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Rachel's Vineyard Bears Fruit for Women's Abortion Sorrows

By Dexter Duggan

Anorexia could be viewed with academic detachment. But regret over an abortion made stomachs churn.

One day in graduate school, as the counseling students worked on the subject of eating disorders, abortion came up. "It was like a bomb going off," recalls Theresa Burke, PH.D., years later. Some women were "so angry and dismissive" toward others who grieved their abortions, "I just saw it was a forbidden grief."

Burke, who holds a master's degree in counseling psychology, went on to develop Rachel's Vineyard, a program for women seeking healing after their abortions. (The web site is www.rachelsvineyard.org)

"I was very much ostracized from professional life," said the Pennsylvania resident. "It made me mad there was such denial" of the need to heal after abortion.

Burke said some women fruitlessly spend thousands of dollars on therapy that doesn't get to the root of the problem. "I think there are tons and tons of women...drugged and sedated heavily" because of abortion trauma. "the loss of a child is a powerful, painful experience."

She said women's lives literally are being wasted because they "have been mistreated, misdiagnosed, overmedicated" in inappropriate therapy.

They "suffer much longer and harder than they need to, and certainly [more] than God would want them to," Burke told *The Wanderer* in a telephone interview on Good Friday.

She said she has worked with aborted women for 17 years. Nine years ago she developed the Rachel's Vineyard weekend retreat, which people told her was "the most effective treatment they had encountered."

Now the retreats are offered around the country, and about 10,000 women have participated, Burke said.

Brief testimonies appear in the retreat manual, *Rachel's Vineyard, A Psychological and Spiritual Journey of Post Abortion Healing* (Alba House, New York).

One such testimony, by "Alice," says: "I was very afraid to step into Rachel's Vineyard. I have been to numerous counselors and no one ever seemed to hit it just right. Being with other women who have had the same experience made me feel for first time that I was not alone. There is so much out there about abortion being safe and simple that sometimes I felt that maybe I'm just truly crazy. Everyone told me there was no palpable reason for the feelings I struggled with.

"Working with the group, I felt for the first time in my life I was not alone. Not only did I have the love and support of other women, but I felt the love and forgiveness of God."

The therapy includes ritual, prayer, and mutual sharing.

Burke recently authored a new book, *Forbidden Grief: The unspoken Pain of Abortion*, with leading post-abortion researcher David Reardon. The book already is among the top 100 sellers at the Amazon.com web site, Burke said, and radio counselor Dr. Laura Schlessinger, who wrote the foreword, "mentions it a lot" on her program.

Burke describes *Forbidden Grief* as a "self-help book in terms of helping" women understand their symptoms, despite society telling them there's no problem with abortion.

"Every weekend there are profound conversions taking place" at Rachel's Vineyard retreats, Burke said, because of participants' "encounter with the living God." A recent retreat, she said, was attended by 12 atheists.

Women in desperate situations who had abortion will "abandon God because they felt abandoned by Him" in their trail," Burke said.

"Many of the feminists who laid the groundwork " for widespread legal abortion "had been traumatized by their own abortions," Burke told *The Wanderer*, and hoped to ease their pain by trying to treat abortion as ordinary.

These feminists "tried to master their trauma" by normalizing "something that's unnatural....There's a need psychologically to normalize it."

Thus, they have "a huge emotional investment in keeping [abortion] legal"...."We cant' remove our defenses" and allow" anything that would call the act of abortion into question," Burke said, adding that they show "a complete intolerance" to any restriction of abortion. "that's grounded in their own wound."

Burke cited examples including national abortion activists Gloria Steinem and Kate Michelman. The latter, a Catholic, had four born children when her husband walked out on her and she was pregnant, Burke said.

Michelman faced “just a horrible situation...she was absolutely desperate.” In throwing herself into pro-abortion activism, she felt she was “helping other women not endure that,” Burke said. Because Michelman’s own abortion wound wasn’t healed, she would channel “all that anger, all that grief into her fight.”

Similarly, Steinem wrote for years trying “to help women connect with their wounded inner child...and yet there’s no connection to the child she rejected in abortion...She had a need to view herself as a protector of children, rather than a destroyer of them,” by campaigning against child abuse.

Burke said that through Rachel’s Vineyard, women “empty that grief and experience God...[You’re] letting your soul find its voice” in “a process of reclaiming your faith.”

She said that engagement with others is better than private one-on-one counseling with a priest because “trauma victims have to be reintegrated in the community.” Dealing with the problem in secret “almost reinforces that secret.... That’s not a healthy psychological model for trauma victims.”

Women may go to Confession 100 times over their abortions but still not forgive themselves, Burke said. “It doesn’t help them heal. The grace is there for them” in Confession, but they need “to empty the cup of suffering” to make room for God.

It’s not unusual to encounter a woman who has had 10 or 12 abortions, Burke said. Repetition is one of the greatest indicators of trauma. Just like women who abuse themselves on a television show like Jerry Springer’s, these trauma victims have “a psychic need to keep shaming themselves.” Sexually abused girls “end up on the abortion table.... It’s a symbolic suicide for many people.”

Burke said pro-life activists also may need to attend Rachel’s Vineyard to deal with grief built up in themselves because they feel they’ve been “banging their heads against the wall for years” while “the world around us” remains blind to the tremendous loss of life. “You can become angry...which is really grief,” she said.

“God doesn’t want anyone lost.” She said. But pro-lifers “can’t love effectively,” to reach out to others if the pro-lifers are burdened with grief and anger. One must stand in humility before God and let Him shine His light.

“I think what’s happening in Rachel’s Vineyard is extremely exciting....People with great hearts of love [are] being formed and lifted up,” Burke said.

Just as television talk show host Oprah Winfrey brought sex abuse to the fore as a discussion issue, Burke said, “I believe that day is coming quickly” when women in large numbers learn the Rachel’s Vineyard message. “we also see the obstacles intending to try to stop it....The lord has just been preparing the soil and raising up the leaders.”

Burke said she wants to thank the American Life League, headquartered in Virginia, for providing support to Rachel’s Vineyard because before that, the program was on the shoulders of only Burke and her husband Kevin, a licensed social worker.

“We could use a full staff because we’re in nine countries now,” Theresa Burke said. “We’ve never had a master plan....God’s clearly in charge.”

Every day, she said, she receives e-mails from grateful women saying she ahs “put a name to my pain”



Rachel's Vineyard Ministries

808 N. Henderson Rd.

King of Prussia, PA 19406

610-354-0555—1-877-HOPE-4-ME