part three

Challenging Opposing Positions
To start, I didn’t want to write this. So I searched, hoping to find someone who had a similar experience to share so that I could read their own take on their progression from a “pro-life/anti-choice/anti-abortion” position to believing in and advocating for abortion rights. I’m sharing this story of my past anti-choice activism because it is a past I have been ashamed of. Yet it also shaped me and is part of what, ironically, made me who I am today.

This, in the end, is a story about how destructive the anti-abortion movement can be not only to society but to individuals as well.

In the late 1980s, when I was sixteen, my mother decided to move our family away from the “rough” inner city of Toronto and tuck us away in safe, clean, boring suburbia.
The day Canada’s abortion law was struck down, I recall my mother watching the news and listening to the reaction from the public. She was motivated to do something, to get involved. She was determined to take a stand. I didn’t really know or care about this issue. I was still just a kid, really, in high school, sort of geeky, blessed with an awkward nature and a teenager’s skin.

My mother, however, decided that we (that is, my mom, my sisters, and I) would go picket the hospital circuit with our homemade anti-choice signs and hand out pamphlets spouting anti-abortion propaganda. Regularly, after school, we would travel downtown with her from Etobicoke, grabbing some veggie pitas en route, and protest the “killing” of the unborn in front of the hospitals. I’d beg to do something else after school, to go out with friends, but the answer was always no. There was no other option. Picketing and homework were my lot.

We had become born-again Christians. My mother had faith that this would save her crumbling marriage and stop her kids from turning into wayward anarchist heathens. For my mother, Christianity and pro-life activism changed everything. It delivered us from skull earrings, multicoloured hair, and “satanic” black nail polish. We were saved!

We began to “fellowship” with other like-minded folks, as is done in movements like this. We were constantly going to church and to youth events. As our involvement in anti-choice activism developed, I grew to like the attention, negative or positive. We became known and even somewhat famous in the movement as an “activist family.” At one point, Toronto Life magazine even featured us in a piece.

A sick and paranoid mythology was part of the anti-choice ideology. We’d hear about the evil “pro-aborts,” how they hated children, how they’d get pregnant intentionally and then have abortions. The anti-choicers really believed that “feminazis,” as they called feminists, were evil, that they sacrificed fetuses in some sort of satanic ceremony. Clinics were rumoured to sell fetal parts to research facilities for medical experiments and to meat processing plants and fancy cosmetics companies for the collagen. They claimed that experiments were performed on “living” fetuses, decapitated fetuses, and so forth.

We’d hang out at Aid to Women, an anti-choice “counselling” organization that was littered with Christian propaganda and expressed a truly extremist anti-abortion ideology. The atmosphere in the movement was extremely oppressive and very controlling. According to the anti-choicers,
the mainstream, secular media were all liars, and any statistics or information that seemed to contradict their views were lies or government conspiracies. Followers were strongly encouraged to rely only on Christian or Catholic sources and to avoid mainstream media. The world presented through their eyes was a very ugly place.

Virtually everyone in the movement was religious—Catholic, born-again evangelicals, or members of some other Christian faction. Their stated goal was to save babies. But their broader agenda was to “save the world” from the secular, non-Christian agenda, and they were armed with an over-the-top anti-gay and anti-woman manifesto. Homosexuals were seen as “AIDS carriers” who were out to “get the family.” Abortion was ultimately just a stepping stone, a point of entry into their paranoid, homophobic, hate-filled world.

Accosting female patients on their way to abortion clinics was like a game for them, some sort of competition. One day, my mother, who had begun to regularly do sidewalk “counselling,” cornered a nineteen-year-old woman from Grenada in an alleyway and convinced her not to have an abortion. My mother dragged her into the fake “pregnancy counselling centre,” the one beside the Morgentaler Clinic on Harbord Street, shoved a bunch of pamphlets and a plastic fetus in her face, and asked her why she wanted to “kill her baby.” The young woman began to weep. This was a “victory” for my mother and made her the envy of other, more experienced sidewalk “counsellors.” “Why do you get to save a baby?” they lamented. “I’ve been doing this longer than you.”

Eventually, we joined Campaign Life Coalition (CLC). My mother was rather generously supporting them—this was back in the days when they had charitable status—with donations to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars. We became involved with many truly extreme characters. There was Vlad, a Soviet defector, who actually lived at CLC’s Dundas Street headquarters. He was an eccentric who worked in the office, and he was devoutly religious. He would accompany us on regular trips across the border to Buffalo to participate in Operation Rescue efforts. He hated abortion providers. I asked him once why he never took part in traditional protests. His answer was that he would kill the doctors if he saw them. I don’t think I brought it up with him again.

We also came to know Ken Campbell, a prominent anti-choice evangelical Christian who spewed his own special brand of reactionary hatred via a Christian radio show in the early 1990s. He would pontificate on air at
great length, supported by the blessings and dollars of his faithful listeners, who included my mother and also my father. Sadly, they must have donated tens of thousands of dollars to him as well. Campbell would rant about the “pro-aborts” and how anti-family they were. He was also extremely fixated on homosexuality, even relating stories of how he was tormented by gay men in his dreams! This seemed rather odd for someone who despised gays: every broadcast was a call to action against the supposed anti-family, anti-traditional marriage, homosexual agenda. Then, of course, he would beg for money. Eventually, my mother had a falling out with him when he kept pushing for more and more money. The last straw was when he showed up at our home with prearranged loan papers all ready for my parents to sign. Fortunately, they declined.

Meanwhile, lots of exciting things were happening in the anti-choice movement in the United States, led by the Christian hard-line fanatic pastor Randall Terry, whose Operation Rescue movement appropriated civil rights activist tactics and then dared to compare itself with the civil rights movement, even going so far as to sing their songs and twist their slogans. “They ended slavery, we’re ending slavery in the womb!” his followers would shout. Randall Terry embraced the role of “prophet” that his devotees cast him in. In the early 1990s, he, along with a bunch of others, worked the faithful up into a frenzy in Washington, DC, with calls to take action against the murderous doctors who performed abortions. Unfortunately, some of his followers did just that.

In 1994, the Morgentaler Clinic in Toronto was bombed. Within the anti-choice movement, the anonymous cowards who had done this were seen as heroes and extolled as noble. They had obeyed a higher law. Morgentaler had “deserved” it, they said. They would make comments about how ironic it was that he had survived the Holocaust only to go on and kill North American babies.

Emulating the United States activists, we started to block clinics too. The movement’s male leaders, preferring to lead by words rather than by example, never put their necks on the line. Often, the front-line activists at the Toronto clinics—Morgentaler’s, the Scott, the one in Cabbagetown—were children and teens. My ten- and fourteen-year-old sisters were arrested.
while protesting, as were many other children. Time after time, kids and teens were encouraged to engage in activism by the anti-abortion adults, who liked the media attention we got.

Sometimes, we’d use Kryptonite locks to attach our necks to gates or to each other, imitating the Lambs of Christ, an extremist American anti-abortion group. A good family friend of ours was a “Lamb.” He was a single forty-year-old who wanted nothing more, as he put it, than “to die in service to the Lord.” He also had ties to the Army of God, a group of Christian anti-choice terrorists, and was proud of his Army of God manual, an underground “how-to” guide full of explicit instructions for vandalism and violence against abortion clinics and providers. He was such a fanatic that his father had taken out a million-dollar life insurance policy on him. He would accompany my mother and younger sisters on their strange and confusing “missions” to many US cities, where they would campaign against Christians using birth control. Sometimes, my mother would suggest that I marry him. Given that I was seventeen at the time, I have always hoped she was joking!

A big part of being a pro-life youth involved socializing with others in the movement and attending various conferences across Ontario and the United States. This was all part of our socialization into extremism and the ideology of control. At a Human Life International conference, one of my sisters and I were “shamed” for being vegetarians, since this meant we were going against the Bible and against our parents’ wishes. Our vegetarianism was deemed anti-Christian.

At our evangelical church, there were people who spoke in tongues—people who had been “chosen” to convey a special message from “the Lord.” It was, of course, always the same two people who “received” and interpreted. One of the tongue speakers looked me over one time and proclaimed to my mother that she detected witchcraft. This started a whole mess of trouble for me, and my mother got rid of my palm-reading books, along with many other suspect possessions.

No matter what, I felt as though I could do nothing right. Thoughts, especially sexual thoughts, which were normal for a girl my age to have, were considered sinful. We were taught that we could not trust a single natural thought. Everything about being a teenage girl was evil and unclean. I was convinced, after constant reminders at church and at home, that God would judge us and that His vengeance would be visited upon us.
My mother would inquire about our sexuality and remind us that masturbation was wrong and sinful. We were to practice chastity until marriage. Their answers to teenage hormones were lame. “I’m worth waiting for” buttons were thrust into our palms. Those in the anti-abortion movement and the Christian churches associated with it had a fundamental mistrust of youth and felt that all of us were in grave danger of becoming sex-crazed animals and drug addicts. It was as though they had simply forgotten, or perhaps never knew, what it means to be human, to be a young adult, and were unwilling to accept that this is an awkward age meant for discovering and learning about who you are and what you believe.

Why did I go along with all this? I think that, for me as a young person, it was about the attention and the thrills—the excitement of the lead-up to an Operation Rescue action, the camaraderie, the police, the media interest, and all the people watching. Then to get arrested, to go to jail for a few weeks (even if you were starting to have doubts about the tactics that got you there), and to get even more attention from those within the cult, all the greater because of your youth and “dedication.” I’d been involved for a few years now, and the magic number, 18, wasn’t too far off, which would mean the end of my young offender charges and sentences. Soon I would be in adult court. Just how dedicated was I?

If I could speak to my now long-dead mother, I might ask her why she let this happen. It destroyed our already fractured family. All we did was obsess over “the cause,” and it ate up every weekend and all our free time. It was as though a stranger had moved into our lives.

What did the pro-life movement teach us as kids and young adults? It taught us that God’s “law” overrides any other laws or rights. These were the anti-social “values” that anti-choice advocates instilled. Their family values involved showing graphic and misleading images to kids and repeatedly violating the rights of women. Upholding their values involved invading privacy, stealing clinic garbage to scrounge for fetal parts, picketing escorts’ homes, committing vandalism, and condoning and even encouraging violence against abortion providers and their property. They taught us to have no concern for anyone’s rights or property because we were obeying a higher law and we answered only to “God.”

When I read about current anti-choice activists, or when I see them at demonstrations or in their propaganda videos, they seem so sincere. Yet many are full of hatred and are sickened by the sight of women standing up
for their reproductive rights. They see us as the enemy and as bloodthirsty “baby killers.” I see familiar faces in the news—the McCashes, Jim Hughes, Linda Gibbons. I see other people I once stood alongside now involve their own offspring in the movement, creating future generations of activists in the cause of quashing women’s reproductive autonomy and carrying out a reactionary agenda.

Painting a false portrait of abortion rights activists is key to the anti-choice movement. To convince the flock, this portrayal must be as ugly and paranoid as possible. Just have a look at the website of the Canadian Centre for Bio-ethical Reform (CCBR) or at LifeSite News. Anti-choicers choose to perpetuate lies, and the tactics they use are fundamentally unethical. They are manipulative, anti-woman, and anti-family.

Their agenda reaches far beyond abortion. The beliefs they hold dear are part of an unholy trinity of hate that is anti-abortion, anti-homosexual, and anti-feminist. They work tirelessly at scheming new ways to complete or promote their agenda, using abortion as an issue to draw people in. This broader agenda is why Campaign Life was so prominent in opposing Ontario’s Bill 13 (an anti-bullying amendment to the Education Act), as well as the Gay-Straight Alliance in general, even though homosexuality has nothing at all to do with abortion.

The anti-choice vision is of a world where women are happy breeders, at home making dinner and raising their children, fulfilled by their duties as baby makers with no selfish thoughts of education, career, or personal achievement. Pregnancy is viewed as a duty, a must, a necessary rite of passage. As anti-choice activists see it, making babies is for everyone. Whether you’re a fifteen-year-old girl who had sex only once and got pregnant, or a rape victim, or a single “slut,” or a woman who’s been diagnosed with cancer: it doesn’t matter. To them, the circumstances are irrelevant.

It would make sense that such a movement, if it were actually about the love of “unborn babies,” would be concerned with the well-being of both pregnant women and the potential life they carry. You might think that these activists would support a government that would fund daycare, prenatal programs, affordable housing, and programs to assist single-parent families and that would fight to end hunger and poverty in our country so that more women would be in a position to bring a new life into the world, when the time is right for them, without fear of the future. But this is not so. Anti-abortionists are encouraged to vote according to one issue:
abortion and abortion alone. They are fixated, paranoid, and poisoned with an anti-female ideology. This is why their heroes are the Mitt Romneys, Rush Limbaughs, and Michael Corens of the world. Anti-choicers are not at all concerned with children or women—only with fetuses.

The anti-abortion movement is truly cult-like. Cutting ties with it, if one wants to, is not simple, since so many of your friends are anti-choice and are either evangelical Christians or devout Catholics. Leaders of the movement make sure of that. I remember how weekend retreats and pro-chastity, anti-abortion conferences were always held in out-of-town locations, far from most attendees’ homes. This made them a great opportunity for bonding and brainwashing. We really believed that when we blocked clinics, we were doing something good, that we were doing the right thing. We believed we were involved in the noble cause of saving women and babies from being dragged to a horrible fate.

I can’t exactly say what opened my eyes. It wasn’t one specific incident but several. The shootings and other anti-abortion violence helped to wake me up, of course.

Then there was the anti-choice hysteria surrounding the Nancy Cruzan case in Missouri. In 1983, she was in a terrible car accident, which left her in a coma, a vegetative state from which she would never recover. Four years after the accident, her family requested that she be removed from life support. They believed that they were following what would have been her wishes. The right-to-life movement in the United States and Canada went berserk, hatching plans to go and “rescue” Nancy. They claimed that she showed signs of brain activity and that her doctors and family were out to kill her. There were protests and legal challenges. The court ruled in favour of her family, and, on 26 December 1990, Nancy was finally allowed to die. The movement’s heartless actions against Nancy and her family were pivotal in changing my mind.

In 1992, I happened to watch an incredible Frontline documentary titled “The Death of Nancy Cruzan.” The tenderness and love that her father showed for Nancy really moved me. I wondered why those involved in the right-to-life movement didn’t talk about this. Surely, they could see how much her family loved her and how painful it was for them to watch this
once vibrant young woman brought back by “roadside heroics” to be an empty shell. The real Nancy was never coming back. Her body, now pale and bloated, would be unrecognizable to her former self. This was not living with dignity.

I was in art school by then and was being exposed to liberal thinking. I flourished. My best friend was a wonderful gay man; we were kindred spirits. I read authors like Toni Morrison and experienced the arts education I’d only dreamed of before. And yet I avoided intimate relationships, drinking, and most types of socializing. Feeling uncomfortable in my own skin, I was unable and unwilling to connect in a healthy, nonparanoid way because I was so used to having a movement and a religion looking over my shoulder.

Fortunately, the next twenty years would take me on a new personal and political journey. Having become a feminist and socialist, as well as the proud mother of a daughter who I hope will embrace the freedoms her foremothers fought for, I now see things very differently. I understand that anti-choice extremists view the world through hate-tinted glasses. They are the proverbial wolves in sheep’s clothing. Their ugly construct of women and the world bears no resemblance to reality.