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The Other Half of the Story: Men and Abortion

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"The clinic was a very cold place. We spoke to a counselor who asked us if we felt that we knew what we were doing. They told me it would be better if I left and came back to pick her up later. So I went out to get some air. I found out later that she'd had second thoughts and come out looking for me. But I wasn't there. So she went ahead with the abortion. That was the hardest thing because I wasn't there when she needed me."



Ryan Hunter was 24 when his girlfriend, Kathy, told him she was pregnant. At the time they were both students at a technical college and had been dating a few months. Although Hunter felt secure in the relationship, he didn't feel ready to be a parent, and he worried that if Kathy's parents found out about the pregnancy they might force her to stop seeing him.

"We chose the easy way out, but it didn't seem easy at the time," says Hunter. "We had many deep discussions. There were a lot of tears. Both of us were fully involved in the decision, and neither one of us pushed the other."

The Hunters hoped the abortion would bring an end to the crisis caused by the pregnancy. But instead of a sense of peace, they found it had brought a different kind of pain into their lives. Ryan was haunted by the fact that he had not been in the waiting room when Kathy had come out looking for him. Kathy remained emotionally fragile, occasionally tearing up when she saw pictures of babies and children. Although they remained together, they had a hard time communicating their feelings to each other.

"We never talked about it," recalls Hunter. "We would drive along the highway and I'd see one of those big pro-life billboards and try to distract her so she wouldn't see it. I was trying to protect her. I didn't realize at that point that I'd been affected, too."

Ryan and Kathy married two years later, but the abortion continued to cast a shadow over their relationship, particularly around the issue of children. "We never talked about having kids. I think we both felt that we had sinned seriously and didn't deserve to be forgiven. There was always this idea in the back of my head that God would punish us by not allowing us to have children."

Delayed reaction

It is estimated that almost 40 percent of women between the ages of 18 and 45 have had at least one abortion. Rarely, though, does one hear the obvious corollary that a similar proportion of men have fathered a child who has been lost to abortion. Some of these men encouraged or pressured their partners to abort. Others strongly opposed the abortion. Many submerged their own feelings and took refuge in the idea that their role was to support their partners' decision.

There is increasing recognition that abortion can have an emotional impact on women that is serious and in some cases long-lasting. While there continues to be debate about the prevalence and intensity of psychological symptoms, a growing number of therapists recognize that abortion—like other forms of pregnancy loss—can have long-term emotional consequences.

What is less well known is that men, too, can suffer emotionally and spiritually as a result of abortion. "So often the man's reactions are delayed," says Randall Wyatt, a psychotherapist and director of the Crosswinds Counseling Center in Dublin, California. "He may think he is supposed to be supportive of the woman and may not offer his own opinions. So his feelings—whether they are relief, grief, anger, resentment, or shame—don't get processed, and that can come out later."

Wyatt's practice involves work with couples and post-traumatic stress counseling, and he has encountered abortion in both contexts. "I've never met a person who went through it who thought it was easy or who didn't have at least some sense of regret," he says. "But it's not always traumatizing. It depends on the person and their experience."

There is limited literature on the psychological impact of abortion on men. The most well-known study was conducted by sociologist Arthur Shostak and is featured in his 1984 book Men and Abortion: Lessons,

Losses, and Loves (Praeger). Shostak interviewed 1,000 men who had accompanied their partners to an abortion clinic. He found that a large number of them had thoughts about the child, had dreamed about it, and anticipated misgivings after the abortion.

Some studies suggest men may actually be more likely to have an adverse psychological reaction to an abortion than women. A 1989 Los Angeles Times survey of men and women who had an abortion in their past found that two thirds of the men regretted the choice compared to one quarter of the women. A 1993 study by sociologists Eileen Nelson and Priscilla Coleman found that 33 percent of women and 52 percent of men reported a sense of regret following the abortion.

Finding forgiveness

Most post-abortion counseling programs have been designed, for obvious reasons, to meet the needs of women. The most well-known Catholic ministry of this type is Project Rachel, which was developed in 1984 by Vicki Thorn in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and has spread to a large number of dioceses around the United States. Although her program was aimed at women, Thorn found she was getting calls from men as well. "The pain of fathers is so incredibly desperate," she says.

In Thorn's experience men's emotional reactions following abortion vary widely. Men who opposed the abortion might feel anger and helplessness immediately. Those who may have encouraged the woman to have an abortion or at least supported her decision might not feel the impact until years later when an event—marriage, pregnancy, the birth of a child—brings the emotions to the surface. Thorn has also noticed that men with unresolved issues about abortion often act out, engaging in risky behavior such as using drugs or alcohol.

There is also a spiritual dimension to the pain many men feel about abortion. A man who encouraged or pressured his partner to have an abortion—or failed to convince her not to—may experience a crisis of faith and feel estranged from God. On the other hand, there are men who were not particularly religious prior to the abortion who find consolation and healing by returning to an old religious tradition or embracing a new one.

Father Mike Mannion, rector of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Camden, New Jersey and author of Abortion and Healing: The Cry to Be Whole (Sheed and Ward), has found that for Catholic men struggling with abortion the sacrament of Reconciliation can have particular power. "The timing of the sacrament is important," says Mannion. "If it's too early, the person may not feel forgiven."

Mannion suggests readings to the men he counsels so that they better understand the sacrament and can come to believe they really will be forgiven. "The ultimate issue is how much the individual believes in God as creator with the power to heal."

End of loss

Even some abortion clinics are recognizing the need to provide better emotional support to the male partners of their clients. According to a recent article in *Psychology Today*, Planned Parenthood in New York City found that the response to a trial run for male-targeted counseling services was overwhelming.

Since 2002 abortion clinics in the San Francisco Bay Area have been making referrals to Project Exhale, a post-abortion counseling service with a pro-choice philosophy. Executive director Aspen Baker runs a hotline aimed primarily at providing emotional support to women who have had abortions. But about 10 percent of the 200 calls she receives every year are from men.

Baker's experience is that men tend to avoid dealing with their own feelings and focus on their partner. "They ask questions like 'She cries all the time, shouldn't she be over it by now?' or 'She doesn't want to talk about it, what should I do?'" says Baker. "I've had men say to me, 'I wish I could have had the abortion for her.'"

A large number of Exhale's male callers are pro-choice. While one might think such men would be less likely to suffer emotional distress as a result of the abortion, that may not always be the case, says Wyatt. "Some of these guys want to be so supportive of the woman's choice that they neglect their own experience. They don't feel they have a right to their own emotions."

Despite his pro-choice convictions, Tony Cantalamessa found that abortion brought more emotional consequences than he had expected. Cantalamessa, who lives in New England, has faced the abortion decision twice, both times involving the woman to whom he is now married. The first time he and his then-girlfriend, Beth, were in college. She was overseas when she discovered she was pregnant with his child. After some phone conversations they agreed she should have the abortion.

"It was mainly her decision," says Cantalamessa. "I was in support of whatever she wanted to do. We were young, and we didn't think we were going to spend the rest of our lives together."

But Tony and Beth ended up getting married after all. Realizing the abortion could create issues in their marriage, they worked with a supportive minister on a ritual they hoped would bring closure to that chapter of their lives. They placed some writings and photographs in a vase, corked it, and cast it into the ocean.

While they had worked hard to put the past behind them, there were signs that some emotional issues remained unresolved. When their first child was born they delayed naming him. "We thought about names but didn't name him until after a week," says Cantalamessa. "I never thought about why we didn't name the baby."

Tony and Beth's spiritual paths diverged somewhat in the years after the abortion. Tony, a self-described agnostic before the abortion, did not find that the experience led him to reconsider his religious beliefs in any significant way. Beth, however, found the experience deepened a call to Christian ministry that she had already been feeling. She decided to focus part of her thesis for her master of divinity degree on the topic of abortion. Tony supported his wife's decision to pursue a career in ministry, and he participates in the life of the congregation where she ministers. But he does not consider himself a strong believer.

Two years after their son was born, Beth became pregnant again unexpectedly. With Beth working in ministry and Tony home full-time with their son, their financial situation was precarious. They discussed the possibility of abortion. This time Tony was more strongly in favor of the abortion, but Beth was much more ambivalent. In the end they decided to go ahead with the abortion.

Afterward Tony recalls feeling a jumble of emotions. "I was relieved, but my wife wasn't, so in some ways I didn't want to feel what I was feeling. I was confused about whether I was feeling the right thing."

Tony remains strongly pro-choice, but he does not dispute that there have been emotional consequences for him and for his family. "It's definitely left some sort of mark. There is a sense of loss. There needs to be more support for people who go through this."

Finding forgiveness

One of the most successful post-abortion ministry programs in the United States is Rachel's Vineyard, developed by Theresa Burke, a Catholic psychologist and author of Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion (Acorn). Burke initially designed the program as a curriculum for support groups of women who were grieving the loss of their children through abortion.

In 1995 Burke expanded and adapted the curriculum into a format for weekend retreats. Despite the fact that Rachel's Vineyard did not have an office, budget, or staff other than Burke and her husband, Kevin, the retreat format spread rapidly by word of mouth and through the support it received from the organization Priests for Life. In 1999 there were 18 Rachel's Vineyard retreats. By 2004 the number had grown to 250, and retreats were being held in 45 states and 11 countries. Although not officially affiliated with the Catholic Church, the program has been adopted by a large number of Catholic dioceses.

One change the Burkes made when they developed the weekend retreat was to welcome men as participants. "For many years post-abortion outreach was mostly geared to women, which makes perfect sense," says Kevin. "But I think over the last two or three years, there has been increasing recognition that men need healing, too."

The Burkes at first had some concerns about opening the retreat up to men. "We wondered how the women would react, because so many of them feel that they were abandoned by their male partners when they became pregnant," says Burke. "What we found was that it was a powerful moment of healing for these women to see men grieving the loss of their children."

The presence of women can also heal some of the pain men bring to a weekend. Scott Miller attended a Rachel's Vineyard retreat in British Columbia in late 2003. For many years, says Miller, he felt anger toward women because of his own experience of abortion 25 years ago.

"I was 20 years old, my parents had just divorced, and I had turned to alcohol. In the midst of all this my girlfriend announced she was pregnant. I thought 'Oh my God, I have to get a job, I have to deal with this, I have to tell my friends, I'm a bad person, I'm ashamed,'" says Miller.

His girlfriend told him she was going to have an abortion. "It kind of stopped me in my tracks," says Miller. "I didn't know what to think. I thought it would take care of all these problems. But it didn't feel right to me." Miller's mother, who strongly supported the abortion, ended up accompanying his girlfriend to the abortion clinic.

"After it was all over I felt terrible," he says. "The shame and guilt hadn't gone away, and now there was something else—murder, I guess. All I did was add coals to the fire. I made it a hundred times worse. I couldn't face my girlfriend, and I felt angry at my mother." His relationship with his girlfriend deteriorated and they eventually separated.

As part of his journey toward healing, Miller would go on to experience a profound religious conversion. He eventually sought out an Anglican priest whom he trusted.

“I told him I wanted to do a Confession, though I didn’t really know what it was,” says Miller. “He read Psalm 51 to me and talked about how God had forgiven David for committing adultery and murder. I didn’t realize God was like that. I couldn’t accept that I had done this. But God was bigger than me. He had more room for love, mercy, and forgiveness than I had for myself.”

Miller ended up going to seminary, and is now an ordained minister with the Assemblies of God. He is married with a 5-year-old daughter. But he says the anger he felt toward women remained with him at some level until he attended the Rachel’s Vineyard weekend.

“I saw the hurt in those women, and it really surprised me. They felt like I did. To see them grieving and crying like me gave me a whole new perspective,” he says.

Miller now serves as a resource person at Rachel’s Vineyard retreats. He recently helped with a retreat in Minneapolis, the city where his mother had taken his girlfriend to have the abortion 25 years ago. “This time, rather than sending my girlfriend to have an abortion, I went there to serve other women,” says Miller.

Burke has found that experiences like Miller’s are common on Rachel’s Vineyard retreats. “We never have an agenda to convert people or demand that they become pro-life,” says Burke. “We’ve had atheists come on the retreat. But I can’t remember anyone who has come who has not had an encounter with a loving, compassionate, and forgiving God. What they do with that is up to them.”

Lost fatherhood

Ryan Hunter, who had been haunted by leaving his wife in the waiting room, also eventually found healing at a Rachel’s Vineyard retreat. He and his wife, Kathy, were sitting at Mass one day when Monika Rodman, the Respect Life coordinator for the Catholic Diocese of Oakland, California, invited women and men affected by abortion to a retreat.

“We spent a lot of time talking about it and decided to go,” he says. “But at that point I was doing it for Kathy. I didn’t think I needed it. I thought I had moved on.”

The retreat proved cathartic for Hunter as well. “I had shoved it into a corner and never dealt with it. As the weekend went on, all this

emotion came out. My wife never realized how much pain I was in because I had never shared it. I felt it was a mistake that we had gone through with the abortion, but I had never told her."

During the course of the weekend, the Hunters decided to name the child they had lost to abortion. They named her Ryanna. "We always had a feeling she would have been a girl," Hunter says. "We talk about her and speak of her by name now. We consider her a child that we lost. But we know that the Lord is taking care of her now."

Rodman believes naming the child lost to abortion is often important to men. "One of the things we try to do with men is help them to reclaim their lost fatherhood," he says. "Facing an unplanned pregnancy, couples often think of the child as a 'problem' and abortion as the solution. We are helping people understand that this was a child, a child they were unable to welcome into their lives because of the pressures they faced at the time. But that child can still be part of their family tree."

Hunter feels the retreat saved his marriage. "If we hadn't gone on the weekend, I don't think we would have been able to keep it together. The communication and openness just weren't there."

Freedom to grieve and a stronger marriage may not be the only gifts the Hunters obtained from the weekend. Two years later, Kathy gave birth to a son. "He's definitely the Lord's child," says Hunter, his joy mixed with a fatigue every father of a young child can recognize. "We've been blessed."

Hope for healing

These stories are all the more poignant for the fact that they have been shared with so few. While they may struggle internally, men continue to face barriers to the help they need to deal with the emotional fallout of abortion. First among them may be a tendency to minimize their own feelings.

"With men, the first step is giving them the right to talk about it because they don't feel they have the right to do that," says psychotherapist Wyatt. "Giving them permission to discuss it and explore it is important."

Men who decide to seek professional help must contend with the fact that the therapeutic community is hardly untouched by the nation's cultural war over abortion. In March 2004 the American Psychological Association issued a position paper on the psychological impact of

abortion stating, "Abortion is a safe medical procedure that carries relatively few physical or psychological risks." The tone of the statement seems calculated to dismiss rather than validate claims of psychological pain related to abortion.

"I think most therapists want to do the right thing for the client," says Wyatt. "But you could certainly see if a therapist had strong pro-choice convictions, they might want to deny the reaction and minimize the emotional impact. On the other hand, a therapist who was strongly pro-life could have a problem in the other direction. You need to listen to what the client is saying."

"The professional therapeutic community is so essential," says Burke. "They are on the front lines. They are seeing the symptoms, and abortion may be the source of those symptoms. If they are unable to get beyond the politics of the issue and to look honestly at what their client is wrestling with, healing can't take place."

Men who turn to their religious communities for help may face a different set of challenges, particularly if the community—like the Catholic Church—is strongly pro-life. While the pope and many bishops have issued statements encouraging men and women who have experienced abortion to seek both spiritual reconciliation and emotional healing, attitudes toward post-abortion ministry can vary widely between parishes.

While Hunter's own journey to reconciliation after abortion brought him into the Catholic Church, he has encountered attitudes that have given him pause.

"I was in RCIA one night, and the subject was forgiveness," he says. "One person asked if there were any sins that couldn't be forgiven. The teacher said, 'Well, maybe abortion.' I challenged him because I felt the message of Jesus was that if you really are sincere in your repentance, you will be forgiven. He backed off, but I wish I'd had the courage to share my story at that moment."

Rodman believes a greater recognition by Catholics that abortion is something inside the church as well as outside would make it easier to offer reconciliation to those experiencing abortion without compromising the church's defense of the unborn. Many Catholics raised to respect life find themselves making a different choice when confronted with a crisis pregnancy, notes Rodman. "If we can be a community that speaks first of mercy and forgiveness, it may be easier for us to speak the words of truth and justice our culture needs to hear about abortion."

Hunter, for his part, hopes that more men and women come to experience the mercy and forgiveness he and his wife have known. “We did an unspeakable thing. But Jesus died so that even sins as terrible as ours could be forgiven. I wish more people could come to know the power of that forgiveness.” 

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