



Published in "National Catholic Register"

A Publication of **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**
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Staring Post-Abortion Grief Straight in the Eye

By Judy Roberts

Psychotherapist Theresa Burke of King of Prussia, PA, was a young graduate student leading a support group for women with eating disorders when she stumbled upon a startling revelation: Six of the eight women in the group had had abortions. Although her supervisor sternly advised her not to inquire further into their abortions, Burke knew she had to explore the apparent connection. Her work led her to start Rachel's Vineyard retreats in 1995 for those suffering from post-abortion trauma.

Now, with David Reardon, an expert on the aftereffects of abortion on women, she has co-authored *Forbidden Grief: the Unspoken Pain of Abortion*. Burke talked with Register correspondent Judy Roberts about her efforts to expose the truth that abortion harms women.

How did you first learn that most of the women in your eating-disorders group had had abortions?

A woman named Debbie started sharing about flashbacks to her abortion. Then she shared that her ex-husband would call and leave messages on her answering machine, calling her a murderer. When she said that, everybody in the group went crazy. One woman said, "Your ex-husband is a horrible man. I had an abortion too, and I would feel terrible if someone said that to me." Another said, "We have a right to control our bodies."

Another got up and left the room and slammed the door. It was this big dramatic reaction from everybody. I went to my supervisor, who was a psychiatrist, and shared what happened with him. I knew I wanted to know more about their abortions because I thought their flashbacks and nightmares could be symptomatic of post-traumatic stress syndrome. He looked me straight in the eye and said, "You have no right to pry into people's abortions".

How did you react?

With eating disorders, people stuff their feelings with food, and so the therapy for it has always been seen as “the talking cure”. In the group, we had run the gamut of every subject. Nothing was off limits. So to have permission to discuss anything and everything except abortion, it was clear that abortion was “forbidden grief”. I eventually left that place, but had a couple other head-on collisions with my own colleagues because no-one wanted to acknowledge post-abortion grief. There’s scientific proof that this is real, yet there is still resistance to acknowledge it.

Abortion providers claim that not all women react to abortion the same way. Some even say that women who are especially “religious” should not have an abortion. Do women who suffer trauma after an abortion have certain characteristics, such as a strong religious background, or have you found that women across the board suffer?

Abortion providers try to blame it on religion – “If you’re Catholic, you will have a problem afterward.” But this pain transcends religion. It’s part of our humanity. When you look at medical records, you find higher rates of suicide, depression and the seeking of psychiatric care among women who have had abortions. Because this problem is so unrecognized, they’re likely to be diagnosed with other problems, such as anxiety disorders, and are not able to deal with the root of what caused the symptoms.

Did you have difficulty finding a publisher for *Forbidden Grief*?

I tried for two years to find a publisher. I was told the book was well-written and moving. I even got personal notes at the bottom of form letters. But nobody wanted to [publish it]. Then I sent it to David Reardon. We met in Chicago and he said he would like to publish it, but he suggested I add [some material]. Then I got pregnant with my son, Stanley, who is now three. So I said, “Why don’t you write it with me?” What David added made this book so much more credible. Otherwise, it was all anecdotes. In the book, I give the woman’s story and the psychoanalysis. He gives the research and cites studies.

Have you always been pro-life?

Yes. But even though this was a very important issue to me, I didn’t feel that everything I was seeing in the pro-life movement was a fit for me. I actually did “rescue” once after my first child was born – he’s 16 now – and got arrested. They separated to separate me from my son in jail and it was so frightening. I thought, “There’s got to be a better way”. Then, when this incident happened in the eating-disorders group, I started my first therapeutic support

group for post-abortion trauma. I just did it as a little ministry on the side. The curriculum for Rachel's Vineyard came out of those early days.

What other pro-life work have you done apart from Rachel's Vineyard?

My husband, Kevin, a clinical social worker, and I won and operated Covenant Family Resources to help couples with adoption. Kevin guides and manages the growth of this ministry – under the direction of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

How did radio talk-show host Dr. Laura Schlessinger happen to write the foreword to *Forbidden Grief*?

Three years ago, I wrote her a letter asking if she would like to take a look at the book and write an endorsement for it. She wrote back and said yes almost right away. Just before the book was published, I wrote her again and explained, "I'm my kids' mom, I had a baby and things were delayed. Would you still be interested in endorsing the book?" I never heard anything back, so David printed all the galley proofs with "Foreward by Dr. Laura". When she got the proofs, she read it, got excited about it and wrote the foreword, almost immediately.

Do you think pro-abortion advocates are ever likely to accept the fact that women are harmed by abortion? Might this be key to changing their attitudes?

I think that's the only hope we have. There's going to be more and more research coming out showing that it's irrefutable. At some point, they're going to have to acknowledge that abortion is hurting women. One of the great gifts *Forbidden Grief* reveals is the depth of their suffering. We pull back the curtain on the human heart. Every other injury is paraded on TV talk shows, but not this one.



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