



A Publication of **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**
www.RachelsVineyard.org

Pro-Life Magazine's Interview with Dr. Theresa Burke

Dr. Theresa Burke was interviewed by Brett Attebery, founder of Pro-Life Magazine. The interview begins with an overview on how and why Dr. Burke got her start in Post Abortion Healing. During the interview Dr. Burke also discussed the unique vision and process of Rachel's Vineyard and how it works for everyone who is affected by abortion. We invite you to read the interview so that you too can know about the healing work of Rachel's Vineyard Ministries.

Pro-Life Magazine (PLM): Hi Theresa. Thank you very much for being here today. I really appreciate you taking the time for us.

The first question I have is what was your impetus for creating Rachel's Vineyard, and how did you come up with that very unique name?

Theresa Burke: I had so many experiences in graduate school for psychology where abortion was something that no one was willing to talk about. And I had a number of experiences in different supervised settings where I was instructed not to talk about abortion.

So if someone tells you you're not supposed to do something, it makes me feel a little bit passionate about it for some reason. So I started one of the first therapeutic support groups, and I saw very quickly that all my training in psychology really didn't touch this wound. It was so deep. It had a lot of spiritual as well as psychological components, a lot of grief, and a lot of guilt. So I saw that it needed a process of reconciliation, and then I turned to the gifts in my faith to integrate them into a treatment model that was Rachel's Vineyard.



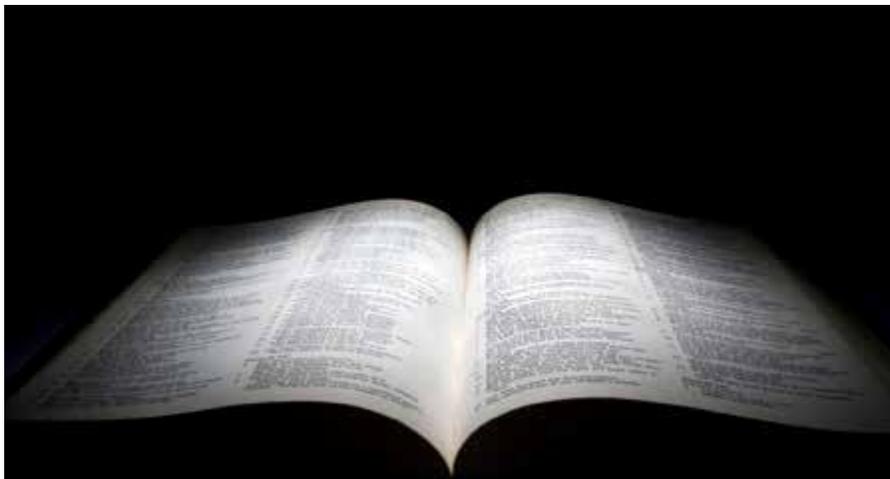
So the name Rachel comes from the Book of Jeremiah where Rachel mourns her children and refuses to be consoled because her children are no more. Thus says the Lord, “Cease your cries of mourning and weeping. There’s hope for your future.” So that was about the Lord’s desire to comfort this grief of lost children.

And then the name “Vineyard” actually came when I made this model and then went to present it at a conference for therapists, and no one was interested at all in something that integrated spiritual with something psychological. They wanted to keep it very clinical. There was a bit of resistance against the whole idea. So I thought why write a book if no one wants to use it?

So I went to the Bible. And I’ve only done this once before where you go to the Bible and say, “Show me what to do Lord.” I had only done this once before when I got married and I was a little bit nervous to marry. I like my freedom. I went to the Bible and it said it was better to marry than to burn. So, I got married!

So I only used this when it was really important, and I thought this was important. So I opened up the Bible and I go right to

John 15. “I am the Vine, and you are the branches. Unless you remain united to me, you will bear no fruit.” So to me that was my answer to say without shame, without fear, to put the Lord behind, between, and in the middle of every exercise we do at Rachel’s Vineyard. And that’s where the word “Vineyard” comes from.



PLM: You said in your practice early on that you felt there was some very deep pain. I know there are many symptoms of post- abortion trauma. Can you touch on some that you see that are very prevalent?

Theresa Burke: I would say that because abortion is a secret, and for many women a time of panic and crisis, it’s not something they want people to know about so it’s surrounded by a lot of shame, and a lot of grief.

And most women feel forced into an abortion because the circumstances aren't right, and they don't want to be blamed. The man plays a very central role in a woman's decision to abort, just his reaction that she is going to be very sensitive to. So there are a lot of things that go into that decision making process, but it's one made in a lot of isolation.

And it's not being able to process what happened, to go back and pretend that nothing just happened to you when you had a very life changing event that involves the death and destruction of one's child. That's going to impact us on a maternal level.



So I really wanted to study this grief in graduate school and I actually was at the University of Pennsylvania getting supervision, and my supervisor said that she couldn't supervise me anymore because supervising me would contribute to pro-life ideology, and she had an ethical problem with that. She couldn't refer me to any of her colleagues because they all felt the same way, and I felt so bad for any woman that was grieving the loss of her child.

You have this hurt. You might develop an eating disorder as a result of it because it's not what you're eating. It's what's eating you. And all the addictions where you're trying to numb and constrict your pain, like using alcohol and drugs. These all become ways that people cope which creates more problems.

There are patterns of multiple abortions, multiple atonement pregnancies that we call replacement pregnancies where they want to finish what they started. They've lost something and they want to make up for it, but so many of the situational things are the same. They're not in a good relationship, there's a lot of instability.

So people can either do two things when they've had an abortion. They can ignore it, and run from the pain with drugs and alcohol for example. And you can also run successfully, meaning that you go on to be a workaholic, or go on and earn a lot of degrees, and you can use your intellect to distance yourself from the reality of what's been lost by using ideology to hide under.

Then there are other people, say anyone with a history of sexual abuse, which the statistics really aren't in women's favor because there is a lot of abuse, or any previous mental health issues, any hurt in the family where they have divorce, for example, and they are already experiencing different levels of trauma. Then you have an abortion experience and sometimes it is the straw that breaks the camel's back. These are the folks that have depression and anxiety immediately. These are the folks who really suffer acutely because they don't have the inner resources, or even support or intellect sometimes, to be able to cope with it in that way that they can bury themselves in work. So these are the ones whose lives can spiral out of control quickly and it's really tragic.

The suicide rate after abortion is really high. I checked the literature on this and the best available data is coming from countries where you have socialized medicine and you can see suicide rates of 600~800% following an abortion. It's a very serious trauma that can end in tragedy like that, not to mention people going completely off the track of what God had planned for their lives and what they wanted for their lives. Goals are derailed, a lot of people drop out of school because they can't concentrate. They have hyper-arousal where they are always on the alert for threats of danger and they feel panicky.

Then a lot of people make decisions that are rooted in their unhealed trauma, like not ever having children because they don't feel worthy to be a mom. So there are consequences and decisions that can go on for a lifetime.



PLM: You were talking about ideology. And it sounds like what you were trying to do was just help people in need, and forget about pro-life versus pro-choice. It's just that these women are in pain. I'm curious from your experience what you think is behind the fact that these things are not talked about, or downplayed, or outright denied by those who support pro-choice ideology

Theresa Burke: It's peoples' personal experiences with abortion, or they're encouraging someone to have one. They don't want to be responsible. Even if you're a counselor who told someone that this is the best thing, and then their life falls apart, the last thing someone trying to help another wants to hear is that what you told me to do completely ruined my life and resulted in a million problems. People don't want to hear that.

A lot of the early feminists who laid the groundwork for abortion rights are women who were traumatized by their abortions. You know, Gloria Steinman, Kate Michelman, Patricia Ireland, they all thought that by making it legal that they would take away the stigma and the trauma, but it didn't.

Even in the most pristine hospital, with anesthesia, etc., a woman has still endured the unspeakable loss of her child in a very destructive and violent way, so there's a trauma attached to that.

Without the support, when one is isolated, when you have to keep it a secret, when people don't even want to hear about it because of their own reasons. I think it is always a personal attachment to abortion because you helped someone get one, or you haven't dealt with your own.

PLM: You know that I have been to a Rachel's Retreat recently. It's one of the reasons we're sitting here talking right now. It was a very powerful experience. Sometime after when I was looking back at that I was very intrigued by the process. It was a very unique process. Could you talk about how you came up with that process, and why you think it has been so effective helping both men and women heal?

Theresa Burke: I'm so happy the retreat was helpful for you and so many other people. It truly is a unique process, and it probably comes out of my unique background because before I went into psychology I had a Masters degree in theatre.

So Rachel's Vineyard is sort of like a play. Only the main actor in the play is the Lord Jesus who comes and wants to heal us so we're basically acting out scriptures where Jesus touched and healed very broken people. So there are lights and there's music and there's soft, quiet peaceful mediations.



Over the years as I got deeper and deeper into psychology, training and teaching many classes as I do now, I learned a lot about brain science. And the latest brain science is saying that victims of trauma do not respond to talk therapy, that sometimes talking about it makes it worse for them, and that the best data is showing that a sensory based treatment is actually the ideal way to deal with trauma victims, where you stimulate the right brain.

Meditation and prayer stimulates the frontal cortex that helps people integrate their cognitive and their emotional experience. What happens with trauma is that people are in the super alarmed reacting all the time, or defense, or screaming at pro-lifers because they're being triggered, their memories, so they're going to attack the messenger because they can't process the message. It's too painful. It's like an "open sesame" to all their unresolved grief and feelings that they've run from or avoided.

The other side of that would be a complete numbed and detached response, like "this doesn't hurt anybody", or "I don't feel anything. I was fine after my abortion." A lot of people can go through life like that until some other event, perhaps the birth of a wanted child, and then everything splits open for them. They can have postpartum depression and psychosis because the child they're holding is a trigger.

Women who struggle with infertility might have been fine until they couldn't have a baby, and then they remember the children they lost. When I teach in hospitals I'm always surprised to hear the people who work in hospice come to me and say that they have a whole floor of people who are struggling with post-abortion trauma who cannot go into death peacefully. And we actually have teams from Rachel's Vineyard who go bedside to hospitals to cancer patients, people who are terminal, sometimes old people, because this is something that they might have been able to run from for their whole lives, but then they fear spiritual issues. They fear judgment by God, and they have all this anxiety, and it's not a pleasant time at all. So we do what we can to comfort and compassionately care for, and show people that their children are waiting for them in heaven, and that nothing, as the Holy Father says, is definitely lost, and that your children are living in the Lord.

PLM: I had that at the retreat, and it was a very powerful experience for me because I wasn't quite sure beforehand why I was going to the retreat. I did feel that I had been forgiven, but I was missing something and the retreat taught me what that was.

I noticed at the retreat that I participated in that there was no one there who had a recent abortion experience. These were all 20+ years, 30, and in one case over 40 years I think. It's interesting to me, in my own case, and then looking around at others. Why do you think it takes so long sometimes for someone to seek out healing?

Theresa Burke: I think when most people finish their experience with abortion, if they don't go on to repeat it many times; they just never want to think about it again. They are going to move on, they're going to make their lives work, they're going to perhaps get married, have a family. The abortion experience might be there underneath but you're not going to think about it because

what would your wife think, what would your husband think, and so on. There's always that fear of judgment, and I think that creates a great paralysis.

It was always my experience like at your retreat, where people would wait 20, 30, 40 years, and we saw this post-traumatic stress disorder where it was a delayed reaction that opened up during some of the life events I described to you.



Now with so many more people healed the healing releases people from shame. And then we have them out giving their stories, their testimonies, and videos. Twenty or thirty years ago there was nothing you could find on the internet. If you wanted a support group there wasn't a Bible study, there wasn't a website, nothing. Now there's so much more. We've really come a long way in educating people. And the key to me is healing because then you can free those voices to speak the truth that is otherwise hushed.

I remember going to a high school and asking how many people knew someone who had had an abortion. The whole room raised their hands. And then I asked them how many of them had ever heard someone tell their story of what that was like for them. Nobody raised their hand. So these stories are critical. The healing is critical.

But I would say that now there are retreats that have ten teenagers. People are coming younger and younger. Now we have a lot of abortion providers coming like nurses whose job it is to put pieces together to make sure that it's a complete abortion, and they have extreme trauma. They come and they cry and they say they didn't know where else to go. And then siblings of aborted children are coming.

So it doesn't just affect the woman, or even the man, and for too long we saw it as just a women's issue. And it's not. It takes two to make a baby.

PLM: As you just gave the example of the high school class, there are many people who know someone who had an abortion, but it can be a sensitive topic to discuss that with someone. If someone sees in a close friend or family member some of these symptoms that you talked about,

and they think that an abortion experience might have something to do with it, what is the right way to approach them to discuss the issue, and possibly recommend a Rachel's Vineyard retreat as a pathway to help them?

Theresa Burke: It's important to understand that their defensiveness is all about the hurt. So you don't tread harshly on someone's broken heart. Go in with a lot of compassion, and the desire to listen, and to be there for them. Their biggest fear is being judged.

While we understand that abortion is the destruction of a child, it is a very personal matter for someone and a painful matter. I like to suggest to people that they assure the person that they are there for them, that they know this has been a rough road, that they deserve healing, that they're a good person. You can give Rachel's Vineyard as a gift sometimes because you know the person has suffered, and you know it's hard for them to talk about.

If you're close to the person it's difficult because we all love someone who has suffered, and yet you can feel so powerless when you know that there's something that could help them, but they need to know that they are worthy of that, and that you would move the sun, the moon, and the stars to get them there. So if it's a gift but they're frightened to go alone, and you offer to go as a support person, we allow that on our retreats.

I also think another thing is education. If you see that someone is sensitive give them something they can look at like a brochure or something where they can learn about their problem in the privacy of their own room, because a lot of people are afraid of just breaking down in front of you, so they're going to push you away before those feelings surface. So give them something, or mail them something that they can open in the privacy of their own room. And say something like, "I thought of you when I saw this," or "You deserve to heal and I love you so much. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you get there." Use those kinds of messages.



Once you encounter someone's resistance or their outright anger, you have to see anger as a cover over the grief. The mistake that I think people make is to step back and decide that they will never say anything again because the other person is so sensitive. And then they go into fear mode. They step back, and then they get mad instead of having just that gentle and consistent

presence because some people put that brochure under the mattress, and we hear these stories at our retreats, for four or five years. So when a person is ready.

And what makes a person feel ready is when they feel that they're secure and they're in a stable enough situation to tolerate the pain. And this is why it sometimes takes years. You want to know that your family is going to be there for you because no one wants to risk ruining something that's going well, or having people look at them in a different way when you've worked so hard to become something else. So you have to have enough confidence in yourself, and that's why some people wait until their forties and fifties.

PLM: At my experience at the retreat there were a number of counselors who were helping with the process, and they were wonderful compassionate people. I would think there are many people out there who might be interested in some way becoming involved in Rachel's Vineyard as a vocation, as a ministry helping to guide a process, run a retreat, be a counselor, or assist in some way. For people who are listening to this and it's on their heart to do something like that, how do they find out about doing this?

Theresa Burke: We actually make it pretty easy. Rachel's Vineyard is in 63 countries now, in 29 languages. We have 100,000 volunteers involved with this program. We work by mentoring people. We have a leadership conference every year. Our next one is next summer in July. We train people, and give them the background. It's not rocket science. You follow the manual. It's what we call an empirically validated treatment meaning that you can't really screw it up if you follow the way it's designed.

We just want people with real compassionate hearts who are going to convey this type of love, to embody the love and life of Jesus Christ as they minister in His name. We work with teams of counselors, interested lay people, those who have suffered the loss of a child and have recovered. We work as the body of Christ and we need all the gifts.



The first requirement is that you go on a retreat as a participant. We don't want anyone coming to observe. Everyone has something to grieve, and we've found that if people don't deal with their own things then they are going to inhibit the grief of other people, and they're going to find it frightening. So we want the Lord to heal you before you try to help anyone else.

PLM: Even if that's not abortion? It could be anything else?

Theresa Burke: Yes, it could be abuse, for example. It could be any kind of grief of loss like the loss of a loved one. Just so that when someone else cries you're not going to get upset because when someone else cries it's contagious. And if you're threatened by your own issues you're going to stop that process consciously or unconsciously. So we want people to really open their lives and their histories to the Lord. And they are also going to realize how hard it is to do that, and then they would never tread with insensitivity in these exercises because we want everyone to feel safe.

And we don't have a model where we say "I'm going to fix you." We journey through the paschal mystery of our own lives, the suffering, the death of the children, and the death of the self that happens sometimes in the traumatic. And we move with Christ into an experience of resurrection. So if you don't know what that feels like in your own life you will be a real lousy facilitator for someone else.

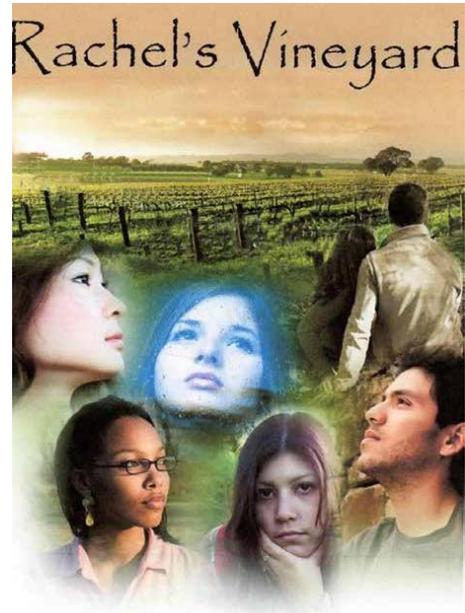
And people come, even professionals come who think they know how to handle everything, and the first night they sit with their mouths open. We don't care if you've been healing people in the past; you have to go through as a participant because the Lord always wants to give us more.

We can't imagine how full and rich and deep He wants our lives to reflect Him. And we've kind of come to this place as humans where we settle. It's like, "I did a little healing and I feel better." They have no clue that the Lord wants to take them miles ahead into a deeper peace, into a deeper relationship, a deeper sense of love. And we cut ourselves off when we don't open ourselves to those kinds of experiences. So we say to come and receive before you try to give. And the best part is when people come back and say they had no idea about all the stuff that the Lord wanted to work on. But that's how He is with us. Sometimes He takes our own interest in other people to open up a door that's really meant for ourselves.

PLM: Rachel's Vineyard has been around for a while. I had no idea you had that many volunteers! There may be some people who have heard about Rachel's Vineyard but they don't know all the details so where can they go to learn more about what you do, and also there might be some folks who will be interested in supporting the mission. Where do they go to do that?

Theresa Burke: You can go to www.RachelsVineyard.org. A listing of all the retreats will be there, as well as questions and answers, and other people's experiences on the retreat. But it's really a gift to give yourself, so rather than all the fear we were talking about, it's like a Christmas present waiting. Who wouldn't go down and open a Christmas present that's just waiting for you? It's not going to re-traumatize you.

A lot of people are afraid that if I open this up I'm not going to be able to function anymore, and that's just not the way it works. People leave dancing and laughing. They are going to move forward in their journey no matter what. It's just a gift, a gift for yourself. So I encourage people to learn more about it. Don't be afraid. There are people who understand, who have been there, and you're not alone. That's half the battle.



www.RachelsVineyard.org

or call 1-877-HOPE-4-ME

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Rachel's Vineyard Ministries
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