



Published in  
"[www.freemethodistchurch.org/magazine](http://www.freemethodistchurch.org/magazine)"  
January 2003

A Publication of **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**  
[www.RachelsVineyard.org](http://www.RachelsVineyard.org)

## **Love Looks For More Than Common Ground**

By Pamela Walls

---

Butterflies took wing in my stomach as I sat listening to the California Pro-Life Director introduce me to Stanford University students. Here we were, speaking out against abortion at one of America's most renowned and liberal schools. I was flanked by a speakers' panel of leading authorities in the field who'd brought statistics and medical facts to the forum. But I came armed only with my story.

And yet, I was convinced that the truth could touch even the most ardent pro-choice activist. So I launched into my talk about how, a few years earlier, I'd missed my period and my doctor had prescribed hormones to start it again after a blood test showed I wasn't pregnant. Several months later, a new doctor examined me and discovered I was by now four-and-a-half months pregnant. "The hormones your previous doctor gave you cause birth defects and brain damage," he'd said.

And so began for me the internal battle every woman caught in a crisis pregnancy faces: amid dire circumstances and a "support system" that suddenly evaporated, my heart was torn in two. Part of me was desperate to survive, unsure that I could cope as a single parent to a disabled child. I was afraid it would mean a lifelong sentence of poverty, something I'd already experienced for years as I worked my way through college. At the same time, another part of me was responding to the sudden news that I was a mother. There was a life growing within me! I'd always wanted to have a baby — but not like this.

I took a deep breath and continued my talk. "Defense mechanisms kick in when something is 'too much to bear,'" I said. "At this point most women erect walls of denial to protect themselves from the reality they're contemplating. Should they sacrifice their lives for someone they've never even seen? It's easier to believe the abortionists' view that it's just a 'blob of tissue.'

"Many women, however, are shocked to find themselves grieving after their abortions," I explained. "No one grieves for lost tissue; we grieve for

people. And suddenly the harsh truth — that she has taken a life — blindsides the post-abortive woman. She realizes that the abortion didn't get rid of her problem and give her back her life; it irrevocably changed her life. Once she thought of herself as a decent person. Now she condemns herself as a murderer. Her self-esteem plummets. Studies show the incidence of suicide in women rises dramatically in the year following abortion. For teen-age girls, who have less-developed coping mechanisms, statistics are more grim. They are 10 times more likely to attempt suicide in the six months following abortion."

At this point in my talk I scanned the room of students. I'd been told not to promote my faith but to simply discuss the emotional effects of abortion. But I could not keep the hope and healing out of my story. "I lost my will to live after my abortion," I said. "For the first time in my life I realized I'd sinned. But I cried out to God and He led me to a group of Christians who explained that Jesus — God the Son — died on the cross to pay for all of our sins. When I prayed for forgiveness, Jesus not only took all of my guilt ... He replaced it with peace and joy. So I'm here to tell you there is healing for women who've been wounded by abortion."

In the next second a lovely young student jumped to her feet. I instantly took in her china-doll face and pretty dark hair as well as the frantic look in her eyes. "I don't believe you!" she screamed. "Your story is completely anecdotal. It's not scientific at all!" But as she bolted from the room, tears glistened on her cheeks.

This precious young woman was protesting her own emotions as much as my words. Inner conflicts often rage beneath the political war we call abortion. I knew from firsthand experience that taking a life had dire consequences to a woman's soul. But I could also understand why many believed there had to be a "way out" for women trapped in a crisis pregnancy.

### **Decisions, Doubt and Denial**

Today so many women think they will get the husband and family they want by sleeping with their boyfriends. In post-Christian America, where there are no absolutes, the safety net God intended for women is gone. We've come a long way from the days when a man had to work to win a woman and wait for the reward of the marriage bed. The very effort it took to create that relationship helped civilize men into less selfish, more committed husbands and fathers. Now, however, a man has little social pressure to marry, and if the woman becomes pregnant, a legal abortion is his way out of responsibility. When he pressures her to get one, she feels abandoned, alone and helpless.

It's from this emotional state that most women make their decision to abort. Initially a woman feels relief that the decision and deed are over with. But deep inside she is conflicted about what she's done. Just as she was abandoned,

she has abandoned her own child to death. Her subconscious might seek to resolve the conflict by bringing it to the surface through nightmares, flashbacks and anniversary reactions of grief or depression. Various forms of denial might begin. While one woman medicates herself with alcohol, drugs or food, another deadens all her emotions to avoid the anguishing guilt and pain.

Although defense mechanisms can initially help us cope with trauma, if we do not examine and resolve our negative emotions, such denial can eventually become a prison. While denial keeps pain at arm's length, it can also keep us from experiencing joy and love — emotions that make life worth living. Prolonged denial can wreck lives. According to best-selling therapist M. Scott Peck, most mental illness comes from an unwillingness to face reality.

### **Healing *Is* Possible**

But when given the emotional support to examine their abortion experiences, even suicidal post-abortive women can find healing, according to Dr. Theresa Burke, one of the leading psychotherapists in the field. Years of research and counseling have culminated in her recent book *Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion*, in which she explains that when women are allowed to grieve their loss, they can fully recover. Unfortunately, our society doesn't understand the complex issues surrounding abortion. So many women, with no way to work out their pain, stay in denial for years. During this time, their lives can be dominated by intrusive thoughts, obsessive-compulsive disorder, low self-esteem and lingering depression, among other things. Some women who have found their abortions deeply disturbing are even known to take a completely opposite stand by becoming ardent abortion activists, Burke says. "When the conscious mind takes a position that is the polar opposite of one's true feelings, this is called reaction formation," she writes. "It's one of many defense mechanisms that helps sustain denial."

### **Gathering Together to Seek Common Ground**

Such was the case among the pro-choice women with whom I spent a weekend seeking "Common Ground." Equal numbers of pro-life and pro-choice activists spent three days doing activities designed to break down the barriers between us. I was humbled by the honesty of my "enemies" and will never forget the window into their souls they provided during one activity called the "fishbowl." The pro-choice women sat in a circle surrounded by the pro-life women. They were to get five minutes to explain why they supported abortion; we were to remain silent and listen — then we would switch positions.

When the retreat leader started the clock, the pro-choice women sat still. These ardent activists were seemingly at a loss for words! A full minute passed. In the tense silence one young woman finally spoke up: "I had an abortion a year ago. It was the most horrible experience of my life," she said vehemently. "But I wouldn't deny any woman the right to it!" When she burst into hysterical

tears, people hurriedly passed her the tissue box. The next minute was an agonizing revelation as she told her story. Others nodded in agreement; indeed their abortions had been awful, too.

"No one wants an abortion any more than an animal caught in a trap wants to chew its leg off to get free," said one woman. "But my father sexually abused me for years, and no one will ever control my body again!"

Heartbreaking tales of earlier sexual abuse flowed from them, as if their abortions were somehow linked to abuse. Indeed, Dr. Burke acknowledges that abortion does feel like a violation to a woman, even if she has chosen it. Yet protecting one's body from sexual abuse is a far different thing from "protecting" oneself from a pregnancy and the life of a growing, innocent baby. Women who identify themselves as victims, and feel victimized by a crisis pregnancy, are shocked to realize they have become perpetrators of violence. Victimiting my own child through abortion had scarred my soul. It took God's forgiveness to make me want to live again.

### **Sharing His Unconditional Love**

And that was why I'd come to Common Ground, to share the story of His unconditional love. Although I spoke of His divine love when the pro-life women got their five minutes, how could words alone breach their walls of defense mechanisms and pain? Yet I longed for these precious women to experience the life-saving grace I'd been given.

Apparently God wanted it even more than I.

It began during a group session when each side shared the names we'd been called while on the front lines. Ugly names like "mindless sheep" and "women haters." Or even worse, "baby killers" and "dykes." Brianna (name changed to protect identity), a pro-choice woman, spoke up in an emotional voice: "Those names hurt because there's truth in them."

During break I went over and apologized to Brianna for any Christian who had called her a name. She smiled, and the next time we had to pick a partner from the opposite side for an activity, she hurried over and said, "I pick you."

But when our new assignment was given, a collective groan went up. We were to sit knee to knee facing our opponent and stare for five minutes into her eyes without flinching. My partner had already shared that she'd not only had an abortion, but she also had a son from an earlier pregnancy. As a teen she'd been mercilessly ridiculed in her small town for being an unwed mother. Now she was a lesbian and part of the most radical abortion rights group on the West Coast, one that muscled pregnant women through protest lines into abortion clinics.

As the leader began the clock, I looked into Brianna's hazel eyes. They darted nervously away from my face. Then I began to pray silently. "Bless her, Lord, and her son. Help her find her way to You." I felt as though I could see into her wounded, hurting soul. My heart flooded with love for her. Her eyes quit flitting away and began to focus steadily on mine.

I sensed the Holy Spirit urging me to pray for her healing, so I did. Suddenly, as if in response, tears sprang into her eyes. They pooled on her lower lashes and spilled over, tracking down her cheeks. As I continued to pray, she began to sob, her nose running, her breath heaving, the silence of the room broken. Our hands reached out and clasped. There are no words to describe the depth of love and sympathy I felt for her; I was gripped by it.

"Time!" the leader yelled. All eyes turned to us, and I could see the questioning awe on everyone's faces. "What was going on for you, Brianna?" the leader asked.

It took her a minute to compose herself, but finally she said, "I just looked into this ordinary face, but I've never seen so much love come out of anyone's eyes before."

Of course, the Lord had supplied that river of compassion. He'd poured it through me to water her parched and hurting soul. But it had also deeply impacted the other attendees. When asked by the media what had been the most powerful experience of the weekend, they all pointed to those amazing moments between Brianna and me — five minutes when the Lord of heaven reached down to show His unfailing mercy, His unconditional love. Five minutes when He breached those walls of defense mechanisms, political rhetoric and pain.

Through it I learned that if we're open to God's voice, we can be the vessels He uses to show His compassion to a hurting world. I remind myself of this when new enemies enter my life — people who treat me unfairly. I surrender to His Spirit and pray for a love that can't fail. It may only be five little minutes that God is asking of us, but for someone those five minutes might last a lifetime.



**Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**

808 N. Henderson Rd.  
King of Prussia, PA 19406  
610-354-0555—1-877-HOPE-4-ME