

My Mother Broke the Law

Category: Abortion: Then and Now

written by Warren Holleman | July 15, 2022

My mother was a nurse anesthetist in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. She staffed the ORs of almost every hospital in Raleigh, North Carolina: public and private, Black and White, two psychiatric hospitals, even the ORs in the men's and women's prisons.

Years later, when people asked her about *Roe v. Wade*, she'd say the Supreme Court decision was a good one. If anyone challenged her or asked why she felt that way, she always offered the same response: "If you saw what I've seen, you'd be pro-choice, too."

That was usually the end of it, but if they pressed her for more, she'd say she'd seen the aftermath of too many botched home abortions and too many unwanted pregnancies.

But there was even more to her story. What follows is a secret she confided to me.

Back in the years before *Roe v. Wade*, my mother was the nurse anesthetist for patients undergoing illegal abortions. Her team did the procedures, she told me, "in the basement of the hospital, in the middle of the night."

She had no moral qualms about this. Her only regret was that the option was limited to those with money and influence—"the daughters of Raleigh's doctors, lawyers, and leading businessmen," as she put it.

From my mother I also learned that my aunt, an RN, provided illegal abortion services in Raleigh as well. She did the procedures in her home. That made my mother nervous. "She's taking a risk," she said. "Something could go wrong."

The ethical principle that guided my mother was a duty to make the procedure as safe as possible for the patient. I believe my aunt used the same moral reasoning, only she applied it to the situation of those without access to secret, hospital abortions. My aunt felt a duty to make *home* abortions as safe as possible.

I admire them both. They risked their careers—and perhaps more—to save the lives of their patients.

There is one more piece of my mother's story. Her own mother died at age thirty-four, from an infection, after giving birth at home to her eighth child. Antibiotics did not yet exist, nor was hospital care available to the average American. That changed about the time my mother entered adulthood, so she became a health professional—and dedicated herself to providing quality care for young women, the type of care her own mother could not get. I find this admirable, too.

Now that *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned, we'll all soon see those things my

mother saw. And, sadly, a whole new generation will grow up taking unnecessary risks and hiding dangerous secrets.

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