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Fruits of the Vineyard: One Woman's Journey From Tragedy and Loss to Healing and Hope

By: Bill Howard

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Names and some locations have been changed for this story.]

The group was asked to go to the center of the room and each pick up a small stone. They would carry this for the rest of the Rachel's Vineyard retreat.

They sit in a circle in a soft-lit room, with the stones under a coffee table at the center. Soothing music plays lightly in the background of what feels like a cozy living room. It is a space that has an air of non-confrontation, beckoning retreatants to relax and know they can share their stories in confidence.

Participants were quickly disarmed at the start by reflecting on the story of Jesus saving the adulteress from stoning (Jn 8:1-11). The small stones represent their burdens in life. They then turn to the person next to them and ask, "Has anyone here condemned you? Then neither do I condemn you." They eventually let go of the stone.

Deborah is now a volunteer at these retreats. She helps with setup, food preparation and whatever else is needed behind the scenes. Deborah has felt the powerful healing that comes from these retreats, that deeper reconnection with God as an unconditional lover.

She likens the beginning of a Rachel's Vineyard retreat to the same fears one has going into the confessional, "only now you are opening yourself up to a group of people." Participants begin to share their burdens — often for the first time — and nobody is allowed to interject. There is no condemnation or judgment; everyone is on a level playing field. Rachel's Vineyard retreats are offered as safe havens for participants to "renew, rebuild and redeem hearts broken by abortion."

Throughout the retreat, they listen, they share, they cry, they question . . . and they heal. Near the end of the retreat, participants are asked to name the baby they aborted. For Deborah, this was one of the most healing parts of her Rachel's Vineyard experience.

"Before going to the event, I recognized it was by the grace of God's mercy and love that I had been forgiven. Everything I was reading and feeling . . . it all came back to God's grace. It was clear to me that the baby's name was Grace," she said.

At home, a little piece of jewelry Deborah prizes has a heart with two wings and a star. It reminds her of Grace. “She is lifting my heart to God.”

I THINK I just took advantage of you,” the groggy man said as they both awoke in his bed after a late party with friends. “Oh, my God,” she thought. Deborah tried to get her bearings in the strange room, not sure she believed what she just heard. She gathered her belongings and headed home dazed. She did not remember anything. Surely, something was put in her drink last night, she thought. Surely, she thought, she had just been date-raped.

A month after the incident, Deborah started to feel the signs. Nausea. Check. Fatigue. Check. Back pain. Check. This seems like pregnancy, she thought, so she went to a local hospital to check on her symptoms. The doctor confirmed she was indeed pregnant.

Embarrassed to draw attention to it, she never brought it up or prosecuted the man. In fact, she never saw him again. Society’s response toward what we now call date rape was cloudier in the mid-1980s, just a decade removed from the heart of the “sexual revolution.” Casual sex was in. She wondered if she somehow led him on. In her mid-20s at the time, Deborah had just moved and started a new job. This was one of her first excursions out in the city. Maybe this was somehow her fault.

So she would bury it deep inside her heart, making sure she was never put in that situation again.

“I never, ever expected to be in that position, and I guess you never really know how you are going to react,” she said. “Having an abortion was never a choice in my mind, but for some reason I asked and the doctor said that the hospital did perform them.”

Roe v. Wade, the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision that legalized nationally most forms of abortion, was barely a decade old at the time and was hailed as another step to freedom for women. “(Roe v. Wade) just put doubt in a person’s mind,” she said. “Your family and your church and everyone say that it’s not the right thing to do, but that law just made me feel doubt. Maybe it really is just tissue? And I think when you are in that place of being afraid and confused you don’t know where to turn to.”

Deborah made an appointment to come back two weeks later. She did not want to tell anyone about the situation, but because of the hospital’s demand that she not be behind the wheel that day (a taxi was out of the question), she asked a coworker to drive her.

DEBORAH GREW UP in a farming community, where Catholic families go back generations on the same land. It was a place with a grounded faith community full of hard-working people. Her family went to Mass every Sunday and said grace before meals. The Catholic faith was more than lip service in her childhood home. “I grew up in a family where women take responsibility for those things . . . we didn’t yell, ‘rape!’ and go to the law,” she said.

Back then, she instead wondered what she might have done to cause the incident to happen.

“I blamed myself,” she said, “even though I still don’t remember what happened.”

The product of a no-bull, salt-of-the-earth community, Deborah had a hard time accepting that she had been victimized — that it wasn't her fault. "I went through a period of denial, like how could this possibly be happening?" she said. "I felt like I didn't have a voice that night and now at this point I still didn't feel like I had a say in it. It's hard to explain."

In the weeks following the abortion, Deborah's conscience was in spin cycle. She loved God and had always had a personal relationship with him, but now that relationship seemed torn.

"After that, I found it difficult to go to church, and slowly I started not going," she said. "I felt like an outcast. I just didn't feel I deserved God's love at that point, so it was really hard going to church."

For those next three months, she would constantly cry, usually at home after work but sometimes at the office. Her body was confused and still preparing for a child that would not come. She felt she was experiencing the emotions of a miscarriage, of post-partum depression. Every time she saw a baby or a pregnant mother, she would burst into tears.

For the next 10 years, Deborah lived behind a wall of denial, "just totally numb," she said.

"But I was always searching for something," she added.

While an exterior practice of her faith was not in the forefront, Deborah turned to self-help and similar books. She "drowned" herself in work. And she quietly kept praying. "I knew if anyone could help me, it would be God, but I went through a period where it felt like he was not hearing or answering my prayers," she said.

The rosary was always a favorite devotion of her family and Deborah turned to this prayer often after the abortion. If she was struggling to connect with God, she felt more peace trying to connect with Jesus' mother Mary. "My family always taught me to go through Mary to reach God, and I always liked talking to God first," she said. "I started to pray the rosary again and went back to my formal prayer because I knew that always brought my parents peace." And then one day, Deborah finally heard an answer. She felt the Blessed Mother calling her to stop punishing herself and to move forward with her life. Deborah began to feel cracks in the wall around her heart and the beginnings of a realization that God was with her this entire time, even if she couldn't sense it. She also realized she needed others to be more involved in her life. "When I did (occasionally) go to the church, I would hear about how wrong abortion was and that we are murderers, and so I found it difficult to go to church," she said. "But I also knew I really needed that spiritual community."

As she returned to Mass on Sundays, she would let God speak to her through the Scripture readings. She identified with the Woman at the Well (Jn 4:4-42) and with the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15-11-32). When those passages were read, she was standing at the well looking Jesus in the eye. She was walking home in shame to her loving father, who would run out to greet her and celebrate her return. Deborah began to

feel connected again through the passages in Scripture that echoed her own pain, shame and longing for love and healing.

About six months went by before she finally could bring herself to go to her pastor for the next big step toward healing.

It was time to go to confession.

THE IMPORTANT THING was that she was in there. Even if Deborah's heart had doubts, her head knew that the confessional was a place of healing. Pope Francis recently called the church a "field hospital," and if that is so, the confessional is the triage unit, not an executioner's chamber. And she needed emergency attention. She had tried to be her own confessor for years, but it was not working. She had not mentioned her long-standing wound to anyone, especially not her parents or siblings. But her heart could not hold this burden anymore.

The priest was compassionate and grateful for her courage, and he let her take as much time as she needed. When it was over, he gave her the Prodigal Son passage to reflect on further.

"Normally when you go to confession, you feel this sense of peace. But I didn't feel that way at first," she recalled. "Instead, I was in tears because I had it bottled up for so long and now I had released it."

Deborah had been so conditioned to punish herself that she doubted that God really forgave her. She thought, to be safe, maybe she should go to confession again. "I had to mentally process the whole thing all over again and kept going back to the Scripture verses he gave me and thought, wow, is that really possible?" she said. Nobody around her knew her pain, yet every day it was like seeing a scarlet "A" on her when she looked in the mirror. Like the hemorrhaging woman lost in the crowd who stuck her hand out and touched Jesus' cloak and was healed (Lk 8:40-48), Deborah was trying to work out her salvation in the shadows. "My fear of reconciliation was, I think, a fear I was going to be rejected and excommunicated when, in your heart, you know God loves and forgives," she said. "But you wonder, am I really going to be forgiven? It is fear and feeling like an outcast."

A few days after the confession, she felt "the weight of the world lift off of me." Deborah basked in this forgiveness for a few months. During this time, the same priest recommended she look into Project Rachel, a Catholic counseling ministry that helps bring healing to women and men who have been involved in an abortion. Deborah knew that her local Catholic Charities office offered Project Rachel as one of its outreaches. There was hesitation yet again. "I wasn't ready to go back to my pain because I spent so much time in it that I wanted to live in this new light that I was in for a little bit," she said. And so every once in a while, the priest would nudge her . . . "Have you done Project Rachel yet?" Deborah finally acquiesced and signed up for weekly counseling through Project Rachel. There was then the weekend retreat program, Rachel's Vineyard that could help her make great strides in the grieving and healing processes. She signed up for that, too.

Deborah's Project Rachel counselor had her go back through the trauma. After Deborah felt abandoned by God for so long, another view of this dark period of her life came to light.

"She helped me recognize where God was in those moments that you have the most pain," Deborah said.

IF DEBORAH HAD her preference, pro-life sidewalk prayer warriors would not hold signs that say "Abortion Kills" or any phrase that condemns the mother. To the post-abortive woman, protest signs against the woman can be like a modern-day stoning and, as a result, they find it difficult to seek healing. They already feel like outcasts because they have already condemned themselves.

If she could hold signs on that last stretch of Calvary, they might say:

"God Loves You!"

"You're Not Alone!"

Maybe there is simply a picture of Jesus holding a lamb.

Deborah's healing will always be a process — she still has not told her parents — but she has moved into the stage of gratitude for God's love and a desire to serve. She is immersed in a faith community again. Her charitable work with the Rachel's Vineyard retreats brings her a peace and fulfillment she had not known for years. She remembers the peace, joy and love she felt departing the retreat and wants to help others feel the same. She keeps a journal and has written a booklet aimed at inspiring hurting men and women to recapture their unique voices. "I deeply regret my decision. Unfortunately, we don't get do-overs in life," Deborah said. "All I can do is move forward, heal and help others avoid the same mistake."

"Sin, secrets and lies have a way of imprisoning us. My hope is participants feel forgiven and free," she added, "that they know they are loved and not alone."

She is proof that the healing is real. There may be a restlessness in Deborah for the rest of her days, one that will finally be satisfied when she meets Grace face to face. But at least now her past will no longer rob her of the joy from God's unconditional love.

PROJECT RACHEL

Project Rachel is the name of the Catholic Church's healing ministry to those who have been involved in abortion. Project Rachel operates as a network of healing composed of specially-trained caregivers.



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