

Lisa Laverty
February 6, 2019
Essex, Vermont

Where Science Ends and Faith Begins. My Response to Bill H.57

Horrified, all I could think was, "I don't have the right to do that!"

I was 13 weeks into my pregnancy, alone at an ultrasound at what was then Fletcher Allen Hospital now the University of Vermont Medical Center, a little nervous, but looking forward to getting a glimpse at the new life inside me.

I don't remember a lot from this ultrasound visit aside from being excited to see my baby. It was longer than usual with some extra measurements taken. But I will never forget what happened afterward. I was led to a windowless room for a consult with the high risk obstetrician. I remember her explaining to me that my baby had extra fluid on the brain called hydrocephalus and something about how trisomy's 18 or 21 could cause this. The doctor then coldly explained how my baby could be dead from this extra fluid by the time my next ultrasound came up at 19 weeks and encouraged me to take a blood test to find out what was going on. I can't remember her exact wording, but she expressed urgency that I should find out so I would have more choices. When it sunk in that the call to action to find out by blood test was so I would have time to terminate, I felt horrified. My baby went in one moment as valued in the hospital's eyes to less than nothing in the next.

My immediate thought when I realized the doctor was alluding to terminating my pregnancy was, "I don't have the right to do this! This is a baby, my baby. I am not God." I am sure that doctor thought she was being compassionate, saving my child and myself from some sort of projected pain. But my lived experience is that lack of hope is not compassion. I clung to my faith, refused the tissues that were offered, turned down the testing and told them I would wait till the next ultrasound at 19 weeks...

Hope starts where science ends and faith begins... Everyday people all over the world experience miracles. We can't make a miracle happen, but that does not preclude their existence.

By 19 weeks the hydrocephalus (water on the brain) had improved and my baby was healthy, but with many markers for Down syndrome. At this point I agreed to that new and safe blood test I had been offered at 13 weeks to find out if my son (we found out he was a he) had Down syndrome. About three weeks later my midwife called and gave me the news that he in fact did. It was the most awkward phone call I have ever received. She had given her condolences with the news as if someone had died.

This past week I watched an episode of "Crikey It's the Irwin's" on Animal Planet with my kids. My oldest son adored the Crocodile Hunter years ago when he was little. We were devastated when Steve Irwin died, so it was pretty awesome to see his wife, son, and

daughter so amazingly carrying on his legacy in this new show about their work at the Australia Zoo.

Well, in the episode we watched there was a koala that had given birth to twins. The teeny koala babies looked like hardly anything, little pink gummy blobs. They would have to stay in their mama's pouch for another 5 or 6 months to grow enough to be able to survive outside the pouch. They explained that twins for koalas is very rare, the moms are really only meant to have one baby and it was risky to leave both twins in the pouch. Later in the show we find out that one of the twins had died, despite their efforts to keep it alive. Steve's Irwin's daughter Bindi and the caretaker for the koalas at the zoo were very broken up about the loss of the koala baby. It was a truly touching moment. As I watched I was struck by how much they valued the life of that little koala.

I ached thinking if only my son had been valued as much by our country and the people whose care he was put in that day as that baby koala at Australia Zoo.

Our son Gus will be six years old next week. He is funny, a great friend, loving and mischievous, he is a son, a grandson, a nephew, a friend, a younger brother to 5 and an older brother to one. He is one of a kind and perfect just as God made him.

It honestly makes me want to throw up when I think what could have happened if fear had ruled that day. If I had been paralyzed by it and thought "I can't, I just can't." Mistaken compassion by that obstetrician and our legal system would have convinced me to do the unthinkable. We would have been robbed of our child, and complicit in stripping him of his right to life.

I've tried to remain silent out of love for all those I know affected by this issue and those I don't know, but my conscience is convicted. I have prayed and prayed for years and now that prayer has led me here.

I am compelled to write today because my adopted state of Vermont, where I have given birth to 5 of my 7 sons, is looking to enact legislation giving women the right to choose to terminate their babies right up to birth. This law would mean that I could do what I knew in my heart was not my right at 13 weeks, through 40 weeks.

I am not the most eloquent writer, but I can no longer be silent. Many of us strive to defend the rights of the innocent immigrant looking for a better life in a new land, but not the right of the innocent immigrant in the womb, looking to make it past a different kind of border wall. We all have the right to have human dignity, to be believed in, whether in fervent health or not, to be given a place in this world. I cannot believe that this bill is what women, or any of us, truly want the right to.

Mother Teresa spoke these words in 1979 in her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech. *"Many people are concerned with the children of India, with the children of Africa where quite a number die, maybe of malnutrition, of hunger and so on, but millions are dying deliberately by*

the will of the other. And this is what is the greatest destroyer of peace today. Because if a mother can kill her own child, what is left but for me to kill you and you to kill me. There is nothing in between."

These are strong words. All I can say is I am humbly grateful that I didn't listen to fear in that little room at the hospital almost 7 years ago. I didn't listen to that high risk obstetrician who thought she was preparing me, giving me options, telling me all about the risks, the what ifs, and withholding all the joy. Telling me that my beautiful teeny tiny baby safe in my womb was someone to be feared, that I had a choice to protect myself from him and to protect him from himself... I am so glad I didn't listen.