



Published in "Salvo"
Autumn 2010

A Publication of **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**
www.RachelsVineyard.org

A Buried Grief

Finally, There is More Help for Women Hurt by Abortion

By: Marcia Segelstein

In 1971, two years before *Roe v. Wade*, Dr. Julius Fogel, a psychiatrist and obstetrician, wrote in the *Washington Post* that every woman who has an abortion experiences a trauma of some sort, to one degree or another (see sidebar). He wrote this in spite of the fact that he was in favor of legal abortion and an abortion practitioner himself. Of course, there is no way to prove whether or not Dr. Fogel was correct in asserting that all post-abortive women experience trauma. But it can fairly be said that he was ahead of his time in acknowledging the psychological impact of abortion on many women.

His assessment fell on deaf ears in any case. It would be many years before post-abortion ministries and outreach programs sprang up to meet the needs of women who had long suffered in silence.

Support Group Revelation

While Theresa Burke was a graduate student in the field of psychotherapy, she led a weekly support group for women with eating disorders. During one session, a patient named Debbie confided that she was having flashbacks to an abortion she'd had several years before. The distress they caused was compounded by phone messages she was getting from her ex-husband, in which he called her a "murderer" and rehashed gruesome details of the abortion. After these phone calls, Debbie would often become suicidal and end up in the hospital emergency room. She was severely anorexic.

The revelation of Debbie's abortion led others to speak up. Another patient, Beth Ann, explained that she could understand how Debbie felt because she'd also had an abortion. Burke quotes her as saying, "It would kill me if someone kept reminding me about it. It's something I try to forget about."

Next was Diane, who, in the midst of a curse-laden rant against men, alluded to having had an abortion. Another patient, Judith, became so upset that she got up and left.

After the session, Burke phoned Judith to be sure she was all right. "I hate the subject of abortion and wish that we could focus on eating disorders instead," Judith explained. When Burke asked her if she'd experienced an abortion herself, Judith said that she had, but that she didn't want to discuss it.

It turned out that six of the eight women in the eating disorders group had undergone abortions. “In subsequent discussions, all six women indicated that their abortions were perhaps the most difficult decisions they had ever made,” Burke later wrote. “At the same time, however, they denied that their abortions had any significant effect on their lives.”

Burke sensed that, as she put it, “a lot of unexplored and unresolved feelings were being denied, repressed, or suppressed.” And because unexpressed emotions are often the key to treating eating disorders, Burke broached the subject of how to proceed with her supervising psychiatrist. She was instructed in no uncertain terms to drop it. Period.

Planting Rachel’s Vineyard

But Burke could not forget what she’d learned in that support group. Having recognized that abortion was an issue for many women, she decided, upon completion of her training, to establish small, free support groups for women who had had abortions. The sessions “were always filled, even though we never advertised,” Burke told me in an interview. “It was all word of mouth.”

Very quickly, she sensed that the women’s pain ran very deep. “I even began to sense that therapy—coming in to discuss their abortions—actually made it worse. We now know from research that talk therapy does not always help victims of trauma.” So Burke started a program called Rachel’s Vineyard.

These weekend retreats—which are open not only to women who have had abortions, but also to fathers and other family members affected—use a combination of spirituality and psychology to help people heal from the pain and guilt of abortion. There are strong Catholic roots to the program, but retreatants come from across the spectrum of Christian denominations, and from outside Christianity as well.

Rachel’s Vineyard currently holds 750 retreats a year, in 48 states, 29 countries, and in seven different languages.

A Life-Changing Experience

Cynthia is a psychologist who now works as a volunteer at Rachel’s Vineyard retreats. At the time she had her abortions, however, she was strongly pro-choice. As a psychologist, she’d had her share of psychotherapy, and she didn’t believe she’d suffered any psychological scarring as a result of her abortions.

But shortly after her conversion to Roman Catholicism, a friend who knew about her past abortions urged Cynthia to attend a Rachel’s Vineyard retreat. At first, Cynthia was skeptical and resistant, but she finally relented after deciding it would be a chance to learn more about this type of intervention.

It proved to be much more than that. In an interview with me, she described the retreat as a life-changing experience. “It was so powerful that I made the decision to dedicate the rest of my career to helping women heal psychologically from abortion. I had no idea I was harboring a very sizeable amount of pain—a real psychological woundedness—around my own abortions. The pain that came out of me was astounding.”

Accepting Forgiveness

Margaret, who is now 70 years old, had suffered years of guilt and shame over an abortion she had when she was 25. She spent years going to different therapists without much success at finding peace. Her mother’s death was the impetus for her deciding to attend a Rachel’s Vineyard retreat. “I realized my mother was now in the presence of my unborn child,” she told me in an interview.

Ten years later, she hasn’t had to return to therapy. By her own description, the retreat allowed her to accept God’s forgiveness and enabled her to start on a journey of self-forgiveness. “It’s a grief that’s often unacknowledged, and you’re not supposed to cry over it. It’s complicated by the fact [that] you made that choice,” she said. She also believes that most therapists, and even priests for that matter, don’t understand how to deal with the issue.

Able to Feel Again

Kristen, who has had two abortions and now volunteers for Rachel’s Vineyard, remembers being told at the time of her abortions that it was nothing to worry about, that she’d be fine. “I really didn’t even know it was a life. That’s what I was told and I believed it for about ten years,” she told me. Then one day, completely out of the blue, she had a panic attack and felt compelled to tell someone about her abortions. “It just came out of my mouth. I didn’t even think about it till then. I’d never talked about it, never thought about it.”

She, too, resisted attending a retreat, finally going after friends urged her to try it. “I was having emotional issues in my life, but even after the panic attack I refused to believe it was related to my abortions. I remember telling my facilitator on the phone beforehand that I didn’t really think I needed to do this.”

How did the retreat affect her? “I was able to believe that God forgave me, and [I] felt called to help others.” She returned to the Catholic Church, and was able for the first time since her abortions to look a priest in the eyes. She also began to feel again. “When you make this choice, something happens inside you where you almost shut off your emotions and become numb.”

Unprepared & Misinformed

Michaelene Fredenburg was 18 years old when she had an abortion, and she recalls being completely unprepared for the emotional fallout. She was overwhelmed by a range of

feelings, from anger to profound sadness. She suffered in silence for years before finally seeking help from a trained counselor.

Fredenburg has since written a book called *Changed: Making Sense of Your Own or a Loved One's Abortion Experience*. She has also started an outreach called *Abortion Changes You*, which she describes as “an invitation for people from all faith backgrounds who have experienced abortion—men, women, grandparents, siblings, other family members, and friends—to discover that they are not alone and that healing resources are available.”

The *Abortion Changes You* website provides a place where people can share their experiences, safely and anonymously. There are common threads running through many entries: guilt, depression, drug and alcohol abuse. Many entries are heartbreaking to read. “I cried for 20 years,” reads one. “My inside is like a giant hole,” reads another. “I don’t think I will ever be able to be me again.” Many people express anger that they weren’t given information about the psychological impact abortion can have.

In truth, pro-abortion groups often misleadingly downplay the emotional effects of abortion. For instance, Planned Parenthood, in the *Frequently Asked Questions* section of its website, provides this answer to the question, “If I have an abortion, how will I feel afterward?”

A range of emotions is normal after an abortion. . . . Some women feel anger, regret, guilt or sadness for a little while. For some women, these feelings may be quite strong. . . . Serious, long-term emotional problems after abortion are about as uncommon as they are after giving birth. . . . Ultimately, most women feel relief after an abortion.

Suffering from Within

Actress Jennifer O’Neill decided to go public a few years ago about the abortion she had when she was 22 years old. In her book, *You’re Not Alone: Healing Through God’s Grace After Abortion*, O’Neill speaks openly about both the emotional and the physical scars she suffered as a result of her abortion. She is now a spokesperson for *Silent No More*, a campaign to make people aware of the suffering abortion can cause—to both women and men—and to inform them that help toward healing is available.

In that role, she appeared as a guest on ABC’s talk show *The View* a few years ago. The panel’s reaction was telling. From the outset, O’Neill was clear about her message: She was there to let people who are suffering as a result of having had an abortion know that there is healing and hope, and that they are not alone. Co-host Joy Behar responded by saying she was afraid that O’Neill’s message “is going to influence them to roll back abortion rights.” Behar went on to bemoan the fact that there’s so much shame around abortion. “Maybe we should change that,” she pronounced.

Many in the pro-abortion camp would no doubt echo Behar’s reaction: Any discussion of post-abortion suffering puts abortion rights at risk, and the shame associated with

abortion is the real problem. I asked Fredenburg if she believes that suffering after abortion is imposed from the outside or comes from within. She responded:

When I had my own abortion, I didn't have any problem with it. In fact, I felt that it was a good idea for women in particular to reach their education and career goals. So the feelings that I had afterwards were completely unexpected. It did not fit into my own philosophy around abortion.

Suppressing the Facts

Author and former CBS News correspondent Bernard Goldberg addresses the issue of how the media covers abortion in his book *Arrogance: Rescuing America from the Media Elite*. He recounts that, in 1990, Los Angeles Times reporter David Shaw wrote a 12,000-word, four-part series on how the media covers abortion. Shaw's conclusion, as Goldberg summarizes it, was that "the culture of the American newsroom is so overwhelmingly pro-choice that the media have a tough time covering the story fairly." Goldberg also notes that Shaw's reports were almost universally ignored, notably by the media itself.

Professional organizations, too, tend to downplay the potentiality of abortion to have serious aftereffects. In August 2008, the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion (TFMHA) presented its findings on post-abortion trauma this way:

[I]t is clear that some women do experience sadness, grief, and feelings of loss following termination of a pregnancy, and some experience clinically significant disorders, including depression and anxiety. However, the TFMHA reviewed no evidence sufficient to support the claim that an observed association between abortion history and mental health was caused by the abortion per se, as opposed to other factors.

Theresa Burke believes that the issue of post-abortion suffering is problematic for mental health professionals who see abortion simply as something safe and legal and part of women's health.

As long as you're enshrining it as part of health care, when people have problems with it or trauma associated with it, it becomes extremely politically incorrect to acknowledge that. Then there's the very real problem of unhealed trauma in the clinicians themselves. If someone comes in with this problem and it might trigger your own unresolved feelings, you're not going to touch it with a ten-foot-pole. You'll find every way possible to convince them that their problems are related to something else.

A Very Real Phenomenon

According to Burke and others in the field whom I spoke with, typical manifestations of post-abortion trauma include depression, anxiety, eating disorders, nightmares, and difficulty with intimacy. Some reactions are delayed for years; others are immediate. "I think most women, if they knew it was going to impact them in such a negative way,

would never, ever in a million years have chosen to have an abortion,” Burke told me. “Having a baby would have been a breeze compared to trying to deal with all the problems that were borne later.”

Post-abortion suffering is overlooked in the political debate over abortion. It’s generally not reported in the media, nor is it acknowledged by the culture. But it’s a very real phenomenon, as the thousands of individuals who have found help and healing through organizations such as Rachel’s Vineyard, Silent No More, and Abortion Changes You would attest. •

“Every woman—whatever her age, background or sexuality—has a trauma at destroying a pregnancy. A level of humanness is touched. This is a part of her own life. When she destroys a pregnancy, she is destroying herself. There is no way it can be innocuous. One is dealing with the life force. It is totally beside the point whether or not you think a life is there. You cannot deny that something is being created and that this creation is physically happening. . . . Often the trauma may sink into the unconscious and never surface in the woman’s lifetime. But it is not as harmless and casual an event as many in the pro-abortion crowd insist. A psychological price is paid. It may be alienation; it may be a pushing away from human warmth, perhaps a hardening of the maternal instinct. Something happens on the deeper levels of a woman’s consciousness when she destroys a pregnancy. I know that as a psychiatrist.”

—An observation made by Dr. Julius Fogel, a psychiatrist and obstetrician who personally performed more than 20,000 abortions, in a 1971 piece for the Washington Post called “A Psychological View of Abortion”

“The expectation that abortion has no significant emotional consequences is strongly reinforced at most abortion clinics. Ignoring all evidence to the contrary, most abortion counselors will tell women that psychological reactions to abortion are rare or even non-existent . . . [S]ome counselors even tell women that an abortion is no more painful or risky than having a tooth pulled.”

—From *Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion* (Acorn Books), by psychotherapist Theresa Burke and David C. Reardon.



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