

## LIVING WITH INTIMIDATION Frank Carpenter

Early this past July, my partner, Jacquie, came home from work at an abortion provider. She told me her car had been damaged. It was parked in the clinic's parking lot and someone had shoved their car into the front of hers, damaging the front lights and hood. Was it an accident? She didn't think so. It is an old car, a 1994 Chevy Cavalier with close to 200,000 miles on it, so we haven't repaired it. But, I still wonder, who damaged the car, was it intentional? Was it because Jacquie works at the clinic?

To me, living with this unease, distrust of our fellows that they may damage our property or ourselves because of our values, is terrorism. It is meant to intimidate, to get us to change. There is a growing acceptance of abuse and intimidation in our society. Jacquie and I talk about our work when we get home.

We live with this low level terrorism every day Jacquie goes to work. She has worked there for two years. Each day they worry about the mail. The mail carrier is understanding, and takes back suspicious packages.

Tuesday and Friday are surgery days. These are the days the clients come for the procedure. The clinic has two physicians, one who flies in one day a week from upstate. Before the election, she shared that she and her husband were talking about what happens if Bush wins. Her husband said in that case he wanted to move to Israel.

The other physician is an African American. As he walks in sometimes the all white protesters accuse him of genocide against his own people. Usually he is fairly level headed. One time however, he confronted one of the protesters. The protester filed a complaint against him. The judge ordered them into mediation. Another time, the African American physician started using the back door to the clinic to avoid the protestors. He stopped that when he realized it might just give the

protester another spot to worry. On July 16<sup>th</sup>, when he got into the clinic, he told Jacquie that one of the protestors had shouted out that he, the doctor was a terrorist, and had called Attorney General Ashcroft.

There are three or four protesters out front Tuesdays and Fridays. When Jacquie first started working at the clinic, the police were responsive to complaints by the clinic against the protestors. With the opening of the city's own Homeland Security Office, this precinct captain no longer works at that precinct, and their calls are not responded to as readily.

A brief re-counting of a few other incidents will provide a sense of the constant harassment, intimidation, that goes with her work.

On July 9<sup>th</sup>, A woman who had had an abortion joined the protestors with a sign "Abortion ruined my life." The manager of the clinic called their attorney.

On July 21<sup>st</sup>, a more than usually obnoxious protester had been showing up for the past few days. She arrives in van covered with anti-abortion posters. One shows a ½ inch embryo without feet. She screams, "The people at this clinic are evil. They are running an extermination camp."

Jacquie and I talk a lot about the clients. The most meaningful part of her work is providing counseling for the clients. One day she counsels a young woman whose entire family is off at an anti-Roe V Wade protest march in Washington. She is beginning to expand her thinking. Sometimes anti-abortion clients think abortion should be illegal because the other women are moral failures, unlike them.

There seems to be an increasing number of girls coming to the clinic, thirteen, fourteen years old. They did not know that sex is where babies come from as sex education does not provide any opportunity to learn about such things. Some are dating men older than they are, who know what they are doing.

Sometimes it is the inseminator who wants, and pays for, the woman to have the abortion. They were just taking advantage of a young woman and don't want to ruin their marriage. They insist on the abortion. Another major reason women come in is because having a child will ruin their lives. They cannot afford to feed the children they already have. The client's mother will not be able to take care of any more grandchildren, they will not be able to attend classes to improve their life.

It is clear to me that most abortions are requested under duress. Even those who have grown up and believing that they will go to hell for having an abortion, do so to protect the children they already have. Jacquie helps them explore ways of looking at god other than an angry judge.

One doctor stopped providing abortions, not because she felt they were morally wrong, or illegal, but simply the overwhelming sense of tragedy that one sees day to day as a fetus is aborted. Fetuses not in the early embryonic months begin to show signs of becoming human. And all too often, many clients are in denial and wait longer than a rational course might suggest. I wonder if during day to day intimidation and entering into the tragedies of so many lives staff are developing post-traumatic stress syndrome.

On November 3rd, at the end of the day, Jacquie is answering the phones. Jacquie responds to the ringing of the phone. A woman's voice responds, "Did you support Kerry?" Somewhat confused, Jacquie answers, yes. The disembodied voice continues "We're going to close you down."

On November 18<sup>th</sup> a woman calls. She had an abortion at the clinic ten years ago. Will her records fall into the hands of the government; must she tell her doctor she had an abortion?

We live with this. It is part of our daily routines to share with one another when we get home. There is a sermon in this.