

A letter to my Black daughter after the fall of *Roe*

Your body is not a public domain.

by [Reggie Williams](#) in the [July 27, 2022](#) issue



(Photo © fizkes / iStock / Getty)

My dear, sweet daughter,

I write this to you as a follow-up to the conversation we had over dinner here in Paris, on the night the world learned of the US Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Our family had been watching to see what would happen with this case, hoping for a different outcome than what the earlier leak indicated. But that was not to be the case. When we finally learned of the *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision, I was moved by your thoughts about this historic turn of events, and so I want to document our conversation.

I want to be careful, however, with how I frame my reasons for writing to you on this subject. It's a problem when men approach topics like this one out of sympathy for a particular woman or girl in their life. It repeats the harms that got us into this situation. This is a matter of justice, not sympathy. The court's decision betrays the nature of our society—and our response to it speaks to the kind of society that we want to live in. This moment is about women losing rights but also about the belief within our society that it's OK, even good, to take away those rights. It stems from a history of human hierarchy that always targets multiple groups of people and degrades everyone's quality of life.

So I'm much more than sympathetic here; I'm angry at injustice. I'd hoped that we'd be further along than this as a society as you and your brother enter your adult years. But you two are entering a society that is moving in reverse, and we need to be able to decipher this moment in order to see our way clearly as advocates of justice and to do our part to help move things forward.

But first—and I know I say it all the time—I'm so proud of the amazing woman that you're becoming. You came into a world that was quickly changing. You were not even a year old when the country was rocked by the events of 9/11. You didn't know what was going on, but that day had a significant impact on the world of your childhood. The *Dobbs* decision is another major event, one that will impact your adult life. You're aware of this one. We feel this one, together, along with millions of others in our country. I'm writing this to you as we're together in France, trying to imagine what we'll face when we return to the States.

I know that you're upset and frightened. I am, too. Now that you are a young adult, I can't accompany you as regularly and as closely as my protective instincts would like, to shield you from the harm that this crazy world aims at your Black woman body. So, my beautiful and brilliant young Black woman, I write this on the occasion of the end of *Roe v. Wade*, to remember what we talked about that evening and to give us both some encouragement to carry with us as we remain in the struggle. I used to address abortion in the classroom as an objective facilitator of facts. In my intro to Christian ethics class, I would ask students to raise their hands and state publicly where they identified in the abortion debate: pro-life or pro-choice. I did that to have them practice empathy as a tool for moral discernment. After they identified their stance on the argument, I would have them gather in small groups of like-minded classmates and develop an argument as though they were proponents of the opposite perspective.

When we came back together as a single group, students always struggled at first to say anything at all. I wouldn't allow them to present caricatures of the opposing viewpoint; they were to demonstrate sincere comprehension of why someone else would feel differently on this topic. It was hard for them to genuinely identify with a different perspective on this very contentious topic—but eventually they were able to do it. They ended up arguing vehemently—against the side that they in fact espoused, as advocates of the other side. And because they had to sincerely present the other viewpoint, for a moment they were no longer hiding behind walls of intentional ignorance, lobbing stereotypes as bombs over walls of distance from one another.

Students regularly told me that this exercise was transformative. But I don't do it anymore.

I stopped because as fun and engaging as it was, the lesson was missing important content. For one thing, the setup didn't make it clear that one can support abortion rights without being proabortion. In addition, there wasn't time to unpack all that I find lacking in the abortion debate and still have enough time to engage that empathic exercise.

Some argue that an ethics professor must remain neutral and simply administer the content that will allow students to arrive at their own conclusions. In that light, I offered the empathy exercise to students as an objective facilitator of information—with an explanation of the deep divide, reading assignments that represented both sides, and even a documentary that organized the debate from both perspectives. But by presenting the topic in this way, I fear that I misrepresented what matters most within this deeply divisive topic: I didn't make it clear enough that this debate is about justice. We need to surface that fact—and the hurtful presumptions within the debate that derail justice.

For the sake of justice, it is important to see how difficult it is to have an antiabortion political platform that does not involve turning a woman's reproductive system—her body—into public legislative territory. As you stated, my daughter, that is an invasive and demeaning stance within a society that remains unapologetic about race, sex, and gender oppression. This kind of invasive treatment of bodies is possible and even commonplace because we live in the wake of multiple histories that have regarded Black women's bodies as public properties, for everything from financial gain to scientific experimentation and exotic fascination.

You know this from your own studies, which exposed you to the troubling history related to the treatment of Black women: sexual commodification, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced medical experimentation, and ongoing trauma within a society that has yet to reckon with those violent histories. I know that this court decision puts you in touch with horrible feelings related to this history, and as much as I'd like to do so, I can't shield you from the grief. But we can and must face this evil head-on.

We live in a society where stereotypes, like the ones that made possible this history of such hostile interaction with Black women's bodies, shape expectations of how you can and should perform based on the body that you're born with. White people with an unexamined racial and gender superiority complex need these stereotypes to maintain the nostalgia of their imagined world. And there is little tolerance, in public, for bodies that don't perform according to their imagination, structured by stereotypes—little tolerance, that is, for lives that are unrecognizable to patriarchy, sexism, and racism. The claim that a woman's reproductive system should not be public legislative territory is intolerable to a power-grabbing demographic in a society where a woman's role is already regulated by norms that define her place in a social hierarchy. And that is especially the case if she is a woman of color.

By contrast, it's impossible to imagine treating a man's reproductive system as public, legislative domain. That is, unless you are referring to Black men, before the Civil War. And while Black men are no longer subject to that kind of invasive treatment, it is apparent that all women, especially Black ones, must still endure it.

But that's only one of the points that I want to highlight from our conversation, and not even the most salient one—it is difficult, after all, to step out of the social programming that sees human hierarchy as the standard way of understanding human difference in the world. Another point surfaces a set of lenses that may allow us a clearer view of the justice problem because it is more explicitly about moral claims.

Abortion is regularly couched, explicitly or otherwise, in terms of moral choices. An abortion is viewed as an avoidable, immoral decision that should thus be removed as a legal option. This type of moral claim is typically made without attention to the lived experiences of people in social spaces, situations, and bodies different than one's own. The practice is a form of what's known as disembodied reasoning.

There is no harmless way to do disembodied reasoning, because moral choices are not so easily made in advance. Disembodied reasoning makes it possible to argue for a hypothetical child, in a hypothetical situation, with a one-size-fits-all moral claim. It forgoes attention to the physical realities that make up the conditions of our daily lives.

But when we take seriously the embodied historical conditions that populate life and sometimes make our experiences of the world unrecognizable to one another, we come face-to-face with the fact that we can't make moral claims collectively, for people we don't know, facing situations we can't possibly predict, in the ongoing dynamic rhythm of daily life in a country saturated with oppressive stereotypes and practices. We need to pay attention to the impact of navigating this world in different bodies.

Theologically, that means taking moral account of things like the meaning of salvation to people who don't know where their next meal will come from—as opposed to those who are well-fed yet use the same term to understand their faith. Similarly, what does salvation mean to someone who can't legally say that she has ownership of her own body in a land where the rest of the population has no such laws governing their existence?

Yet Christians still make these blanket moral moves, guided by unexamined presumptions to fashion prefigured moral norms. When we do that, we aren't engaging actual life. Interacting with real life is more of a challenge. It demands more of us than the prefigured, preestablished concepts do. To be pro-life is to engage something so much more complex than the term pro-life has captured.

Understanding this fact reveals that too many Christians would rather deal with preset ideas of good that they can imagine as universally right. That kind of thinking helps them to see themselves as good Christians, without the pressures of dealing with real people who are living real lives in the real world. So they end up forcing living people into preset, preestablished choices that are harmful when they touch the ground in a real life; or they condemn people after the fact for not upholding the preset moral standards. They inevitably injure people who find themselves facing situations that don't fit the mold. That's not pro-life.

My dear, sweet daughter, this is why we both found ourselves struggling with the voices that claimed the end of *Roe* as a Christian victory. When we are dealing with

people's lives, we must make actual, embodied life encounters the departure point for discerning what is good and just. We must meet life with an openness to all of its complexity—for it is there in the embodied encounter that we meet Jesus, who said to his followers on more than one occasion, "I am the life."

We aren't capable of interaction with life when we see moral Christian living as something that we can do "in our hearts" or as an abstract state of being, and certainly not when we believe that we have objective knowledge of good and evil, sicut Deus (like God) for all times, with all people, in all places. We become like Adam and Eve, who after eating the forbidden fruit are no longer relating to each other—no longer capable of connecting in relationship with each other, God, or the earth. They are left naked and alone with their efforts at Godlike knowledge of good and evil. And just like them, the disembodied Christian moralists would leave us looking only at ourselves, naked and alone, trying to make ourselves into good people without the ability to connect in any meaningful way with anyone around us.

Yet it is in connection with one another—in the dynamic, unpredictable nature of relating to the irregular day-to-day—that we encounter life, that we discern the will of God face-to-face with life in all its complexity. I remember a conversation with a couple who found themselves facing a tragic situation with a pregnancy that they ultimately had to terminate. They were devastated. I also remember the story of a pastor who wanted a child yet found herself facing what was for her an unthinkable need to abort. There are a myriad of stories and situations, all of which are challenging—and none of which invite public opinion. As difficult as these moments are for the women and sometimes their families, they should face them without the added burden of moralizing Christians who lack the ability to value life in the world.

Jesus is not an abstract idea. Jesus is real and embodied. Faithfulness to Jesus can only happen in relating with him, in embodied, daily, dynamic life encounters with real people. That's pro-life. It also recognizes that you, my child, have your body, as your responsibility, in the context of community in which we share love for each other as people who choose to do so. Your body is not a public domain. It is given to you by God, and with God's help, in a community that you choose, you will decide what you must do for your well-being.

That is what I'm thinking about this morning as I reflect on how this court decision will impact you. Like you, I'm a lifelong learner, and so I'm grateful to share such a meaningful conversation with you. As you see fit, I hope that you'll continue to share

your thoughts with me about all of this—and that together with your mother and brother, we'll gather with and listen to others who are committed to justice in the struggle for women's agency.

But more than anything, on this day, I want you to know that your father is a committed ally in the struggle. I will always have your back.

Love,

Dad