

why I believe abortion is part of being a good mother

On Wednesday, More4 broadcast *Travels with My Camera – A Matter of Life and Death*, a “personal journey” documentary by the journalist Miranda Sawyer. This was heralded by a piece in the *Observer* - later reprinted in the *Daily Mail* - penned by Sawyer, explaining the purpose of her quest. Sawyer’s dilemma has been that, until recently, she had been a died-in-the-wool, card-carrying, pro-choice feminist. Following the birth of her son last year, however, Sawyer had begun to have doubts about the ethics and logic of abortion. “I was calling the life inside me a baby, because I wanted it,” she wrote, after visiting picketed abortion clinics in America. “Yet if I hadn’t - as would perhaps have been the case ten years earlier - I would have thought of it as just a group of cells it was OK to kill. It was the same entity. It was merely my response to it that determined whether it would live or die. That seemed irrational to me. Maybe even immoral.” Later, she explained that, “When you’ve experienced pregnancy and birth, and the fantastic beauty of the resulting child, it’s hard not to question what a termination does, or is.” In a nutshell, since becoming a mother, Sawyer has found herself - whilst still ultimately agreeing that women should be able to have abortions - becoming more troubled by the pro-life argument. It’s odd because, since I had children, I’ve found myself becoming much less troubled by the pro-life argument. Of course, that echoes that old, black-humoured mum joke, often heard in playgrounds on wintry February afternoons – “What do you think should be the cut-off point for terminations?” “I dunno – secondary school?” - but also reflects how many issues still remain within the abortion debate.

In the fortieth anniversary year of its legalization in this country, there are still a great many assumptions and taboos around abortion. Last year, *Guardian* columnist Zoe Williams wrote a wholly clear-headed and admirable piece, examining why women always felt compelled to preface discussion about their abortions with an obligatory, “Of course, it’s terribly traumatic - no woman enters into this lightly.” She went on to explain that this is because, however liberal a society is, it assumes that, at it’s absolute core, abortion is wrong - but that a forgiving state must make legal and medical provision for it, lest desperate women do a Vera Drake down a back alley, and make things even worse. Abortions are never seen as a positive thing – as any other operation to remedy a potentially life-ruining condition would. Women never speak publicly about their abortions with happy, relieved gratitude, in the same way that they would about a vital job promotion, say, or leaving an abusive partner - despite that fact that both of these would impact much, much less on their lives than an unwanted child. There are no “Good luck with your morning after pill!” cards. People don’t make jokes about it – despite the fact that all the truest jokes are about vexed topics, and cover every other subject, including cancer, death and God. Yet however much a single, childless woman isn’t encouraged to discuss her positive abortion experience, this pales in comparison with women who already have children, who then decide to have abortions. Our view of motherhood is still so idealized and misty – mother, gentle giver of life – that the thought of a mother calling it a day after, say, two children, setting limits on her capacity to nurture, and refusing to give further life, seems obscene. Just as mothers must pretend that they love other people’s children, never wish to be violent, or get hog-whimperingly drunk, wear a cowboy hat and ride one of those bucking mechanized rodeo cows, so they must pretend that they are loving and protective of all life, however nascent or putative it might be. They should, we still quietly believe, deep down inside, be prepared to give and give and give, until they simply wear out. The greatest mother - the perfect mother - would carry to term every child she conceived, no matter how disruptive or ruinous, because her love would be great enough for anything. I have problems with that assumption. The first is that I believe something very elemental and, in the most academic sense, non-Christian. One of Miranda Sawyer’s biggest post-motherhood dilemmas over abortion was trying to work out where “life” begins in a foetus, and concluding that if abortion could occur before “life” begins, then that would, after all, be a “right” kind of abortion. However, given that both science and philosophy continue to struggle to define what the beginning of “life” is, wouldn’t it be better to come at the debate from a different angle entirely? For if a pregnant woman has dominion over life, why should she not also have dominion over not-life? This is a concept many other cultures understand. The Hindu goddess Kali is both Mother of the Whole Universe, and the Devourer of All Things. She is both life *and* death. If women are, by biology, commanded to host, shelter, nurture and protect life, why should they not also be empowered to end life, too? I’m not advocating stoving in the heads of children, or encouraging late abortions - but then, no-one is. What I am vexed with is the idea that, by having an early abortion, a woman is somehow being unfemale and, indeed, unmotherly. That the absolute essence of womanhood and maternity is to sustain life, at all costs, whatever the situation. My belief in the ultimate sociological, emotional and practical necessity for abortion did, as I have mentioned before, become even stronger after I had my two children. It is only after you have had a nine-month pregnancy, laboured to get the child out, fed it, cared for it, sat with it until 3am, risen with it at 6, swooned with love for it and

...ological, emotional and practical necessity for abortion are, as I have mentioned before, become even stronger after I had my two children. It is only after you have had a nine-month pregnancy, laboured to get the child out, fed it, cared for it, sat with it until 3am, risen with it at 6, swooned with love for it and been reduced to furious tears by it that you really understand just how important it is for a child to be wanted. And, possibly even more importantly, to be wanted by a reasonably sane, stable mother - one with the emotional and corporeal resources to give the child what it needs. Last year, I had an abortion, and I can honestly say it was one of the least difficult decisions of my life. I'm not being flippant when I say it took me longer to decide what worktops to have in the kitchen than whether I was prepared to spend the rest of my life being responsible for a further human being. I knew I would see my existing two daughters less, my husband less, my career would be hamstrung and, most importantly of all, I was just too *tired* to do it all again. I didn't want another child - in the same way that I don't suddenly want to move to Canada; or buy a horse. Whilst there was, of course, every chance that I might eventually be thankful for the arrival of a third child, I am, personally, not a gambler. I won't spend £1 on the National Lottery - let alone take a punt on a pregnancy. I didn't fancy the odds on success, and the stakes (my marriage, my sanity, the emotional stability of another human being) were far, far too high. Ultimately, I don't understand anti-abortion arguments that centre on the sanctity of life. As a species, we've fairly comprehensively demonstrated that we don't believe in the sanctity of life. I don't understand why pregnant women - women trying to make rational decisions about their futures - should be subject to more pressure about preserving life than, say, Vladimir Putin. What I do believe to be sacred - and, indeed, more useful to the Earth as a whole - is trying to make sure there are as few unbalanced, needy, destructive people as possible. I think that, by whatever rationale you use, ending a pregnancy twelve weeks into gestation is incalculably more moral behaviour than bringing an unwanted child into this world. Or child that, through no fault of its own, would be the destructor of a marriage, a family, a parent. It's fairly inarguable to say that unhappy children, who then grew into very angry adults, have caused the great majority of mankind's miseries. If psychoanalysis has, somewhat brutally, laid the responsibility for mental disorders at parents' doors, then the least we can do is tip our hats to women aware enough not to create those troubled people in the first place. In short, whilst I am now packing something just short of the contraceptive equivalent of Trident, if I ever did have to have an abortion again, I would like to think it would be something unlikely to provoke a moral dilemma in anyone - least of all myself. I would like to see a time where abortion is considered to be an intelligent, logical, humble, compassionate thing to do. I would like abortion to be considered as, perversely, one of the ultimate acts of good mothering.

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