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Journey of Hope

By Anne Koenig

A group of women with anorexia and bulimia led Dr. Theresa Burke to help people who've had abortions.

Burke is the founder of the Rachel's Vineyard retreat program for those who are hurting emotionally or spiritually after ending their pregnancies. She will be the featured speaker at the annual fund-raising dinner sponsored by A Woman's Concern Inc.

A pro-life crisis pregnancy and resource center, A Woman's Concern offers pregnancy testing material assistance including diapers, abortion-alternative counseling and support to those facing unplanned pregnancies, and free obstetrical ultrasound services.

A King of Prussia psychotherapist, Burke will present "Journey of Hope" a talk based on her new book, "Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion," released this month by Acorn Press. She will discuss the traumatic aspects of abortion and how to heal.

The event will be held at 6:30 p.m. Friday, April 19, at the Palm Court at Willow Valley Resort & Conference Center.

Burke, in recent telephone interview, said she was a graduate student working with women with disordered eating behaviors when one of the young ladies in her group therapy session admitted she was having flashbacks and nightmares about the baby she'd aborted.

That admission set off a chain of responses among some others in the group, Burke related. One woman, for example, became enraged and, screaming on profanity after the next, said she'd had an abortion, too, and it was her right.

Another, overwhelmed by the memories of the abortion she'd had, could not even bring herself to talk about it; she walked out of the session.

"If their feelings were this powerful," Burke said, "it had to mean something." These were people who, for years, she said, had swallowed their grief, shame and sadness.

She began to see a connection between post-abortion emotions and the other problems in the women's lives, including their eating disorders.

Burke noted that many women, who seek help at crisis pregnancy centers, have already had abortions – sometimes several; a symptom of trauma, she noted, is repetitious behavior.

While some might view those who have had multiple abortions as "cold-hearted or just careless about birth control," Burke said, she sees it differently. They might actually be exhibiting a symptom of deep psychological trauma, she said, by re-enacting the pregnancies.

"The issue," she said, "is that the woman suffers the loss of her child. It's excruciating and very painful. To the body, it's traumatic because the body is a delicately designed ecosystem to sustain life. When that is abruptly and violently ended..."

There is also emotional pain, she said. And, consequently, high-risk behaviors are not uncommon among those who've had abortions. Some become suicidal, she said. Some drive too fast. Some shoplift. Some develop eating disorders.

"I can't say that every woman experiences a trauma," Burke said. "But we do know that about 75 percent (of those who have abortions) are violating their own moral beliefs."

And, she said, our culture denies the person who has had an abortion the freedom to openly display her grief. There are abortion proponents, for example, who say abortion is simply the removal of cells; thus, nothing to grieve. There are pro-life activists who say abortion is murder; thus, an agonizing guilt.

"You seal it off and you put it somewhere inside of you," Burke said, "and it becomes impacted..."

"It inhibits their recovery because they stuff it away."

Abortion is particularly precarious to teen-agers "in a developmental sense," Burke said, "because they are standing at the door of their womanhood and then it's completely cut off, cut out. And this can have a really harmful effect."

"I know so many people," she said, "that this trauma dictates their future choices about motherhood. Because of the trauma, a pregnancy would remind them of the abortion." And, so, she said, they choose to never become pregnant.

Symptoms of post-abortion syndrome/trauma include bouts of crying, guilt, intense sadness, emotional numbness, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, suicidal urges, anxiety and panic attacks, depression, anger, sexual problems or promiscuity, lowered self-esteem, sleep disturbances, difficulty with relationships, flashbacks and an inability to forgive one's self.

"A lot of people know that God will forgive them," Burke said, "but they don't forgive themselves. And sometimes the guilt and pain is the only way they can relate to their aborted child...They don't want to give that up. It's like their memorial to that child."

The Rachel's Vineyard retreats offer opportunities to learn healthy ways to be spiritually connected to the child who was aborted, she said.

"When you're blocking up a part of your heart with the child that you've rejected," Burke said, "it kind of shuts down other parts of your heart."



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