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**My Turn: What it means to be a woman today**

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For the Monitor

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*“What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.”
– Muriel Rukeyser*

I don’t write this for myself. I’m old now. I’ve lived my life. I write it for my daughters, granddaughters and for the generations of girls yet to be born. And it’s my hope, as well, that my sons, grandsons and the boys yet to be born will also heed the words written here, to perhaps gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be a young girl, a woman, in our society at this critical point in our history.

Five years ago, I was sitting on an overcrowded plane trying hard to escape into my new book, *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Unlike many, I’d not read it years before on its initial release. Next to me was a young man who, seeing it, started a conversation saying he’d read it in one of his college courses. What I remember most about our brief exchange was what I only distilled in retrospect. There had been a kind of subtle concern in his voice, some fear carefully shrouded, tucked away from any possibility of being spoken, dare it become real. He simply said, “I think every young girl and woman should read it.”

Before the Texas ruling on abortion, I’d all but forgotten about that brief encounter. Now I find it echoing off the inner chambers of my mind like some premonition, once barely acknowledged, now ravishing unabated. I’ve watched with shallow breath the steady enactment of legislation clearly designed to remove a woman’s personal autonomy, and to largely return her to her “rightful place,” to the deemed patriarchy of the family and society.

This is promoted under such seemingly innocuous headings as . . . all being in support of traditional values and, of course, always in the best interest of the family. And now, the Supreme Court will take up Mississippi’s abortion rights case putting *Roe v. Wade* on the line.

Particularly when it comes to the issue of abortion, many in the more conservative Christian communities, proclaiming to be pro-life, now are feeling called to rise up and stem the tide of societal decay. However, I would argue that what’s now being labeled pro-life is just the tip of a not-so-subtle proverbial iceberg concealing a much broader movement, a movement that’s allowed for the steady growth of what I would call “holy misogyny.” It’s quite perfect, actually. Who could argue with the will of God?

Let’s look at how the issue of abortion and the-not-so subliminal desire to return women to a handmaid-like existence are related. It seems to me that many who would call themselves pro-life are really not pro-life at all, but simply anti-abortion. In my view, a true pro-life stance would include care and concern for all parties, not just the unborn.

Ideally, where an unwanted pregnancy has occurred, all parties would be included in a discussion of potential outcomes based on their particular situation. And all such parties would naturally include the father whose role and responsibility have remained conspicuously omitted. Sadly, it’s only the mother who’s being summarily called out and left isolated and vulnerable to be easily hunted down by self–appointed vigilantes. And, as importantly, if a woman is required by the state to have a baby, shouldn’t the state then be required to provide support?

And little has felt more misogynistic to me than there being no exceptions for rape or incest. As one who’s sat with hundreds of women for over thirty years as a therapist, minister and spiritual advisor, I’ve heard the stories from many of the one in five of us women who’ve either experienced sexual abuse as a child or will experience an attempted or completed rape as an adult.

Clearly, those engaged in the passage of the current legislation have never been a young girl, in the middle of the night, lying shaking and terrified of hearing the door open again. And those same people have likely never found themselves huddled in a fetal position on a shower floor trying desperately to wash away the memory and horror of the rape they’d just endured.

And perhaps most disheartening is how holy misogyny rears its head when, in those rare times, a mother gathers the courage to talk to a leader in her more conservative faith community about the abuse she knows is happening in her own home. Sadly, it’s not uncommon to be told that it’s really her charge to try and be a better wife. And, too often, the mother agrees. This is because she’s long ago put aside those initial feelings and questions about who she is in relation to the men around her.

She long ago suppressed that first time, perhaps sitting in a church, when she may have found herself wondering, God is a man. Jesus was a man. My minister, or priest, is a man. All the disciples were men. The gospels were written by men. Dad, or my husband, is head of the house and he’s a man. Everyone that’s important is a man. Where is there someone good and important who looks like me? What’s wrong with me?

Let’s try to imagine, what would happen if just one of them told the truth about her life? Perhaps then, indeed, the world would split open . . . and just maybe we could begin to build a society where all voices are heard and celebrated.

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