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"Runaway Bride" Exhibits Trauma Symptoms

Case Highlights Trauma's Impact on Future Relationships and
the Need for Resolution

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Just about everyone has been talking about Jennifer Wilbanks, a 32-year-old medical assistant from Atlanta, who had been scheduled to get married last month in front of 600 guests and 28 attendants. She disappeared a few days before her wedding, prompting a massive, three-day search.

When I first heard the story, I thought of the many issues that could make a woman sabotage a relationship and become so frightened of intimacy and commitment that she would be overcome by the "fight or flight" syndrome, associated closely with post-traumatic stress disorder. By all observations, Jennifer chose to flee.

Many of us know people who have experienced "cold feet" before their wedding day. If there is trauma in their history, they may wrestle internally with feelings of deep unworthiness, fear of judgment, unexplained terror of trust, and the heavy burden of bringing unspoken past secrets into a marriage.

Conflicts and Fears

One of my clients shared that as she approached her wedding; she was reluctant to reveal the fact that she had suffered the loss of three children because of induced abortions, which occurred many years before she met her fiancé. The secret ate at her. What if he found out? What if he were to judge her? Could he still love her? How could any mother destroy her own child? She worried that if she ever had a child, she would not be a good mother.

Feelings of unworthiness spawned by previous traumatic experiences can lead women to sabotage promising relationships. They don't trust that good things can happen to them.

They frequently walk away from tender and caring men because of guilt-ridden and rejected hearts. They don't feel they deserve to be loved. Through traumatic reenactment, they recreate unresolved themes by bringing past issues forward, but in a disguised way—a compelling, unconscious acting out of themes related to the original trauma.

Jennifer shared that she was driven by forces she could not speak about, did not understand, and is still struggling to make sense of. She stated: "At this time, I cannot explain fully what happened to me. I had a host of compelling issues, which seemed out of control ... In my mind, I was simply running from myself and from certain fears controlling my life."

What could those conflicts and fears be in Jennifer's case? We can only speculate, but indeed, there are some interesting themes. Hopefully, if her therapist has any experience with trauma, she will find these potential reenactments worthy of investigation.

In Rachel's Vineyard we have seen how trauma has been acted out in many ways as people recount the bizarre behaviors they engaged in following their experiences with abortion, sexual abuse, rape, or painful and damaging experiences from their childhoods.

Frequently they find themselves in new situations where they re-experience familiar feelings of abandonment, victimization, despair, helplessness, guilt, and keeping secrets in future relationships. Sometimes they engage in dramatic fantasy episodes where they unconsciously recreate and re-experience the original feelings related to their trauma. I see Jennifer's case as having all the hallmark symptoms of traumatic reenactment. Here are some attention-grabbing themes:

- Running away in secret. Going off somewhere and not telling anyone as she tried to resolve a growing problem that she hid from friends and family. The running away was an attempt to avoid facing a major life change that was causing stress.
- The story about being abducted: Jennifer told police she had been kidnapped and sexually assaulted. While being questioned by authorities, she later admitted to making the abduction story up. Lies were told as she risked serious consequences with the law, an overt invitation for punishment.
- Shame and guilt when her secret lies are publicly exposed. There was a need for forgiveness from family, friends, and even society.

If Jennifer was seeking redemption and forgiveness for something shameful in her past, it is quite conceivable that she could create a conflict in the present that sought to satisfy or reveal an unmet, unspoken need from her past.

Reenacting Personal Trauma

When people can't talk about their painful personal histories, they act them out. They tell their traumatic story, but in a disguised way. They re-experience the feelings associated with their conflict: guilt, shame, helplessness, victimization, secrets, and the desperate attempt to be understood, accepted, and reconciled. The trauma becomes fixed at a certain moment in a person's life, dissociated from consciousness, and provides the material for subsequent post-traumatic reenactment.

This was probably not the first time Jennifer had a dissociative episode. Trauma victims are known to emotionally and mentally depart from reality. They may engage in acting out behaviors or even dissociative fantasies that display the feelings they have never been able to put into words. Stories that have never been told are revealed in camouflaged ways.

Jennifer had a history of shoplifting. She had been arrested three times between 1996 and 1998 for stealing nearly \$1,800.00 worth of merchandise. Compulsive shoplifting can indicate a number of themes related to previous traumatic experiences: to recreate themes of shame and humiliation; an unconscious desire for punishment; or as a way to self-medicate depression by releasing adrenaline and endorphins. It's also not unusual for trauma victims to place themselves in risky or even dangerous situations.

Fortunately, Jennifer is on the road to self-discovery. "Each day I understand more about who I am and the issues that influenced me to respond inappropriately," she stated. "Therefore, I have started professional treatment voluntarily.... I look forward to days ahead when I am strong enough to speak for myself."

It's obvious from these words that she had "lost her voice." It makes you wonder if that did not happen years earlier in a traumatic experience where she felt she had no voice. While I am only speculating about common issues that many women experience and act out, I find it a very helpful step toward sanity to look at behaviors we can't explain, as a complicated way that people are trying to tell a story. Ultimately, they are seeking help, understanding, compassion and forgiveness for deep, unspeakable issues.

Helping Couples Heal

In the meantime, Jennifer's fiancé appears to be sticking by her, telling us his "only concern now is to get Jennifer well." He stated: "My commitment before God to her was the day I bought that ring and put it on her finger, and I'm not backing down from that."

I think Jennifer has a very good chance of getting well with this kind of support. Many other women are not that lucky when they engage in repetitions of trauma where they seek to sabotage and shame themselves, violently aborting the promising futures being offered to them.

Kevin Burke, the associate director of Rachel's Vineyard, shared that he believes that Jennifer's situation gives us an opportunity to ponder the whole area of premarital preparation and counsel. He suggests that couples take time to focus on their relationship during the engagement period, and that there should be greater sensitivity and programs in place to identify and help those preparing for marriage who may have trauma in their histories.

"It should be made clear from the outset, that abortion, divorce, sexual abuse or other violations in one's history does not mean that the person can't have a fulfilling and life-long commitment," he said. "However, as a church, we have a responsibility to let folks know that if they have these injuries in their past, or with their current fiancé, or with another individual, that this can often lead to future marital dysfunction."

He suggests that couples should be given various resources for healing these wounds during the engagement period as they prepare for marriage, or perhaps to take for future use.

We know that Rachel's Vineyard retreats deeply impact future marital health and happiness and can also be a gift to one's children. So many marriages and families would be spared the trauma of divorce with this type of psychological and spiritual intervention.

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