

Commentary: 5 things a pro-lifer learned from pro-choice friends at the women's march



Demonstrators took to the streets in Washington, D.C., other American cities and also around the world as part of marches calling for equality and inclusion for women.

By **Joanne Cleaver**

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I was a stowaway at the Women's March on Washington. I couldn't go, so a friend carried my name on a card in her pocket, along with those of a dozen other women there in spirit.

My friend's act of kindness also was an act of faith. She is a pro-choice Democrat. I am pro-life Republican. And we suddenly found ourselves agreeing on the huge issue that the Trump administration threatens the tender progress recently claimed that genuinely achieves both our goals for women and unborn babies. So, she put me in her pocket.

There was good news on Sunday's 44th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*: The abortion rate has declined by double digits. According to the Guttmacher Institute, which tracks abortion and related trends, in 2014 the number of abortions dropped below 1 million annually. The rate for women age 15 to 44 is down 14 percent

since 2011.

What's making the difference: expanded community access to health care and young women's ability to develop real relationships with doctors, thanks, yes, to the Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare). It's a rare moment of convergence for those who say abortion should be available and rare, and those who believe we must do better for women and babies.

The Women's March showed the real choices facing both sides — and the way forward.

Observations from the pocket:

1. Now is the moment of truth. The Republican Party is adamantly pro-life. (At this point, it's one of the few things keeping me in the party.) And now we know that access to health care helps reduce abortion. Will Congress vote its claimed values and reinvest in health care that sustains life for women and unborn babies?

2. Pro-life feminism is ascendant. Three decades ago, I was one of those sidewalk vigil-standers, a "life chain" handholder. I didn't consider myself a feminist. Now I do, partly due to life experience and also to my deepening appreciation for diversity. Yes, some hard-liners at the march harassed pro-life feminists, but pro-life feminists have momentum on their sides, because to deny us is to deny the diversity of women. When a "Saturday Night Live" skit makes your point for you, you know you're gaining traction.

3. The false choice of "your baby or your life" is shown to be a lie. New initiatives such as Pregnant on Campus, a project of Students for Life, bring practical help to students who shouldn't have to sacrifice their babies for their educations. There are many ways to help women include their babies in their visions for their own futures. Progressive employers are adopting expanded parental leave and flexible work arrangements, for instance, that foster economic self-sufficiency for young families and single mothers. Congress can vote pro-life through expanded support for community colleges and for nutrition programs for mothers and children.

4. Fundamentalism is counterproductive. Religious pro-lifers muddy the message when they mix their faith with facts. (I don't want anybody's rosaries on my ovaries either.) And idolizing Planned Parenthood blinds pro-choicers to the bigger question of finding new ways to truly support women. If health care becomes ever more available and affordable, doesn't that make Planned Parenthood obsolete?

5. Science counts, but empathy wins hearts. Nobody disputes that a zygote, an embryo, a fetus and a born baby are all human. The issue is when that human deserves legal protection to live her life. The pro-life movement needs breakout stories to do for it what "Hidden Figures," the wonderful movie about black female mathematicians who helped power the space program in the 1960s, does for the civil rights movement.

As the march morphs into a movement, feminists of all philosophies have a chance to seize the moment to make real progress for women and unborn babies. Congress might rise to the occasion. But we can't count on politicians to do what's right. Let's show them how to get it done, for females of all ages and life stages.

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