During my early teenage and young adult years, I firmly believed in the right-to-life side of the endless abortion debate. My view slowly began to change during my early twenties. Now, in my forties, I see that, as my life has evolved, so, too, has my view of abortion.

I was raised in a Catholic household. Premarital sex was a sin, but abortion was a bigger sin. To me, abortion was unequivocally immoral; it was tantamount to murder.

At seventeen, when I fell in love with my first real boyfriend, I chose to save sex until after marriage. Early in our relationship, I made my feelings clear to my boyfriend, who accepted how I felt. As our relationship developed over several years, my desire to show my love physically grew. I knew it would go against Catholic teaching, but I thought it would be acceptable because, although we weren’t married, we loved each other. Besides, at the time, I truly believed he was the man I would one day marry. In that frame of heart, I overrode the church’s teachings on premarital sex—and on birth control.
Like all young women, I had goals and dreams. I didn’t want to lose any opportunities by getting pregnant, so I got a prescription for birth control pills. Every time you have sex, of course, the risk of pregnancy exists. I thought often in those years about what I’d do if I ever got pregnant despite my precautions. I knew that I’d be devastated and that my parents’ disappointment would be hard for me to bear. I knew that, technically, I’d have three choices: seek an abortion, choose adoption, or accept motherhood. Realistically and ideally, though, I knew I had only two choices: I could never accept abortion as a valid option.

I believed that abortion was morally wrong, but I’m adopted, so I also wondered: What if your birth mother had believed in abortion? You wouldn’t be here now. My strong, idealistic views made me argue—loudly and often—that abortion should only be allowed in exceptional circumstances. I could understand how a woman could—and should be able to—abort if she had suffered the horrors of rape, or if she or the child might die or suffer severe genetic or medical problems; I could not accept any other justification for abortion. The thought of the procedure made my stomach heave.

Anyone who advocated for the right to choose abortion was immediately immoral in my eyes. Even my best friend was the recipient of my swift reaction. I couldn’t believe that she thought killing an unborn child was acceptable: I became incensed whenever the topic came up between us. It was always the same endless circle.

“How can you justify killing an unborn baby?”

“Why should a woman be forced to deliver a baby she doesn’t want? It’s her body. She should have the right to choose what happens to it.”

Around and around we’d go, spinning like an angry tornado. To save our friendship, we finally agreed to disagree on the subject and to stop discussing it.

Because abortion was out of the question for me, I knew that I’d carry any unplanned baby to term, whether I kept it or gave it up for adoption. I wondered, though, whether I’d have the courage to give up a baby, so I considered my future life plans: Now wouldn’t be a good time for it, but you want a child someday. Why not keep the baby if you get pregnant? I also thought about the future consequences of choosing adoption for me and for the child: How could you give away a child never knowing if that might be your only chance to have one? And what if the child grew up as angry and resentful toward you as you’ve been toward your birth mother? Or feels rejected and unlived
like you did for so long? How would you feel if you spent the rest of your life not knowing how your child felt about being given away?

The longer I thought about the potential of an unwanted pregnancy, the more I suspected that I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I chose adoption. I knew I’d probably keep the baby and try to forget that it had come at the wrong time in my life.

My view of abortion remained deep and unbending for almost a decade, until some point in my early twenties. Suddenly I was living a surprising life—one I hadn’t expected, one I couldn’t even have conceived of a year or two earlier. In an instant, the six-year relationship with my first boyfriend had ended badly, and I was alone. A year later, I lost my dream teaching job because of harsh government cutbacks and then spent a year un- and under-employed. To add insult to injury, I was rear-ended at a stoplight—on Christmas Eve—and was left with chronic neck and back pain. My life was a muddled mess, and I felt shattered.

Out of the grey mist that my life had become, an unanticipated offer to teach English as a Second Language at a private school in China arrived. To escape the chaos in my personal and professional worlds, I accepted the job. Perhaps it was because this new life abroad was so unexpected and because most of my previous mental photographs of my life had remained undeveloped—no marriage to the love of my life, no permanent teaching job in my hometown, no financial security—that I suddenly began to see that I could live a different life than the one I’d envisioned when I was growing up. I also realized that many of those images had not been my own; they’d been drawn in my mind by society and by my parents. Getting married and raising a family was what I’d thought I was supposed to do.

But I’d broken the mold. I’d left the comfortable circle of family and friends and moved to the other side of the globe. And I was having a great time, testing my limits and trying new things. Suddenly, those old expectations lost their hold on me. I saw that I could finish my contract in China, move home, find a partner, get married, and raise a family. But those were choices, not requirements. I could also take a thousand other paths.

So I chose one of those alternate paths. I stayed in China for another year. I eventually lived in Macedonia, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates. I travelled and took photos and met new people. I married the best man I have ever met. And somewhere along that meandering road—I don’t recall noticing precisely when or where—I realized a startling thing: I don’t
want children. I also realized that choosing to be childless was perfectly acceptable.

Once I understood those two things, an interesting change happened: my views on abortion began to shift. When my desire to have children dissolved, the picture of what would happen if I accidentally got pregnant became very different. When I wanted kids, choosing abortion didn’t make sense. A child might come into my life too soon, but I planned to have one eventually, so I’d probably keep it. After I realized that I didn’t want kids, having one would have been devastating. It would have meant lifestyle changes I didn’t want to make, obligations I didn’t want to meet, and worries I didn’t want to endure. I could suddenly see how a woman could choose an abortion in an unplanned-pregnancy scenario. I could suddenly see how I could choose an abortion; in fact, I began to believe that might be the choice I would make.

Acknowledging that was quite a shock at first, but I’ve accepted that change in my point of view. I understand that we gain new perspectives as we evolve. I see, too, that the abortion equation comes down to a basic question: Should women have the right to make choices about all matters that deeply affect their lives? The answer, of course, is a resounding yes.

In the same way that women should be able to choose such parts of their lives as their life partners and their jobs, they should also be able to choose whether to have a family. No woman should be forced by law or by religion or by societal pressure to give birth if she is unready or unwilling. If we believe in women’s rights such as the right to vote and the right to work, we must also believe in women’s right to choose their reproductive futures. Although I never thought I’d say it, every woman should be free to choose an abortion if she believes it’s the right thing to do. Nobody else should be allowed to make that choice for her.