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www.RachelsVineyard.org

Couples Who Abort Due to Genetic Abnormality

By Michelle Krystofik and Kevin Burke

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Every year in the United States, approximately 133,000 pregnant mothers will undergo routine pre-natal tests and receive what is called “poor pre-natal diagnosis,” or PPD. This means that their infant is afflicted with a chromosomal abnormality or a serious defect in a vital organ. The most difficult and complicated grief that we witness on Rachel's Vineyard Weekends involve couples that aborted a child for this reason.

With the increase in genetic testing and fertility treatments there are growing numbers of couples facing these difficult decisions. Parents are often pressured by doctors, therapists, friends and family to “terminate” the pregnancy. They are given the grim prospect of a child born prematurely who die or suffer severe deformities with only the assurance of a brief life filled with suffering and pain. More than 90 percent of these pregnancies end in abortion. Some fertility treatments include “fetal reductions” where multiple embryos are fertilized and implanted, followed by a later decision by doctors to end the life of the less healthy fetuses.

When abortion is the preferred course of “treatment” not only is the baby's life ended, but the lives of these parents are changed forever. Like our first parents in the Garden of Eden, assuming this power over life and death has far reaching consequences beyond the decision to abort. The fallout from this loss places a tremendous strain on a couple as they struggle to come to terms with the shock and pain of their experience. Research confirms that women suffer years after the procedure:

Women 2-7 years after were expected to show a significantly lower degree of traumatic experience and grief than women 14 days after termination... Contrary to hypothesis, however, the results showed no significant inter-group differences.¹

¹ Kersting, A. et. Al. (2005) “Trauma and 2-7 years after termination of pregnancy because of fetal abnormalities.” *Journal Psychosoc Obstet & Gynae.* V26: #1 9-14.

These parents suffer from a particularly complex form of grief and guilt years after the experience. They hunger desperately for healing and peace, but struggle to come to terms with their responsibility in the death of their child and the need for repentance, reconciliation and healing. They feel strongly that their situation is “different” from others who abort. Couples cling desperately to the idea that they did what was best for their child, saving them from a life, however brief, of suffering and pain. In other scenarios they must choose among healthier embryos or multiple fetus so that the healthiest survive. Given the medical advice and pressure from a spouse or others, they feel they did not have a real choice.

The husband in these cases may have encouraged abortion as a way to protect his wife from the pain of giving birth to a child who would have died, or would die shortly after birth or would have been born with a physical and mental handicap like Down Syndrome that would be a burden to his wife and family. In their efforts to establish control and take action, they are tempted to see abortion as the best solution.

After the abortion there can be considerable anger at God, whom couples often blame for putting them in this situation. One couple expresses this struggle:

If we were given a normal child, we would not have been put in this situation. We are different from others who have aborted because we wanted this child. God put us in this impossible situation, forcing us to make these painful decisions. We are left without our child, and with powerful feelings of confusion, resentment anger and grief.

Without a healing process for this complicated grief, this pain will surely impact their relationship.

Empty Arms and Wounded Hearts

It is only when these mothers and fathers come to a clearer and honest understanding of their abortion loss, that they can begin to repent, grieve and heal. An important part of this process is facing their role in that decision to abort, and the fear and weakness that tempted them to embrace this solution. When the rationalization, and seemingly wise counsel of doctors and others fades away after the abortion, a mother and father are faced with empty arms and a wounded heart. They must face the painful realization that this decision also aborted their opportunity to hold this child and offer that child love and affection for however long the baby lived. In the case of Down and other conditions, they were given a child with special challenges to love and care for, and in their rejection of that child, something in them has also died both individually and as a couple.

The healing process can never be forced. We must be patient, especially in the early stages of healing as the wound is very raw. There can initially be great defensiveness. It's important to acknowledge their pain and loss, the confusing nature of the decisions and challenges that their fertility treatment/testing and medical care presented to them. However, at some point in the process, when they are ready and with God's grace and much prayer, they must face the truth that their abortion decision led them to make a

choice that violated their parental hearts, created to love any children they conceived regardless of the challenges. They will need to face that the abortion was a crisis of faith, one that we all face in different times in our life where we fail to trust God, and we make decisions that violate His will for us. We must always speak to them in love, as fellow sinners who have aborted God's will in our lives.

Lord, Please Help Me Not to Be So Perfect

Susan attended a Rachel's Vineyard Weekend Retreats after aborting a child diagnosed with a condition that would lead to her daughter's death shortly after birth. She expressed a desire to leave the retreat Saturday morning. Susan shared:

I don't fit in with these other women and men who freely chose abortion for "selfish" reasons. I had no choice. The choice I made was in the best interests of my child.

One of the priests serving on our retreat team spoke with her after breakfast on Saturday encouraging her to stay though the afternoon and then if she still felt the same way, she could leave. Because of her trust in this priest, and the help of the Holy Spirit she decided to stay.

A major breakthrough occurred for Susan following the Living Scripture Exercise of the Woman Healed of A Hemorrhage offered on Saturday afternoon. In this exercise, the participants have an opportunity to touch a cloth representing the cloak of Christ. Susan approached the cloak, that flowed from the base of a monstrance holding the Blessed Sacrament, and prayed, "Lord, please help me not to be so perfect, to want everything in my life to be perfect, even my child." She broke down in tears, but continued on the weekend receiving an incredible amount of healing and peace. At the memorial service she wrote a letter to her child apologizing for not having the courage to go through with the child's birth and imminent death:

*Our Dearest Marie,
How are you, sweetie? How are you doing in Heaven? Mommy and daddy really miss you. Your brother, Vincent, asks about you all the time. I think you are probably his favorite sister because you are not there to take away his toys or to mess up his projects! Your sister, Veronica, would have loved to have a little sister like you because you and she would have been best friends. But I think they would both be so jealous of you because you would have won both me and your daddy's hearts! You are our little angel, our most beautiful child.*

But we are both so sorry that we denied you that chance to be with our family. You would have loved to be with us, to hear our voices, to have us touch you, hold you, and kiss you. Even though it may only have been a short time: months, days, or maybe just hours, deep Down I know that it would have been worth it. We would have learned so much from you: how to love, how to serve, how to be humble, and how to trust in our God completely!

Dearest Marie, you are our guardian angel. Your daddy and I both need your prayers. I know that you are in good hands, as Jesus has shown me that Mother Mary is taking care of you. We will not worry about you, but you are forever in our hearts. We love you so much, with all our hearts and all our souls. We promise that we will pray to you always, tell you about all that is going on in our family. We thank God that He has blessed us with you, that He has given us a chance to come to this retreat so that both your daddy and I would feel closer to you. We look forward to the day that we will meet in Heaven, in the eternal home of God our Father, where we can finally hold you close and give you hugs and kisses.

Thank you for forgiving us. You are forever our child and we are so blessed to be your parents.

*Love always,
Mommy and daddy*

It may take longer to make this transition but in Rachel's Vineyard, individuals will experience some release of their pain and anguish. They may still struggle to fully embrace repentance and healing. The couple may remain attached to the idea that “we did what was in the best interests of our child” and may still wrestle with feelings of anger and resentment. Offer ongoing support if appropriate and share any after care services that might assist them. Offer prayers and encouragement and share with them that the grace of their healing experience has planted seeds that in time will bear a greater fruit.

For those offering the Rachel's Vineyard Retreats, it is important when couples register for the weekend sharing this type of loss, that you go over the entire weekend, making them fully aware of the process. With that understanding, we can entrust them to the God of mercy and pray for the Holy Spirit to open their hearts to his forgiveness and healing, according to His perfect will and time.

Perinatal Hospice

Those ministering to engaged or married couples are in an excellent position to offer alternatives to abortion when a couple receives the painful news there is a problem with their pregnancy. The type of counseling couples receive is critical to the decision to abort or give birth to a disabled child.

Most couples only receive non-directive counseling, which means they are told only the various challenges and likely prognosis of the condition without offering other life-affirming resources. This can be overwhelming and lead the parents in the aftershock of this news to see abortion as the best solution.

In one study, 80% of parents who received ‘non directive’ counseling chose to abort while 80% of parents who were provided with the option of perinatal palliative care

chose to carry their child to term.² (Autumn 2008 Issue of Perspectives, the newsletter of the DeVeber Institute for Bioethics and Social Research.)

Fortunately there is a growing movement to provide Perinatal Hospice that supports couples who journey through the difficult birth, death and funeral of their child. With encouragement and education they help provide the vital healing experience of embracing their child with love for as long as the baby lives. Though deeply painful, it gives parents and families the opportunity to celebrate the child's life and to grieve this loss in a healthy way. The couple and their family experience the natural process of grief. With the support team of doctors, nurses, chaplains and social workers they can find healing and meaning in their suffering and loss. Abortion robs parents of this opportunity. While we can struggle to understand the meaning of suffering and death, especially of an infant, God's grace and blessing abounds when life is embraced, loved and released with dignity, instead of abortion.

For those with a Downs syndrome diagnosis, there is a need for parents to learn of the blessing that these children can be in their lives, to counter the negative picture presented by proponents of abortion. It may be beneficial to have some contacts of parents who have a Downs Syndrome child who would be willing to speak to those faced with a Down Syndrome diagnosis. Once parents get over the initial shock and fear of the unknown, their lives are filled with peace and as one mother told us, " I live with pure joy everyday. I'm learning about unconditional love from my son."

Resources:

www.perinatalhospice.org

A listing of perinatal hospices and other valuable information.

From their website: A perinatal hospice approach walks with these families on their journey through pregnancy, birth and death, honoring the baby as well as the baby's family. Even in areas without a formal program, parents can create a loving experience for themselves and their baby, and health professionals and family and friends can offer support in the spirit of hospice.

National Association for Down Syndrome

www.nads.org

National Down Syndrome Congress

www.ndscenter.org

The DeVeber Institute for Bioethics and Social Research

<http://www.deveber.org>

Prenatal Partners for Life

www.prenatalpartnersforlife.org

² Calhoun, BC, Napolito, P et al. (2003) "Perinatal hospice: comprehensive care for the family of the fetus with a lethal condition." JreprodMed. V48: 343-348

*If you have come to this site because you or someone you know has received an adverse or negative prenatal diagnosis, you have come to the right place. We are parents who have gone through similar circumstances and we want to offer support. We are here to help you. **You are not alone!***

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