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The George Tiller I remember

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In the week since his murder, [Dr. George Tiller](#) has been variously described as a hero or a lightning rod. I knew him well for more than a decade and I want to let you know what drove George Tiller.

He was born during World War II to a comfortable middle class family in [Kansas](#). His father was a physician and a pillar of the community. George grew up in middle [America](#), played sports, went to church, studied medicine and served in the army. He intended to become a dermatologist and to continue to live the kind of life he knew.

Then, in 1970, his parents, sister and brother-in-law died in a plane crash. George moved back to [Wichita](#) to take care of his baby nephew and to close out his father's family practice. While doing so, neighborhood women approached him and asked if he would continue to secretly provide abortions, as his father had done.

At first, George was offended and disbelieving, but he discovered that his father had once refused to provide an abortion to a patient who then sought help from someone untrained - and died.

George learned that his father had subsequently come to understand his patients' desperation and felt compelled, as their physician, to help them, to keep them safe from resorting to dangerous methods or unscrupulous practitioners. And thus George's father quietly provided illegal abortions to his patients.

All of this was a staggering surprise to George. When his psychic dust settled, abortion had become legal. He resolved to care for the patients who turned to him for help, just as his father had. And as he did, George learned firsthand of the urgency and complexity of his patients' predicaments, which fueled his determination to keep going. He said, "The women in my father's practice for whom he did abortions educated me and taught me that abortion is about women's hopes, dreams, potential, the rest of their lives. Abortion is a matter of survival."

George needed a lot of determination because, over the years, his clinic was picketed, firebombed and vandalized. He survived an assassination attempt, spent several years under the protection of federal marshals, his patients' confidential medical records were subpoenaed, and he was repeatedly charged with crimes and violations - which were either dismissed by the courts or resulted in acquittals.

George told me that in several instances, people who had been picketing his clinic later entered as patients - seeking abortions for themselves or their daughters, sisters, wives. The women obtained their abortions, then returned to the picket line. Apparently they found their own circumstances to be extenuating and compelling - but did not reach to imagine that every patient there had a similarly compelling story.

The George Tiller I knew kept going because he listened to his patients, cared about their sorrows, respected their thoughtful decisions and kept his vow to provide them with state-of-the-art medical care. And for this he was murdered, inside his church.

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