertile one. I've never been careful about birth control. I was sure I was too cold to be fertile. My hips are too narrow, I'm too thin. I don't eat enough and until then, I didn't cook. I thought there wasn't much motherly about me. I had never baked a cake, planted a garden or taken my nephew to the zoo.

But things were changing. My heart seemed to be opening more and more, even to myself. During that same week, I spent an entire Tuesday, that is a weekday, a WORKDAY, in bed with Robert watching TV and making love. I don't watch TV. I hate TV. As far as I'm concerned it is a creativity killer and devours brain cells. But I lost my mind and my metacommunicator and had one of the most blissful days of my life. Relaxing, being, breathing, loving.

And we got pregnant. Sometime that ecstatic, blissful week, love got us pregnant. We found out the day before Christmas. In time for Christmas. Jesus said "Love thy enemy. Love thy neighbor as thyself. Love takes precedence over the law."<sup>4</sup> The trick is in learning to love all the states—the friend, the foe and the self.

### **My deviant body parts**

In the 1990s in the United States, abortion should be a fairly straightforward procedure. I elected to go early in the day to have a seaweed laminaria inserted in my cervix to dilate it slowly over a few hours. This is a more natural method, which I chose over the steel rod approach, where they pry open the cervix, allowing the procedure to happen more quickly. But things rarely go as planned when it comes to my body.

My body is a garden. I grow tumors, cysts, polyps, lumps, bumps and babies. I cut them out, or have them removed, and they grow back again like weeds. Recently I had a polyp removed from my cervix during a routine pap smear. I fainted on the doctor's table, once again alarming professionals as I tripped to the other world. If only the doctor had encouraged me, like the Senoi elders do when a child falls in a dream, saying "You must relax and enjoy yourself when you fall (faint)... Falling (fainting) is the quickest way to get in contact with the spirit world... The falling spirits love you..." (Larson 1988: 98). When I returned from the trip, I looked at the polyp in the test tube and imagined it was a fetus. A few weeks later, we discovered my pregnancy.

The "pregnancy," with its little heartbeat, must be located on the ultrasound before it can be aborted. The mass of cells is referred to by clinicians as the "pregnancy" so as not to offend the parents and make us feel we are killing a human being. We preferred to call it the "spirit" the "baby" or (endearingly) the "little pooper." We couldn't be fooled. At seven weeks it had a heartbeat and we believe, a spirit. Eternity.

But my pregnancy proved hard to detect and the procedure could not be carried out as planned. In fact, when they went in with the ultrasound they couldn't even find my uterus! No uterus had ever been lost before, but mine was nowhere to be found. We thought for a moment it was an hysterical pregnancy, complete with morning sickness and mood swings—a case for Freud. Perhaps I just needed some attention and some time off.

They probed my most private sanctum with a microphone-shaped ultrasound device, covered with a condom (“safe” exploration), for what seemed forever. Eventually, the nurse located my uterus. Apparently my cervix is very long and narrow (like me) and my uterus is tipped and hiding way back there somewhere (like Robert). My vagina apparently is short, which complicates matters further.

After the discovery of my uterus the baby seemed to be missing. It could not be detected on camera. More poking, more prodding. When it was finally confirmed that I was indeed seven weeks pregnant, it came time to insert the laminaria and dilate the cervix. Foiled again. My long and narrow cervix takes strange turns and twists. It refused to accommodate the laminaria.

With reluctant kindness, the nurse suggested that I come back the following day when the doctor on call had more experience. “He’s seen everything,” she said. “Even weirdos like you!” I heard. “I think your procedure might be more complicated. I recommend giving you a narcotic.” “It’s going to hurt like hell and you might die,” I heard.

Although I no longer expect to be like others, I still feel disconcerted hearing about all the deviance of my body parts. I would prefer the medical establishment not compare my private organs to some standard of normalcy. I wish they wouldn’t enter me with their machines and technology. But this is all happening in a social milieu which is dangerous for doctors and clinics. There is so much fear of malpractice in the United States that medical people have to move slowly and test thoroughly to protect themselves. I’m grateful to abortion doctors, nurses and technicians who sometimes risk their personal safety to make sure that women maintain reproductive freedom.

In retrospect I appreciate my body’s wisdom. My uterus hid, protecting the spirit to give us an extra day to discover our calling and our song through this ordeal. However, with the disappearance of my uterus, my metacommunicator also left. We went home and I sobbed and trembled and felt sorry for myself. Why does it always have to be so complicated with me? Why couldn’t we have gotten it over with? I felt so out of control. I thought I was losing my mind, going crazy, having a psychotic break.

With Robert’s loving support, I managed to work on myself. I gave up my need to stay in

control and let myself be moved by something greater. What finally moved me was hunger. Amazing. For me to feel hungry is unusual; to be moved by hunger is monumental. I eat according to schedule, often pre-determined quantities. This was revolutionary; a momentary satori. “When tired sleep, when hungry eat.” A new form of mothering.

While I was lying down, letting myself be moved, the world channel began to express itself. Our household machinery became animated—the answering machine clicked on without the telephone ringing, the VCR turned on and off, lights flickered. It was eerie; we were spooked. As we unfolded the experience, we recognized the participation of our appliances as another signal telling us that our story was meant for the public.

### Aborting and being

When the moment arrived to have the abortion, I felt terrified. I feared death. I dreaded knowing that strangers would enter my most private temple to tamper with the mystery of creation.

The receptionist at the clinic cracked all these jokes about my name, in the waiting room, in front of everyone. “How inappropriate,” I thought. This is a serious matter. Then she began to tease me about a free trip to the Bahamas—as if I were about to go on vacation. I wondered why she was being so jovial. She seemed so serious with the other patients. Had she no feeling for me?

Her lighthearted reference to a vacation portended the wild trip I was about to embark on. Who would have believed that a couple of minutes later I would be roaring with laughter? I breathed into the nitrous oxide and absolutely exploded with laughter. The doctor, the technician, the nurse, the counselor, Robert, the whole room was in stitches. My pelvis was shaking so much they could hardly do the procedure.

All the medical people had urged me to take a narcotic to reduce pain, being that my organs were so oddly placed and shaped. But I resisted, and I’m glad I trusted myself. The procedure hurt a lot, but there was no need to have been knocked out. It hurt terribly when they stretched my cervix, and the suctioning felt awful, but it ended so quickly. Then I felt hot. Then I felt cold. They covered me with blankets and wheeled me to the recovery room.

Most women get up off the table and walk to the recovery room. Not me. I was out of it, shaking and cramping and holding Robert's face close to mine. He was asked to leave when another woman came into recovery. I just lay there for a while. Then came the bliss.

I never wanted to leave that recovery room. It was perfect. I felt perfect. Caressed by the Spirit. My temperature was just right. I felt so much love for Robert and so lucky to be with him. I experienced no pain. I was in heaven, looking out the big windows over the city. The light was perfect, the city was paradise. Other women came and went. They wanted to get out of that room, back to their normal lives. I wanted to stay there forever, in God's arms, the perfect womb. Everyday life seemed far away.

As I lay in reverie, one of the nurses asked me if I would be willing to do counseling for women who need support after an abortion. They wanted my card. The public wanted me. They had heard about the work that Dawn Menken and I had done years ago around the abortion debate.<sup>5</sup> I had been very supportive of the doctors and nurses during the abortion procedure, encouraging them in their work. They enjoyed me.

When I was ready to leave I found Robert in the waiting room. He brought me to the window and showed me an incredible double rainbow across the sky. He had been sad, mourning the loss of the baby and feeling guilty about having to send the embodied spirit back. "Return to sender. Address unknown," he was lamenting. Then the rainbow appeared. All was right. We recalled the last rainbow we had seen together, over Portland. It was during one of our liaisons as we were falling in love. I had joked that I wanted to have a baby with him as we ate pancakes in this funky cafe. Then we went out for a walk and saw a rainbow.

### **Dream song**

Robert dreamed a song the night before the abortion. In the dream, an old geezer was walking along the street with his dog. He was singing and roaring with laughter. And then the bum grabbed a machete and sliced the dog's head off. Just like that. He was laughing and blood was spurting everywhere. He told some guy to eat the dog's brains—to eat the whole dog. Then he began to sing a song about breathing and living. "Oh the air is clean."

Dreams happen. I feel Robert's machete sometimes and he feels mine. The machete is an aspect of both of us which we need. Driving to the abortion we had a violent fight. Robert was in a rough mood and it came through in his driving. I was nauseous, freaked-out and wanting a smooth ride. We blew up at each other. I yelled at him not to come, that he was not welcome at MY abortion. He insisted despite my anger and vehemence. I didn't mean it anyway; it would have been terrible without him. He was incredible, so supportive, my love. We can find better uses for our swords.

Our song, the piece of the Spirit we bring to you, has to do with love and murder, with breathing and being. These are extreme states because they are disavowed aspects of our community and relationship life, often coming out without awareness. I believe we all need access to these states to grow together as a culture.

### **A spirit of murder**

"Abortion is murder," the Right to Lifers say. Yes we say. Yes to murder. Sometimes it is right to kill. We got a lot of murder out of this experience. The troops were armed and ready, this time. Let's talk about some of the things which Robert and I needed to murder. The beliefs that the true bond between lovers only happens by having a child and that having a child is the ultimate expression of a couple's love are now dead. The dream that we can always be in a state of togetherness and bliss is over. The ideal about absence of conflict in love is finished. My determination to be creative by pushing myself and the idea that I can force a baby out is gone by. Robert is killing aspects of his thinking and analyzing and ingesting his more wild instinctive nature. Our self-hatred bites the dust.

There is so much to kill—so many wrong ideas about life, so many plans and programs which are always defied by nature, by the Great Mother, the Tao, the whirlwind, the snow storm which wipes us off the road when we think we have control. We could make a life's work out of murder, if only we had the right intentions. Many of the social and cultural norms and rules regarding love still need to be killed. In our culture, certain loves are valued, others outlawed. Some of the beliefs to murder include: a heterosexual man and woman make a family, so only heterosexuals can marry. Homosexuality is a disease, an addiction, a sin. Gays should not raise children. Interracial

marriages are wrong. There is only one way to God, through an organized religious form.

These beliefs are insufficient, I say. They deserve recognition as one viewpoint among many, but must be challenged as the ruling paradigm. For me, God is where love is, and passion and conflict and nothingness. God is in the mystery, the unknown, the numinous. I don't believe that culture should dictate rules and regulations for love. This must be killed so people can be free to discover their unique relationship to the divine.

Anti-abortion groups claim they want to protect the lives of children. I believe this worthy goal could be better accomplished by working in the inner cities, creating social programs and economic opportunities for disenfranchised youth who don't expect to live past their teenage years. We could work together to combat institutionalized racism which leaves people of color with little or no support and protection from the mainstream United States.

Anti-abortion groups seem to me sentimental primarily about the lives of unborn white middle class fetuses. They say these "children" have no protection, no voice. Certainly this is true, but we haven't yet developed the psychological, spiritual or scientific technology to communicate with these "unborn children" in order to hear their voices. Developing such technology could help determine whether or not they wish to be born at this time, in this place, to these parents and into this difficult and complex world.

We take the message from anti-abortion groups even further. We needn't stop with giving voice to unborn children. We could listen to living children as well. We'd listen to the voices of youth, people of color, women, the differently abled, the elderly and many other groups in this country who are systematically abused and silenced by the mainstream. We would give voice to our own creative impulses, our feelings, our jealousies, insecurities, dreams and ideals. We would listen to all the parts of ourselves which we tend to silence and repress because they don't go along with our desired identities. Let's use the message from anti-abortion groups to wake up and embrace an inclusive spiritual calling. We can attempt to make our home, this planet, a more humane and democratic place for all people.

The spirit of murder can be positive if used to serve the spirit of life. I recommend it. Instead of killing each other we might begin to abort the

laws and systems which create the competition for resources, the abuse and the desire for vengeance which drive us to destroy each other.

We offer a new perspective on abortion. Some of us may need to abort some of our rigid sentimentality around traditions such as marriage and childbirth and even life and death. It seems to me that in many inner city communities where murder and random violence have become daily threats for many people, some youth have been robbed of their natural sentiment for humanity. Perhaps so much of the explicit violence in the United States happens in certain subgroups in part because others, who identify with law-abiding mainstream values, do not use their own violent impulses consciously. Many people express violence behind closed doors towards those less powerful. Or they repress violent impulses, allowing them to tear apart their bodies and souls. Violence is a capacity we all share and should put to use for the benefit of all. We have so much to kill, except time.

### **Birth of a mother**

Through these many deep and rich and extreme experiences, I became a mother, a mother whose identity is not defined by traditional mainstream or Eurocentric feminist conceptions of womanhood. She is sometimes a nurturing caregiver, devoting herself to the creation of food and comfort for her loved ones. At another moment she becomes a holy harlot, a temple prostitute, offering her body and soul to god, unrelated to the cares and needs of others. She can appear as Sheila-na-jig, the mother goddess and womb of Celtic myth, all head and vulva, no softness, no breasts, athletic and acrobatic, an exhibitionist. Sometimes she manifests as the fanged Hindu goddess Kali, at once sane and insane, who adorns herself with human skulls and dances on graves (Paglia 1992). I say yes to supporting all these aspects of womanhood. I say yes to life and love and the sword and murder.

When we first found out about the pregnancy, we referred to the growing cells as "the little pooper." This is yet another aspect of womanhood, of humanness, which I have birthed. We offer the spirit of the pooper: a naive, happy child of the universe, enjoying life without worries, breathing freely, knowing that she is in the hands of the Spirit. I wish every child and every adult could have this feeling, at least for a moment.

I feel the presence of an affirming, loving and democratic mother, one like the sun which shines on flowers and feces alike. I'd like to be this mother to you. I want to say yes to you. The 800 year old soul in me can feel you. I feel for you if you've wanted a child and couldn't have one because of economic or legal issues, fertility problems, emotional constraints, homophobia, sexism, racism. If you've had an abortion, I feel your suffering, your ambivalence, your elation, your sense of empowerment. I say yes to you. I say yes to the conflict between pro and anti-abortion viewpoints. Yes to your love and your murderousness and your being. Yes. You can breathe, you belong here on this earth, each and every pooper, all your instincts, your creative and destructive urges, your messy poops. Yes to your blocks, your pain, your symptoms and your death. Yes. Yes. Yes. Live it here now. THIS is the moment. You never know when it will be time to "Return to Sender."

#### Notes

1. A complete description of Process Work with extreme states can be found in Arnold Mindell, *City Shadows: Psychological Interventions in Psychiatry*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988.
2. For a concise overview of the history of abortion and abortion rights see *The New Our Bodies Ourselves*. Boston: Touchstone, 1992: 370-82.
3. This story was told to us by Arny Mindell, who first heard it from Franz Ricklin. Arny told us that the story was repeated to him by a Native American elder in New Mexico.
4. *The Holy Bible. New Testament. (Matthew 23: 37-40)*.
5. In 1990 Dawn Menken and I facilitated a conflict between Advocates for Life and National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) during a class held at the Process Work Center of Portland.

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