



PRO- VOICE

HOW TO KEEP LISTENING WHEN
THE WORLD WANTS A FIGHT

ASPEN
BAKER



You are reading an excerpt from
Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Our books challenge conventional thinking,
introduce new ideas, and foster positive change.
If you sign up for an account on our website,
you may purchase our books at a discount.

www.bkconnection.com

More Praise for *Pro-Voice*

"In a world where everyone forces you to chose a side around abortion, *Pro-Voice* challenges all of us to put empathy first and ideology second. Aspen Baker radically reframes our current culture war over abortion by putting stories first. By centering the voices of women, Baker clearly explains that actual conversation—not preaching or stonewalling—is the only way to move forward."

—**Latoya Peterson, feminist, activist, and owner and Editor, Racialicious.com**

"We've made great progress on tough social issues by sharing our stories authentically. *Pro-Voice* dives into that topic and makes it actionable. If you're an organizer, it's a must-read in 2015!"

—**Raven Brooks, Editor, Netroots Nation**

"Thank you, Aspen, for asking the global community to create an environment of compassionate pro-voice dialogue around this ubiquitous, incendiary issue. May this book birth the healing we all need."

—**Deborah Santana, author, philanthropist, and founder of Do a Little**

"The pro-voice movement Aspen Baker founded in Exhale is based on the idea that we are all storytellers, with the right to our own stories; specifically that every woman has the right to her own feelings about the experience of abortion, whatever they might be. As a journalist who writes about reproductive rights, I truly believe this approach is the only way to bridge a divide in this country that is putting women's lives in peril."

—**Liz Welch, award-winning journalist and coauthor of *The Kids Are All Right* and *I Will Always Write Back***

"In *Pro-Voice*, Aspen Baker shows us how to make America's abortion wars a relic of the past. Sharing and listening can heal old wounds and generate a new understanding and respect for this deeply personal issue."

—**US Congresswoman Gwen Moore**

"The best social and policy change begins with having discussion in the real world with real people. In this book, Aspen shows us a way to listen to women in a deeper way, creating a space for us to see the complexity of experiences with abortion. This is the kind of space that will help us reach across the divisions that often separate us and see the humanity in each other. Bravo, Aspen and pro-voice!"

—**Eveline Shen, MPH, Executive Director, Forward Together**

“We have less and less authentic space for dialogue in our country, yet Aspen Baker has taken the power of listening into the most contentious of territories, the abortion debate. She has shown that the stories that emerge when someone feels respected and safe enough to share them have the power to heal. We can choose to listen, and if we do, perhaps we can create a healthier society.”

—**Joe Lambert, founder and Executive Director, Center for Digital Storytelling**

“The abortion debate—or rather, standoff—is one of the most polarizing in our polarized country. *Pro-Voice* creates humane connections across the passion-filled gulf that divides abortion conversations; then, as Jonathan Powell has also written recently, ‘There is no conflict in the world that cannot be solved.’ If that is not a reason for hope, what is?”

—**Michael Nagler, author of *The Search for a Nonviolent Future* and *The Nonviolence Handbook* and President, Metta Center for Nonviolence**

“In *Pro-Voice*, Aspen Baker raises a bold mandate that we hear people’s abortion stories and imagines a world in which abortion is understood not through conflict but through empathy, regardless of one’s politics. Baker shows, despite the loud rhetoric, that personal experiences with abortion are rarely spoken, and even more rarely are they compassionately heard. Proudly defying political categorization, *Pro-Voice* challenges everyone to step away from the fight in favor of deeper understanding. This is a most courageous and necessary book.”

—**Marjorie Jolles, PhD, Associate Professor, Women’s and Gender Studies, Roosevelt University**

“Aspen Baker’s sharply insightful new book illuminates the refreshing—and groundbreaking—attitude she takes toward abortion, a stance that embraces the emotional complexity of women’s abortion experiences and reveals the discussion’s many gray areas that are so often obscured by political gamesmanship.”

—**Martha Shane, filmmaker, *After Tiller***

“In this wise and compassionate book, Aspen Baker makes clear how strange it is that the people who battle over abortion policy rarely hear the stories of women who have actually had abortions. With sensitivity and insight, she shows that people’s personal stories can transform the debate. *Pro-Voice* is smart, provocative, and, finally, heartening.”

—**Francesca Polletta, Professor of Sociology, University of California, Irvine, and author of *It Was Like a Fever***

PRO-VOICE

This page intentionally left blank

PRO-VOICE

HOW TO KEEP LISTENING WHEN
THE WORLD WANTS A FIGHT

ASPEN BAKER



BK[®]

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
a BK Currents book

Pro-Voice

Copyright © 2015 by Aspen Baker

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.



BK

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

1333 Broadway, Suite 1000

Oakland, CA 94612-1921

Tel: (510) 817-2277, Fax: (510) 817-2278

www.bkconnection.com

Ordering information for print editions

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the "Special Sales Department" at the Berrett-Koehler address above.

Individual sales. Berrett-Koehler publications are available through most bookstores. They can also be ordered directly from Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626; www.bkconnection.com

Orders for college textbook/course adoption use. Please contact Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626.

Orders by U.S. trade bookstores and wholesalers. Please contact Ingram Publisher Services, Tel: (800) 509-4887; Fax: (800) 838-1149; E-mail: customer.service@ingrampublisherservices.com; or visit www.ingrampublisherservices.com/Ordering for details about electronic ordering.

Berrett-Koehler and the BK logo are registered trademarks of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

First Edition

Paperback print edition ISBN 978-1-62656-110-6

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-111-3

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-112-0

2015-1

Interior design: VJB/Scribe. Proofreader: Henrietta Bensussen. Editor: Elissa Rabellino. Index: Stimson Indexing. Cover/jacket design: Wes Youssi/M.80 Design. Cover photo: Reny Preussker. Production service: Linda Jupiter Productions.

*Dedicated with love to my husband, Chris,
and our son, Wolfgang*

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Preface ix

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: The Birth of Pro-Voice 7

Chapter 2: America's Abortion Conflict 27

Chapter 3: Listen and Tell Stories 55

Chapter 4: Embrace Gray Areas 97

Chapter 5: Shape What's Next 133

Conclusion 173

Notes 181

Resources 195

Acknowledgments 203

Index 205

About the Author 217

This page intentionally left blank

Preface

I was 24 years old, pregnant, scared, and unsure about what to do. I went out on a limb and told someone whom I didn't know very well about my situation, only to discover a universal truth: we all have our own hidden stories.

It was the middle of summer and well past closing time in the downtown Berkeley bar where Polly Hancock and I worked together as bartenders. We were counting up the till and dividing our tips. When I didn't partake in our customary end-of-shift drink, I couldn't help but tell her why: "I'm not drinking because I'm pregnant. I'm not sure what I'm going to do yet." I don't know what I thought she'd say or how I hoped she'd help. I just needed to tell someone.

I'll never forget what happened. Without hesitation, she replied: "I've had an abortion." Before Polly, no one had ever told me that she'd had an abortion.

Everything changed in that instant. To this day, I remember how it felt. It was as if the sky had opened up, or a lightbulb had gone off, or every secret that existed in the world had finally been revealed to me. I saw beneath the surface of real life. Once I took the risk to open up, Polly opened up to me.

A couple of weeks after that late-night conversation with Polly at the bar, I had an abortion. Because I now talk openly about this experience, which you will read about in more detail in chapter 1, others feel comfortable sharing their stories with me. In the 15-plus years since my

abortion, it would be impossible to count how many others I've heard about, into the thousands. Even though listening to and sharing about these experiences has become commonplace in my life, their presence still astounds me. The depth and nuances, the gray areas, and the unexpected twists and turns of each person's own journey exist in stark contrast to what are considered the known, simple, black-and-white terms of the abortion debate. The two spheres—the private conversations about real, lived, personal abortion experiences and the public political debate over the rights of women and fetuses—seem to have little in common with each other.

Abortion is a part of all our lives in one way or another. When one in three women will have an abortion in her lifetime,¹ there are few people the experience doesn't touch, whether it is a distant aunt who never emotionally recovered from her abortion; a brother who never talks about his high school girlfriend's abortion; or your own mother, whose illegal experience made her the fierce activist for abortion rights that she is today. Yet the debate seems so remote from these intimate family histories that even Barack Obama infamously remarked that he couldn't comment on the theological and scientific perspectives on the matter because it was "above [his] pay grade."²

The mistake is to think that the answer about what to do about abortion in this country will be resolved by religion, science, judicial process, or legislative policy. Facts and figures, logic, faith, values, and spirituality may inform our own personal and cultural beliefs, but in a diverse democracy like America, there is no one path, or one final answer, that can ultimately resolve the issue to everyone's liking. Accepting

and acknowledging abortion for all its complexity can move our nation out of the abortion wars and toward peace.

Achieving this goal is simple, yet incredibly difficult. It demands a shift away from judgment and toward empathy, and it requires treating others as we would like to be treated. I must add: in the midst of a heated, passionate, high-stakes fight.

Go ahead and imagine how you would like to be treated as a fetus or as a woman who is pregnant and doesn't know what to do, but that is not what I am getting at. What I want is for you to think about how you would want to be treated when you found yourself in the throes of the most passionate and important argument of your lifetime.

Are you willing to treat your opponent with the same respect that you desire?

My guess is that being mocked and ridiculed or told you're stupid and wrong is not at the top of your list for how you would like to be treated in the midst of a fight. It's certainly not what I like, even from those who oppose me. Instead of seeing how much pain I can dish out to those I disagree with or who I believe have done me wrong, I seek to follow the golden rule and use my words and behavior to create more of what the world needs: love, compassion, and connection.

I want a future abortion conversation known for its openness, respect, and empathy, so instead of generating more heat, anger, and conflict, I practice *pro-voice*.

Pro-voice is a way of life. It is my religion. I have witnessed how the power of listening, storytelling, and embracing gray areas breaks through the rigid us-versus-them mentality that plagues enduring social conflicts such as abortion. Instead of being focused on attacking what's wrong, pro-voice focuses

on highlighting and strengthening individual and social goods—such as our remarkable human capacity to love our enemies as ourselves—to generate new cultural norms.



“There isn’t anyone you couldn’t love once you’ve heard their story,” Catholic pro-life, antiwar feminist peace crusader Mary Lou Kownacki once said.

Since Polly told me about her abortion, I’ve heard thousands of abortion stories of loss and regret, confidence and renewal, hope and tragedy, and trials and triumph. All along, I’ve also heard stories of infertility, miscarriage, adoption, and stillborn babies, though not nearly with the openness I experienced until I had my own story to reveal.

While writing this book, I got pregnant again. I was just a couple of weeks away from finishing my first full draft of this manuscript when I received some difficult news about the health of my baby that was discovered in a routine ultrasound. My husband and I, along with our families, went on an emotional roller coaster as we learned new information about what our baby, and thus our entire family, could expect to experience in the hours, days, weeks, and years after his birth. As I’ve talked openly with some of my friends about our situation, I’ve heard new stories about their own birth and parenting experiences—of what it was like to be adopted with their birth mom in prison, to adopt after multiple miscarriages, the experience of giving birth to one live baby while its twin was stillborn, stories of premature birth, and more—stories I might never have heard had I never opened up about my own struggles.

This is the type of storytelling that I call authentic. It's personal, intimate, and meaningful. It's as natural as breathing. Hearing stories, especially vulnerable, hard-to-talk-about ones, opens something within us, and we can't help but find a way to connect with the person revealing our own hidden truths. Often, we connect by sharing our own story.

There is a striking difference in the conversations that were available to me after my abortion and the ones that have happened since the birth of my son. Whereas talking openly about my complicated feelings after my abortion in the public sphere had made me into a political pariah because others feared how my story would impact the abortion wars, with my recent pregnancy, I had never been asked "How are you feeling?" so often in my life. And people seemed to want to know and care about the answer. There was no shortage of listening ears, and however I replied—whether I was feeling wonderful and excited or scared and unsure—there was always a "Been there!" response. I wasn't alone. There was no worry that any of my emotions about pending motherhood could have a political impact on the rights of other people to become parents.

The difficult birth and parenting stories I now hear aren't being told to me in order to get me to vote a certain way, or to indoctrinate me to an ideology or religion. Parents tell each other these stories because no matter how different our situations or outcomes, we're letting each other know that in some small way, we get it. We've been there, too. We're not alone. In their stories, what I understand is not that different from what I heard that night in Polly's admission: others have found themselves in unexpected situations too, have

had to make difficult choices, have felt loss and sadness and yet, also, hope and love. Somehow they persevered, and they expect that I will, too. We all get through it. We all make our best life and establish our new normal. We are forever changed, and we move on.

These types of intimate conversations about abortion have been practically nonexistent in the public sphere, especially within the political one. But this is changing rapidly. More and more stories about abortion are finding their way out of the shadows and into the light, in entertainment such as the movie *Obvious Child* and television shows such as *Parenthood* and *Friday Night Lights*. However, it is the growing wave of public reveals by women who have had abortions that is leading the cultural change by disrupting the status quo with their personal stories. In the political realm, Jackie Speier (D-Calif.) was the first U.S. Representative to talk about her abortion on the floor of Congress. Speier's spontaneous confession in 2011 was soon followed by those of women leaders who made their abortion experience part of their political campaigns, such as Wendy Davis, a 2014 candidate for governor in Texas, and Lucy Flores, who talked openly about her abortion while running for lieutenant governor in Nevada in 2014. Taking matters into their own hands, such women as Angie Jackson, the first woman who live-tweeted her abortion, in 2010, and Emily Letts, the first woman who shared a video of her abortion on YouTube, in 2014, have pushed the envelope of self-expression online, opening the floodgates for more stories to be told.

A lot is at stake with this new openness about personal abortion experiences.

How we—as a society and a culture—handle it will impact not only the larger debate but also the women and families who experience abortion. I hope we use this rare cultural moment to do something greater than claim a winner or loser in the abortion wars. Let's give this outpouring the respect it deserves by taking a fresh look at how we can better support people who have abortions and peacefully address our political differences.

Pro-voice can help. Its tools of listening, storytelling, and embracing gray areas can become the predominant, expected cultural practice for talking about abortion.

Imagine what a difference this approach can make in the debate. It isn't a task just for lawmakers and judges. Infusing the cultural wars with love, respect, and empathy is the responsibility of everyone who cares about the health and wellbeing of women, our families and communities, and our democracy.

What are you willing to do to make that happen?

Throughout *Pro-Voice*, I seek to show rather than tell what can happen when we let enemy thinking go and treat others respectfully—even when we are under threat and attack. If you get anything out of this book, I hope you will see the possibilities for entirely different conversations about abortion—and other social conflicts—in our country. We can have real heart-to-heart conversations generated out of our shared lived experiences with abortion and so many other hidden stories.

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

My daughter has a lot of issues; she's into drugs and trouble," Angela (not her real name) said in Spanish. "When I was pregnant, I was scared and didn't know what to do, and I thought about having an abortion. I think God is punishing me just for thinking about it."

Angela was one of a dozen women sitting in a circle talking about how abortion had had an impact on their lives and the lives of their loved ones. The discussion was facilitated by my organization, Exhale, at a local job-training program for immigrant women in San Francisco. In addition to skills training in computers and electronics, the program connected the women to local community resources like ours. Exhale, the nonprofit organization that I cofounded after my own abortion and have been leading since 2000, offers a national, multilingual support talkline for women and men who need to talk about their abortion experiences—free of judgment and politics. Since our launch, thousands of people from around the world have called our confidential service to talk about their abortions.

Angela is not alone. Like her, many people who have never actually had an abortion feel strongly about it, and their views are shaped by their own personal, hidden stories.

Every reader of this book likely has two things in common with Angela. Whether or not you've personally experienced abortion, you probably have some kind of story that connects you—deeply and intimately—to the topic. And, as

with Angela, this personal relationship shapes your views and perspectives on the issue.

This is true for any issue mired in social conflict, whether it's racism, gun-violence prevention, or childhood vaccinations. The stories we tell and the stories we hear shape our collective perceptions and define our opinions and positions. Without making space for these personal stories to be heard, we can't get to the heart of the matter, which is why listening is at the root of what it means to be pro-voice.

My Exhale cofounders and I developed pro-voice because we wanted our talkline service to be available to all women who have had an abortion—women who felt regret and those who felt relief, women who are feminists and those who are not, pro-choice and pro-life women who have had an abortion, and everyone else—as well as the men and other loved ones who are a part of their lives. Yet, every time my cofounders and I talked about our vision and our plans to offer an emotional support service, the first question we always got—and often still do—was whether or not we were “for or against abortion.” For an after-abortion service, being for or against abortion is beside the point. All of our callers already made their choice. Our job isn't to decide whether or not theirs was the right or wrong decision but to make sure that they get the unconditional love and support they need to move forward and have healthy lives.

The world needs pro-voice because what Exhale has been doing—listening without judgment—shouldn't be isolated to the realm of charity, a confidential talkline service, or even the subject of abortion. It must become the expected social behavior for how to address controversial issues when there are real human stories hidden behind the fight.

It may be hard to believe, but Exhale has worked specifically on abortion for more than 15 years, and we have never taken a political stand for or against its legality. And yet, we've had incredible and far-reaching social impact.

Exhale has led the way and initiated ideas for talking about personal abortion experiences that are increasingly accepted and mainstream across the political spectrum. When we started Exhale, we were chastised by abortion advocates for publicly acknowledging the gray areas of abortion experiences, but now organizations such as Planned Parenthood do it, too. Exhale's mission to create a stigma-free culture around abortion was initially criticized as weak by political activists, but now leaders like NARAL Pro-Choice America's Ilyse Hogue recognize the threat that stigma holds for women's equal rights. Magazines such as the *New Yorker*, *Glamour*, and *Cosmopolitan* let the voices of women who have had abortions stand on the merit of their own words, without outsider commentary. Most important, activists on all sides are now willing and able to articulate the fact that each woman's experience with abortion is unique and deserving of support and respect.

The culture is changing around abortion. It's time to leave the war mentality behind.

Born in the heart of nonviolence, pro-voice affirms the humanity of everyone involved in the fight. The antidote to polarizing, toxic dynamics, pro-voice replaces secrets with openness, dismantles stigma with support, overcomes judgment with respect, and establishes intimate connections where divides previously dominated.

The benefits of listening when the world wants a fight can be hard to measure—and yet, I have witnessed its positive impact many times.

On a clear November morning in 2009, I was sitting in the shiny new Southwest terminal in Oakland, California, watching my Twitter stream explode with reaction to the Stupak-Pitts Amendment. Stupak-Pitts, designed to prevent the Affordable Care Act from paying for abortions, got everyone I knew worked up. It was the fight of a lifetime for many activists who had spent their careers advocating on behalf of our nation's poor, the vulnerable victims of so many ideological policies.

I was headed to Los Angeles, where a longtime friend and donor to Exhale was hosting a fundraising house party on our behalf. One of the original founders of the California Black Women's Health Project, Fran Jemmott, was dedicated to talking about abortion in the lives of African American women.

On that morning I felt really torn. How could I raise money for women to have a place to talk about their abortions while I stayed silent on a big fight that would affect the lives of so many of them? Was Exhale's mission silly and soft, just like our critics said? Was this the time to stop listening and start fighting?

I was unsure about how to be a pro-voice leader in that moment, on that day.

A few hours later, I was sitting on Fran's couch in her living room with about 15 other women of all ages, from their early 20s to their late 70s. It was a diverse group of women of color, mostly African American. Fran kicked things off, welcoming her guests and talking about her history with Exhale. A former program officer at a large foundation in California, Fran had given Exhale one of our first significant grants. Then, unprompted and unplanned, she shared her abortion story. She asked the next woman to introduce

herself to the group. The same thing happened. She shared her story, too. One by one, each woman spoke, introducing herself and then telling her abortion story.

Every woman in the room had at least one abortion story to share, and some had stories of birth and miscarriage to share, too. There were stories of legal and illegal abortions, of abortions necessitated by economic reasons or because of family violence or abuse. Other stories were about the importance of family pride and reputation, not wanting to let their family down by having a baby at a young age. Their stories were so different—their reasons, their reactions, and the way they told them, some in tears, others more matter-of-fact. The diversity of stories in the room was striking.

I had yet to say a single word. But by the time everyone had spoken, I knew why I was there and why I wasn't in Washington, DC, fighting about Stupak-Pitts. I knew why Exhale kept listening, even in the midst of fighting. I knew why our mission was powerful and important, because, without saying a word, something meaningful was able to emerge.

"Wouldn't it be amazing," I finally said, "if the way we talk about abortion in this country was done in just the way it happened here in this room? That's Exhale's mission.

"Today," I continued, "there is a big fight happening in Washington, DC, over abortion, and I am here with you because Exhale wants fewer fights and less judgment and more connecting like we're doing right now. What you all did naturally and without prompting is exactly what the future of abortion conversations needs to look like."

Later, Fran revealed to me what a big risk it had been for her high-profile friends to even attend such an event. Yet,

their participation and willingness to share their intimate stories also revealed a deeper sense of trust and connection. “The need to bear witness,” Fran affirmed, “is a revered cultural and community tradition.”

That day wasn’t the only time I had doubts about the power of pro-voice to make a difference. I have plenty of moments of uncertainty. But each time I consider joining the fight, I remember that fighting only leads to more fighting. If I want more listening in the world, the best way to make that happen is to keep listening and to inspire others to listen more, too.

Anyone can be pro-voice. Open source, pro-voice is a set of tools and techniques that are freely available to those who share a commitment to overcome debilitating conflicts by finding the connections among the divides, and by being empathetic and respectful instead of judgmental. Republicans and Democrats, pro-choice and pro-life advocates, religious people and atheists—all can be pro-voice if they are willing to listen and share personally with the goal of transforming social conflict from war into peace.

My goal is that readers of *Pro-Voice* will find inspiration, ideas, direction, and hope that will help them to apply pro-voice in their own lives and to navigate the conflicted issues they care about most.

The Birth of Pro-Voice

I grew up in the middle of our nation's wars over abortion.

In 1976, the year I was born, the first clinic bombing was reported. The 1980s, my formative childhood years, were dominated by the impact of aggressive pro-life protests. California, my home state, had one of the most successful anti-abortion campaigning organizations around: more than 40,000 pro-life activists were arrested while protesting abortion clinics during a four-year period in the '80s.¹

As I was growing up in Southern California, it wasn't unusual for me to see a huge picture of a bloody, dismembered fetus on a massive sign attached to the side of a minivan driving up and down the freeways near my home. I was certainly affected by pro-life public-awareness efforts but unaware of the violence against clinics. I grew up without a TV, so if these events were covered on the news, I never saw them.

As regular attendees of what I like to call a "surfing Christian" church and school, both nondenominational, my family and I spent time with other church and school families on the beaches of my hometown. San Clemente is steeped in surfing culture: it's the home of *Surfing Magazine*; surf legends such as the Paskowitz, Fletcher, Beschen, and Gudauskas families; iconic surf brands such as Rainbow Sandals and Astrodeck; the nonprofit ocean conservation organization

the Surfrider Foundation.² To top it all off, our “Spanish Village by the Sea” was made famous by Richard Nixon during his presidency as the location of his “western White House.” Everyone, including many of the moms and all the kids, surfed, and in our circle, a special occasion meant it was time to pull out a nice Hawaiian shirt or sundress and wear the good flip-flops. Only the preacher wore a suit. Everyone was pro-life, and we all mourned the tragedy of abortion, but no one ever invited me to a protest, and as far as I knew, no one in our community participated in one, either—violent or not.

But we did put our pro-life Christian views into practice. Ever since I was young, my family and I traveled with church groups to Tijuana on missionary trips where I never saw anyone preach or try to convert others. We were there to chip in and help local orphanages survive. The dads worked on building clean bathrooms, and the moms spent all day in the kitchen making food. My younger sister and I spent the day hanging out with the babies. As a young girl, I found it hard to hear that the baby sitting on my lap—the one resigned to the flies in her eyes, nose, and mouth, despite my constant attempts to shoo them away—had been found by one of the adults at the local trash dump, where they went early each morning to look for abandoned babies. I loved babies. In fact, I spent less time with my own peers in Sunday school class than in the nursery, caring for the infants during church services.

Outside of these trips to Tijuana, it wasn’t unusual for my dad to bring home a stranger he had just met who needed a place to crash for the night, or for my family to spend Thanksgiving at a local soup kitchen. We lived pretty close to the bone ourselves. My parents basically made minimum

wage in the 1980s, and I never earned an allowance. I started making my own money at 10 years old with—you guessed it—babysitting gigs, and the money I started to save then helped me pay for college later. But that wasn't my only job. I also had a paper route at 10, the first girl to get the job from the local boys. Even though I read the paper every day before making my rounds, I don't remember tracking the abortion fights.

Our community was white, working class, and not well educated—the dads I knew were plumbers, contractors, and teachers, and most of the moms worked as assistants and receptionists in local doctors' offices or were teachers too. When I was young, my dad had every kind of odd job—bee-keeper, chimney sweep—and my mom worked as a cocktail waitress. My dad would often take my little sister and me to have hot cocoa at the bar when my mom was working late into the night. Later on, both of my parents got better jobs working for the wealthy—my dad as a private pilot for company CEOs and my mom as a housecleaner. Homeschooled for a few years, I often did my work at the kitchen tables of families whose homes were several times the size of our own while my mom scrubbed their houses clean.

We all cared about God, the less fortunate, and the ocean. I don't remember a single political conversation, but I do know that I was raised with a charitable bent in our pro-life views, not a violent, judgmental one. As a kid, I remember a couple of teenage girls who got pregnant and had babies at a young age, and I promised myself that it would never happen to me. It was hard to believe that I could ever be in that position, getting pregnant when I didn't want to be. If the unlikely ever happened, I always assumed I'd have the baby.

I knew I could never kill my baby if I got pregnant. And then I did.

♦ ♦ ♦

I had come a long way since my childhood on the beaches of San Clemente. I'd followed in the family footsteps set out by my grandfather, my uncle, and my dad, who had all worked as professional pilots, and started taking flying lessons while still in high school. I was learning how to land a single-engine Cessna airplane at small airports throughout San Diego while I got to know the Alaskan bush-pilot character of Maggie O'Connell on *Northern Exposure* along with the rest of America. After graduation, I quickly made my way to Alaska, where I learned how to land a plane on rivers, lakes, and glaciers, among having other adventures.

They say that women headed to Alaska alone are either running to or running from a man, and upon arrival they find that the "odds may be good" for finding a husband but the "goods are odd." The Fairview Inn in Talkeetna, where I lived for a summer working for a local bush-flying outfit, had photo albums full of local men looking for a female mate. Their main requirements for a potential partner were that the woman be "quiet" and be able to "skin a moose." Beyond its breathtaking beauty, the quirky honesty of Alaska was one of the things I loved the most.

There's a lot of freedom in such a big place, and with it comes the harsh realities of inhabiting a rugged, wild land. Getting charged by a mama grizzly bear on a deserted trail once was enough for me. So too was knowing that not all of the courageous, passionate mountaineers I met would come back from their adventures alive. When I was 20 years old,

I hauled the body bag of an older East German man off a small plane and had to organize how to get his remains and belongings home. Before he headed into the mountains, I'd spent hours with him and his climbing partner, who talked about how they dreamed of climbing Denali while confined by communism behind the Berlin Wall. The man's dream ended tragically in an avalanche, and yet he inspired me to always pursue my own.

After Alaska and a brief stop living at home, attending community college in Orange County, I got accepted into UC Berkeley. I paid my way through school, selling everything from lattes and cocktails to bikes and skis at the local REI while earning my degree in peace and conflict studies. A voracious reader who had spent hours at the local library from a young age, I discovered and was politically transformed by *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* at age 15. By reading his story, I learned how to connect the dots between the hardships I saw in Tijuana or at the local soup kitchen and a broader social system of inequality and discrimination. I sought a college education that would teach me how to right the wrongs of injustice. I imagined that after graduation, I'd travel the globe on peaceful, humanitarian missions to serve those hurt in conflict zones and uplift those silenced by political repression.

Then everything changed—sort of. Three months after graduating college and three months into a new relationship, I found out that I was pregnant.

I thought I'd have the baby, until I told the guy. He wanted me to get an abortion. It forced me to take the option seriously in a way I never had before. It was hard to come up with a picture of what an abortion would mean in my life.

I could see the dismembered fetus on the side of the minivans from my childhood, yet I had no corresponding image of a woman who'd had one. No one had ever told me she'd had an abortion. I could only remember one rumor years before about a girl from high school whom I hadn't known well, but everyone else I knew had had their babies. I had no idea how to make the decision. What criteria should I use? How would I know what the right decision was? Would I regret an abortion later?

It was during this time that I took the risk to confide in my friend Polly while we were closing up the downtown Berkeley bar where we both worked. When she told me about her own abortion, Polly gave me an unusual gift: the knowledge that I was not alone in my experience. Whatever I decided, someone I knew had been through this, too.

It was the strangest feeling to walk around pregnant, not wanting to be, knowing that I had this big secret and that no one could tell just by looking at me. I found myself more curious about other people's private lives. What secrets were people holding that I couldn't see? What major life decisions were they facing? Whom could they talk to?

The old adage about walking a mile in someone else's shoes came alive. I promised myself that I would never judge anyone again. I hadn't lived their life. I didn't know what they knew, fear what they feared, hope what they hoped. I knew that we all needed the same thing: not to be rescued or saved from the pain and difficulty of our circumstances and choices, but to feel cared for and supported as we fought our own battles.

In the end, having the abortion was not so much about staying on some kind of life track or "getting back to normal"

as it was about my need to sever all ties I had with the guy. It was a step toward the unknown. The abortion forced me to let go of the future I had spent several days imagining after I found out that I was pregnant. I wasn't going to be a mom this time. I said goodbye to all the ideas, strategies, plans, and hopes I'd come up with as I tried to make having a baby work out somehow in my life. There is no do-over with abortion. I could never take it back. I knew it would always hold a place in my life's story, and with just a few days to make such a life-altering decision, I had no way to know if it was the best one for me.

I didn't know who I would be after an abortion.

While I had been aware of the abortion debate before my abortion, I didn't give it much attention. After my abortion, I listened more carefully, but all I heard was yelling and screaming. Noise. Anger. Outrage. It seemed to come from all sides. I couldn't distinguish one side's voice from the other. It was toxic and polarizing and full of judgment, finger-pointing, and blame. I felt grateful for my legal, covered-by-health-insurance abortion—absolutely—and yet once it was over, I was pretty mixed up about it.

I didn't hear a voice like mine in the debate.

I searched for support, people and places to go talk to about my abortion. Even in Berkeley, California, all I found were Christian, pro-life organizations that wanted me to seek forgiveness from God. That wasn't what I needed. The pro-choice side had nothing to offer. If the pro-life side considered abortion one of life's biggest sins, then the pro-choice side seemed to consider it no big deal, an experience not worth talking about. I eventually found my way to a private therapist whom I paid in the cash I earned from

my bartending tips. Ever since I'd known what an abortion was, I told myself I'd never have one, and then I did. I didn't know if my abortion was aligned with my values or an aberration, inconsistent with who I was. My life wasn't so black and white anymore. It had gotten very, very gray.

I now knew that I wasn't alone, but I didn't understand why people weren't talking about their own abortions. I wondered how things would change if we did.

I no longer needed to travel the globe to support and uplift those hurt by conflict and repression. America's abortion wars were in desperate need of their own humanitarian, peaceful mission, and I was determined to respond to the crisis.

Nonviolence Reimagined

In his final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "I suggest that the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence become immediately a subject for study and for serious experimentation in every field of human conflict."³

After my abortion, I took up Dr. King's challenge. I wanted to put my peaceful values into action and experiment with nonviolence on the issue that had unexpectedly landed at my front door. I now had a personal stake in the abortion debate, but I didn't want to fight to win. I wanted to transform the war into peace.

Since 2000, I have devoted my life to this experiment.

I cofounded Exhale to put nonviolent theories and ideas into real-life practice. Our programs and messages infuse love, compassion, and connection into the polarizing debate,

diffusing tensions, increasing understanding, and promoting wellbeing. Listening and storytelling are the primary tools of our trade. The gray area is our landscape. We coined “pro-voice” in 2005 to inspire others to join our growing movement of peacemakers.

Months after my abortion, as I was researching abortion on the way to founding Exhale, I walked into a local Berkeley bookstore in search of a self-help book for women who’d had abortions. I was hoping to find something that could provide detailed information about all aspects of the procedure—from the medical and physical elements to the emotional ones—with voices of women sharing their stories and advice, including the ways they felt about the loss of their fetus. I found nothing like it on the shelves, so I went to the clerk to ask for help.

When I told her my request, she looked nervously at me, turned red, got flustered, and blurted out, “But abortion is a choice!” She may have repeated it a few times.

“True,” I said, “and I was hoping to find a book about women’s experiences.”

“All abortion books are under politics,” she said before walking away quickly.

I looked under politics, and sure enough, there were a few books about abortion there, but nothing was written for a woman who’d had one or was thinking

about having one. Abortion was considered a political, private choice, but rarely was it addressed in personal terms. The clerk at the Berkeley bookstore wasn't the only one to think of abortion so narrowly.

As much as I liked and appreciated the doctor who did my abortion, he gave me the same message. He made it a point to say that I'd never have to tell another person about it. He informed me that no doctor would be able to tell that I'd ever had one. From the very beginning, the message was that my abortion was private, a secret, not something to be shared with others, even my other doctors.

Later, a fertility specialist told me at a conference how much this sentiment had hurt his practice, because women later in life who were trying to get pregnant would hide their past abortions out of shame. But, he told me, a past pregnancy is one of the best indicators of someone's future ability to get pregnant. A patient's hiding of such critical information made it difficult for the doctor to understand his patient's whole history, and it prevented him from offering real, medically proven hope to the woman and her partner.

We at Exhale weren't alone in our desire to forge a new way forward on the abortion debate. The year we adopted "pro-voice," Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (now called Forward Together) published their vision for a broad-based reproductive justice movement led by women

of color, and pro-choice leader Frances Kissling published her seminal piece “Is There Life After Roe?” on the importance of valuing the fetus alongside women’s rights.⁴ Anna Quindlen wrote in *Newsweek* that in all her years as an opinion columnist, the debate over abortion had hardly changed, noting, “Leaders of the opposing sides have been frozen into polar positions.” Quindlen acknowledged that abortion doesn’t fit “neatly into black-and-white boxes, it takes place in that messy gray zone of hard choices,” writing that “we insult ourselves by leaving its complexities unexamined.”⁵

During his 2009 commencement address at Notre Dame, President Obama put out a call for more civility, asking opposing sides to at least try to “discover the possibility of finding common ground” and help “transform the culture war into a tradition of cooperation and understanding.”⁶ But when the next abortion battle was waged a year later, this time over the Stupak-Pitts Amendment, which would limit abortion funding in the Affordable Care Act, the common-ground rhetoric was quickly abandoned in favor of the usual polarizing talking points.

There is a better way to do this, but the conflict is so effective at sweeping the nation into its vicious cycles that resistance to its power is short-lived.

There have been a handful of efforts designed to confront America’s abortion wars over the last 40 years. The most famous attempt is the one led by the nonpartisan Public Conversations Project, in response to the 1994 murder of two women who worked in a Brookline, Massachusetts, abortion-providing clinic. For five years, six pro-life and pro-choice leaders met in facilitated confidential conversations in an attempt to practice mutual respect across their differences.

After Dr. George Tiller, one of just a few doctors who performed abortions later in pregnancy, was murdered in his church in Wichita, Kansas, in 2009, the pro-choice website RH Reality Check (rhrealitycheck.org) launched an online effort called “Common Ground” with the hope of bridging America’s divide on abortion. But the forum lacked the full support of RH Reality Check’s leadership, and so it lasted less than a year.

In all cases, the focus of these peace initiatives has been on the activists and the leaders actively engaged on both sides of the fight. Not a single common-ground effort has sought to include or directly address the lived experiences of people with abortion. Exhale is the first to attempt to put the voices and leadership of women—and men—who have gone through abortions at the center of organizing efforts for abortion conflict transformation.

Exhale’s pro-voice philosophy is a 15-year experiment in the application of nonviolence to America’s cultural conflict over abortion. We didn’t invent pro-voice to help one side or the other of the abortion wars to declare a final victory, nor was it created with any particular set of policy goals or objectives in mind, even those considered “common ground.” Pro-voice is an evolving theoretical framework with a set of concrete tools to help people and groups create meaningful connections across their differences—whether they are political, personal, or cultural—with the goal of making conflict more compassionate and respectful. It has applications and benefits far beyond the issue of abortion.

Pro-Voice = Listening + Storytelling

At one end of the room was a sign that said “Agree.” The other end had a sign that said “Disagree.” Standing at different points across the spectrum in between were women of different ages and ethnicities. One was visibly pregnant. They had just heard the statement “Abortion is a form of killing” and had moved to stand in the position that indicated their vote. “It’s not a baby yet,” said one young woman standing under Disagree, “so I don’t think it’s killing.” “Everything in your body is alive, so just like you kill cancer living in your body, an abortion kills something that is living,” said another, who was standing under Agree, adding, “I don’t know if it matters whether or not it’s a baby.”

Hearing this exchange, other women in the group changed their positions. They moved to different areas on the spectrum and then shared their reasons why. More statements, such as “It’s better to have an abortion early in pregnancy” and “Abortion is a form of birth control,” were read out loud by the trainer. Each time, the women moved to different points across the spectrum between Agree and Disagree, and each time, they spoke about where they had landed and why.

Often, people shifted their positions after listening to others speak.

The 12 women going through the exercise were all in training to be talkline counselors at Exhale. Each of them had applied and then been carefully screened and interviewed before being accepted into a 60-hour training, in which they learned how to answer calls from women and men in search of emotional support after an abortion. As a group,

these women explored such questions as whether abortion was killing, because many of the people they would be talking to on the phone had considered it that way.

The goal of this training exercise was not to find agreement among the group or even to debate the statements. Instead, the exercise was used to surface how diverse values and beliefs can shape our understanding of personal abortion experiences, even among a like-minded group of people who share a common goal.

The trainer had done this exercise with volunteers many times, and when she closed it, she always asked the group, “Can you imagine doing this exercise with people we gather randomly off the street outside our office? Talking about abortion in this way is not safe in public or with strangers, which is why it’s so important that we create a safe space for women and men to feel heard, no matter what, on our talkline.”

Ten years later, in the middle of winter in New York City, three young women stood in front of a room of complete strangers, a classroom of college students, and shared their layered, complicated personal truths about abortion. Not a single one of their stories fit easily into a box marked pro-choice or pro-life. In fact, one of them told how it was these very boxes that had caused her so much distress after her abortion. She couldn’t make her feelings fit a political agenda. In any typical public setting, these women’s stories would raise the question “What’s the point?” Stories about abortion are usually told in simple, black-and-white terms with clear moral and political agendas.

However, these stories were ambiguous, and yet their impact was undeniable.

“This workshop isn’t what I expected,” one student said. “I came in wearing my armor. It turns out I didn’t need it.”

Exhale’s 2013 national Sharing Our Stories Tour—a program in which five women shared their personal abortion stories with people on college campuses, in churches, and in community centers across the country—shattered expectations and dismantled stale assumptions about what happens when abortion is discussed openly between people who have different views on the topic. In Austin, Milwaukee, Chicago, New York City, and the San Francisco Bay Area, the women shared their stories in pro-voice workshops they led, teaching audiences how to be empathetic through listening and storytelling.

Heavily evaluated by a consulting firm specializing in measuring social impact, audiences reported that they had been moved and transformed by what they had experienced.⁷ Here are some of the comments that the audiences shared:

- ♦ “Due to the diversity of perspectives and feelings, I felt . . . more willing to share my experience and ask questions.”
- ♦ “I was surprised by the speakers’ compassion, empathy, and sensitivity to those who oppose them.”
- ♦ “I am personally pro-life and often feel shut out or judged because of my opinion. However, I could one day be in the same position and respect everyone regardless of political stance.”
- ♦ “It made me feel at ease to learn that men have a role and a place in all of this that is respected and appreciated.”

- ♦ “In the future, I will be more thoughtful about when it’s appropriate to engage politically and when it’s better just to hear a person as a human being.”

Over 88 percent of audiences on the tour heard a new perspective about women’s experiences with abortion. And the diversity of the abortion stories helped create an environment where different feelings, thoughts, and opinions were welcome. Ninety-seven percent of audience members thought that the workshop was respectful of diverse experiences.

These pro-voice workshops broke every rule about what’s supposed to happen when strangers talk openly about abortion. You can do it, too. With pro-voice as your guide, controversial topics like abortion can bring people together, not drive them apart.

In *Pro-Voice*, I show how listening, storytelling, and embracing gray areas create unexpected possibilities. I offer stories, case studies, and ideas that I hope will inspire readers to make pro-voice their own. For the purposes of this book, I focus on the high-level principles and components that are fundamental to the pro-voice practice. I review how America got so stuck on abortion and the challenges that women who have abortions face when they speak personally and publicly about their lives. I explore what it takes to infuse creativity and openness into a decades-long stalemate; and I share the successes, failures, and lessons learned in the pro-voice experiment thus far.

Throughout this book, I use the phrases “women who have had abortions,” “people who experience abortion,” and “women and men” in an attempt to acknowledge the incredibly diverse

array of people who are directly affected by an abortion. There are many challenges in speaking to and about all these groups, including the limitation of pronouns to represent the spectrum of gender identities and the natural emphasis on the lived experience of a person who physically undergoes the abortion procedure. Remember that even a secret abortion still takes place within the context of a woman's relationships, however healthy or abusive they may be. Her partner, family, and friends have their own personal experiences of her abortion, as do those providing her medical care. Though I use the term *fetus* throughout the book, I am quite comfortable calling it a *baby* or an *unborn child*. No word is off-limits if it's been used by a woman to describe her own experience with abortion, and no political alignment is implied in my own word choice.

These are the guiding beliefs of the pro-voice philosophy:

Pro-voice connections are radical acts of courage that can change the world. In the midst of hostility, attacks, and demonization, creating meaningful connections across differences generates new possibilities for change and transformation.

Embracing a diversity of voices, including those that are hidden, reveals new possibilities. Whether it's the pro-choice woman who regrets her abortion, the pro-life woman relieved by hers, or the experiences of the men involved in abortion decisions, the voices and stories that disrupt conventional black-and-white thinking create opportunities for new ideas to emerge.

Separation damages human dignity. Not only must we advocate respect for our own humanity, but also we must affirm and sustain the dignity of our opponents.

Personal experiences should shape political reality. People's real, lived experiences with polarized issues or stigmatized experiences can humanize toxic dynamics and illustrate complexity hidden within us-versus-them perceptions.

We continue the work of a long and powerful line of peace-makers. We have been influenced and inspired by those who have chosen love over hate and accept the task to do the same with the modern challenges of our evolving society.

All pro-voice strategies should be designed with the following goals:

- ♦ Rehumanize toxic dynamics
- ♦ Affirm and sustain human dignity
- ♦ Generate creativity and imagination
- ♦ Spur innovative thinking and action
- ♦ Invite openness, engagement, and conversation where before there was black-and-white or us-versus-them thinking

Pro-voice tools have been piloted, tested, experimented with, fixed, adapted, improved, and perfected in a wide range of forums, online and in person, in big groups and small, with people of diverse values, beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences around the country. Each tool can be broken down into any number of specific steps to form a curriculum tailored for a range of individual, community, and organizational purposes.

These are the core tools of the pro-voice philosophy:

Listening. Central to Exhale's work from the very beginning, active listening to truly understand where a person is coming from is the cornerstone of pro-voice practice.

Storytelling. It's essential to let go of the desire to make the most persuasive narrative and instead support people as they tell their own stories, in their own words, and in their own time.

Embrace gray areas. The creativity and innovations needed for cultural change come from the ability to accept the ambiguities of human experiences.

Exhale's community has been inspired and galvanized by what takes place in the intimate moments of connection between a talkline caller and an Exhale counselor, between women who are sharing abortion stories with each other, and between a storyteller and her audience. Given that there are often great differences between a storyteller and her audience, a counselor and a caller, or two women swapping stories with one another—they may be of different races, ethnicities, religions, ages, or education levels; they may speak with different accents and wear different styles; and they may have vastly different opinions about abortion—they can still connect in ways that empower, inspire, and make them hopeful for the future. These moments exist because even though the subject matter is highly polarizing, a pro-voice person will offer compassion and respond with empathy instead of defensiveness, even when under threat.

Practicing pro-voice behavior makes one incredibly vulnerable.

This type of nonviolent response—responding to hate with love or to attack with pacifism—has been called “moral jiu-jitsu.”⁸ By flipping the script, by changing expectations about how one is supposed to respond to hostility, conflict, or distress, we disrupt us-versus-them thinking. Opponents are unsettled. Gandhi called this nonviolent response to oppression *satyagraha*, and Dr. King called it “soul force.” One pro-choice activist referred to her work to publicly embrace the gray areas of abortion as a way to “take the wind out of the sails” of her pro-life enemies.

Pro-voice is the framework that applies these revolutionary concepts to the modern cultural warfare over abortion in America. Let’s see the opportunities in the obstacles of the abortion conflict and listen to the real human stories hidden behind the fight.

Thank You For Reading

Did you like this excerpt? Tell us your thoughts:
bkcommunity@bkpub.com

Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Copyright © 2014, All Rights Reserved.