

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE LABOR OF GRIEF AND BIRTH OF FREEDOM

Like so many other women and men, Michelle had come to believe that she could never be free from the emotional pain of her abortion. At best, she thought, she might be able to cope with it, from day to day. But to truly be free of its burden? That, she thought, was impossible.

After two abortions I felt very alone, depressed and confused. I never knew what was wrong with me. I would cry and cry, I was out of control, and when anyone would ask me, "What's wrong?" I honestly answered, "I don't know." I felt as if I were going insane. Who cries all the time and hurts themselves without knowing why? I hated myself. Years of counseling did not help, antidepressants did not help, nothing seemed to help. It was all kept pretty much a secret. Only a select few knew of my extreme depression, hurting myself, and of my abortions.

Finally, after years of this torture, I told my dad everything. I told him of the abortions, sleeping around, drugs I had been doing to get me through, and of the abuse inflicted on me by myself and the others. He shocked me by being there for me. He understood why I did what I did. He sat with me as I told my mother and she also shocked me when, instead of being mad at me, she hugged me and cried and said that she wished she could have been there for me. These are reactions I never expected.

But the depression and self-abuse did not stop. My father, who is a counselor himself, tried everything he could to figure out what was wrong with me. He sent me to more counseling, which did not seem to help. My father wanted more than anything to figure out how to help me. Finally, at a seminar he attended, he met a woman named Theresa Burke. She was teaching about abortion trauma and talking about other people who suffered with many of the same symptoms I had, and they also could not figure out what was wrong with them.

My father learned that they would be holding a Rachel's Vineyard retreat for people who had abortions. The retreat would be a way of letting go of guilt and maybe feeling better. When my father told me about the retreat, I have to admit, I just thought, 'what the hell, I'll try it,' but that it would not change anything, just as nothing else had. I felt this way straight up to when I arrived for the weekend retreat. It was nice, but I still felt it was not going to change my depression.

I cannot describe what happened over the course of that one weekend. Through the exercises and sharing we did, I was drawn gently into God's love and forgiveness. That night, I knew God existed and that I am not a terrible person, and that I have already been forgiven by God and my children. It was

overwhelming. Never had anything like this happened before in my life. I cannot begin to describe on paper the wonderful sense of peace and love I felt that night. Nothing like that has ever happened to me before.

The profound healing that Michelle experienced was new to her, but not to me. I have been privileged to witness literally thousands of such transforming moments, when the labor of grief ends in the birth of a new, restored woman. It is as though an emotional key turns, simultaneously releasing all the muck and grime and weight of past abortions while opening a door to a fresh new future. These are truly miraculous moments. One can actually feel God touching souls to make them whole. Tears of sorrow are mixed with tears of joy as women and men experience their first taste of freedom after years of cruel bondage.

No post-abortion counselor who has witnessed the journey through “forbidden grief” into the peace and acceptance of healing can doubt the existence of a God who truly cares, truly forgives, and truly heals. One simply cannot help but feel humbled and privileged to be a witness to such restoration and healing.

But such healing can only happen when the isolation and secrecy are dismantled, and one’s story is revealed to others who do not seek to judge or condemn. Only then is it finally possible, with the support of a small community of others who compassionately affirm the loss and respect the grief, to grieve one’s losses to their fullness. The importance of social support to the grief process reflects an important aspect of our human nature: Though we are individuals, we are inescapably social beings. The lack of social support will degrade or destroy our well-being. Conversely, the experience of social support, in even a single relationship, can strengthen our well-being.

For most of us, it is only when we have the support of others who will not judge or condemn us that we feel safe from social rejection. This support makes it easier for us to confront and explore the deepest part of our souls. With it, one learns how to accept forgiveness from God and one’s aborted child. With it, one learns how to extend forgiveness to oneself and others. And with it, one discovers how the most difficult, soul-breaking experiences imaginable can be used as the foundation for building a richer, deeper, and more meaningful existence.

My motivation in writing this book (over the course of several years) has been to encourage two sets of people—(1) women and men troubled by past abortions, and (2) counselors and others in a position to help them—to learn more about post-abortion problems and to set their feet on the path toward healing. Obviously, however, this book is not a “how to” manual for obtaining healing after an abortion. That’s a subject that could fill another book. Instead, the goal of this book is to lift the veil from the forbidden grief of abortion, which is so misunderstood, or ignored, in our culture. Before our society will ever expend much effort

in helping people heal from their past abortions, it must first recognize that healing is even needed. If you have read this far, you are no doubt convinced of that.

On the other hand, while this book is not intended as a “how-to” guide to healing, I would like to outline at least some fundamental issues. If you have had an abortion, however, I want to emphasize that what I’m presenting here is not enough to help you complete your journey. Just as you would not contemplate going on a hike through the Amazon jungle with a map torn out of an encyclopedia, neither should you consider this or any book as a sufficient map for finding healing. Sticking with the Amazon tour analogy, I discourage you from trying to blaze your own way even with a very detailed map. Instead, it would be much wiser to find an experienced jungle guide to accompany you on the trip. In the same way, while books and articles on post-abortion healing will be very helpful to you on your healing journey, they can never be adequate substitutes for an experienced counselor who knows where all the stumbling blocks lie—and there are plenty of them, many of which you won’t see because you are simply too close to them.

Furthermore, you should remember that post-abortion healing is a specialty unto itself. The average psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, or counselor of any other academic stripe who does not understand post-abortion issues can often inflict more harm than good on the unsuspecting woman. Many may believe they have enough insight to help, but unless they have had additional training, they often don’t. Certainly, if your thoughts and feelings become so overwhelming that you feel you can no longer cope, seek professional assistance immediately. But generally, I encourage you to take the time to find one of the growing number of professional therapists and experienced lay counselors who have received special training in post-abortion healing. A list of recovery resources is included at the end of this book.

MAKE A COMMITMENT TO RESIST YOUR FEARS

In chapter six, I discussed the approach-avoidance conflict, which is at the heart of the struggle to find healing. On one hand, you desire to be completely free of your past abortion. On the other hand, you fear the tears, the grief, the opening up of old wounds. Perhaps, like some women, you even fear being healed because you “don’t deserve to be happy.” This fear of being healed resembles the ironic condition of prisoners who become so accustomed to their prison cells that they begin to fear freedom.

Fear is your greatest enemy. Perhaps you are afraid of losing control, going crazy, or opening up a wound that is so excruciating it can never

be healed. Remember, however, that your fears are just an expression of unresolved emotions arising from your trauma. Fear is normal. But if you keep your eyes fixed on your goal, you will do fine, just as Hanna did:

I was terrified to take that first step forward and participate in Rachel's Vineyard. It seemed safer to remain hiding in the darkness, keeping the pain locked up deep inside rather than to risk exposing my shame to another soul. Now I'm grateful to have experienced God's healing and forgiveness with other women in an atmosphere of complete acceptance and trust. Rachel's Vineyard has been a blessing to me.

You need to make a thoughtful, determined commitment to go through the healing process and finally put this part of your life to rest. Keep reminding yourself that hundreds of thousands of women and men have gone before you. They are on your side, encouraging you, and promising you that your efforts will be well rewarded. According to Deanna:

I was scared to death to attend the Rachel's Vineyard retreat. I was so leery about it that I made my friend drop me off and take my car so that I wouldn't be able to leave if I wanted to. What I experienced that weekend is hard to put into words. I went through so many different feelings in three short days but I did not go through anything alone. There was always someone there with a hug or the words I needed to hear. This experience took a great weight off of me and opened the door to forgiving myself. This allowed a space in my heart for hope to grow.

Many people are afraid to grieve because they have never fully understood the grief process. In fact, grieving is a multifaceted process that we must learn how to do.¹ With the help of others, you, too, can learn how to work through your grief.

Healing involves naming, claiming, and taming an unspeakable wound so that you can move out of the silence and beyond the secret. To grieve means to open up and release the toxic feelings and emotions that are robbing your life of joy and peace. Recovery can't begin until you peel away festering layers of guilt and anger. This will expose the underlying wound of loss, which can then be treated through the grief process. Will there still be a scar? Yes. But the infection will be gone. You can and will be whole again.

There is no alternative. Healing is never found by hiding from the truth. Healing is discovered by meeting the truth with an honest and humble courage. Beyond acknowledging the death of your child, it is also necessary to understand the depth and breadth of what has happened. This includes recognizing the host of situational and personal factors that fed your desperation. Confronting the truth means facing and better understanding yourself, not for the purpose of condemning yourself, but for the purpose of learning to become the person you want to be.

Grieving normally involves a social context, a connection to other

people. This is why we hold funerals as a means of helping each other through the grief process. Grieving an abortion loss is also best accomplished with the support of others. If you feel isolated, your fears may be exacerbated, along with feelings of shame, guilt, and depression. The thought of breaking out from your seclusion may create intense feelings of anxiety. As Julie recalled:

I thought my abortion was something “put away” in my memory bank until my husband and I sought marriage counseling (after 22 years together!). Suddenly the abortion was coming up as an issue. I am finding this to be very tough, and part of me doesn’t want to continue as I get physically ill from it all. Part of me doesn’t want to think that my abortion can really have something to do with my life “now,” but then another part of me says that I have never been “me” since the abortion. It’s because of this that I find myself “fighting” myself inside—one part holds me back so much, the other part wants to be “free” again. Yet I am simply terrified to allow myself to “go there.”

Many women report being petrified by the prospect that others will learn about their painful secret. The anxiety attached to revealing hidden emotions about an abortion can be overwhelming and may even include physical symptoms such as nausea, dizziness, and shortness of breath. Even when one knows that there is healing on the other side of counseling, the struggle against feelings of shame can be difficult, as Helen explained:

I kept thinking up excuses as to why this wasn’t the best time for me to go through the weekend retreat. But finally, I had to face that there would never be a better time than now, because I was so tired of carrying the heavy burden of depression, guilt, and anger. I was vacillating between wanting to deal with my feelings, and incredible panic. When I approached the retreat center, I was so anxious! I had a deep fear of being judged and condemned.

This fear of judgment may be especially intense if you have encountered judgmental attitudes in the past, or if those who already know about your abortion have shown a lack of appreciation for the intensity of your grief. These past experiences of being judged or dismissed may make it harder for you to seek support again. When you have been “burned” in the past, it’s natural to fear getting burned again. Susan offers a description of her struggle:

I “knew” right when I was on the table that abortion was wrong—I felt it inside, yet went ahead with it anyway. I got sick afterwards and ended up in the emergency room for a D&C. It was then that my parents were notified. Nothing was said by them except to later use this “weapon” against me. No one asked me how I was or how I felt. So it’s been extremely difficult to discuss. I am afraid of being condemned by others or having my past used against me.

Fear of condemnation or rejection is the opposite of feeling accepted and loved. To battle these fears, remind yourself constantly that the people

involved in post-abortion ministries already understand your pain and your fears. Many have been through the same experiences you have. They are here to help you, not condemn you. The fact that so many are volunteers—or poorly paid staff members—is evidence that they are motivated by concern and love for you. You will never find a better audience with whom you can share your thoughts, your fears, your hopes.

Many of the fears you may have about sharing your feelings “out in the world” are well-grounded. But in the safe environment of a post-abortion ministry, the same fears don’t apply. They are only a hindrance. Joanna describes her experience on the first night of a Rachel’s Vineyard retreat:

I was so frightened walking up to the front door, but the warm greetings and friendliness of others in our group made me feel welcome and lowered my anxiety. I was terrified of more rejection in my life. There was no rejection—only love, support, and encouragement. By the end of the retreat, I felt relief and hope! Release from the terrible feelings of unworthiness and hopelessness. It was incredible to see that so many others felt the same way and gathered their courage to come on the retreat.

We have all heard the isolating rhetoric: “Abortion is a personal and private decision.” But the fundamental fact is that we are human beings—social creatures who need and rely on our connections to others. Abortion severs the connection between a mother and her child, but it doesn’t necessarily stop there. Abortion can break relationships between lovers, spouses, and family members. It encourages isolation and secrecy. It can even create a disconnection from self.

The healing process, then, must build connections. One of the best ways to do this is through group counseling sessions with other post-abortive women or men in a supportive framework, with the assistance of knowledgeable professionals and lay counselors. In this safe, understanding environment, you will not only experience how others connect to you, but you will be able to connect with and help other women with your empathy and words of encouragement.

GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO GRIEVE

Someone told me I should grieve to get over this loss, but I feel guilty when I do. How can I grieve for something that I ended? How can I grieve for someone I never even knew? What right do I have to grieve for someone I didn’t want? When I chose to have the abortion, didn’t I give up the right to grieve?

Jillian’s self-doubts are common. Her feelings of guilt were blocking her expression of grief. Since the abortion was something she freely chose, she reasoned, she didn’t deserve the luxury of tears. Tears bring

relief. But she wasn't a mother who lost her child to an auto accident. She aborted her child. What right did she have to cry for her lost child in the same way as women whose children are taken from them? What right did she have to seek the relief of tears?

For many women and men like Jillian, guilt immediately rears its ugly head whenever they begin to think about their loss. But guilt is precisely the feeling the subconscious most wants to avoid. So guilt drives them away from examining the multitude of feelings hidden beneath that guilt.

If you have been trying to cut yourself off from feelings of loss, anger, or sadness, it is likely that you are obstructing your grief. By justifying, rationalizing, and making excuses that defend and protect your abortion decision, you may be sidestepping a very real grief that will haunt you until it is recognized.

In order for you to work through your grief, you have to allow yourself to experience it as an acceptable emotion. You will not be able to grieve if you keep telling yourself that you have to be "strong," or that you "just won't think about it," or that you "have nothing to feel bad about." All these excuses are forms of denial by which women and men seek to hide their sense of loss. But abortion invariably involves a loss.

Abortion is a death experience. Whether you want to call it "losing a pregnancy," losing a "potential person," or the death of your baby, it is still a loss. This loss extends to relationships, maternal attachments, and a sense of lost innocence. It also involves the loss of all the "could have been" scenarios which may invade your reasoning. The loss may assume even deeper levels of grief as the future becomes the present, and some of the reasons the loss was endured in the first place (the hope of saving a relationship or career, for example) are now seen to be false hopes.

It is difficult or impossible to grieve a death without recognizing the spiritual aspects of the human heart. All faith perspectives utilize a spiritual foundation when dealing with issues of death. Our rituals, rites, and ceremonial customs play an important role in providing closure, respect, and dignity for both the one who has died and those who mourn the death.

Giving permission to grieve means facing the painful reality of what was lost and how it was lost. Yet denial usually takes time to eliminate and often breaks down into stages. The first stage is *recognition*; this entails admitting the problem. The second phase of breaking denial is *acceptance*. During this phase the problem is addressed, but often with conditions and a continued reluctance to fully face the true nature and seriousness of the problem. In the final phase of working through denial there must be a *surrender*. Here, there is a complete resignation to the reality of the situation and a willingness to address its true nature and

meaning. Once this phase is reached, the work of feeling one's grief and letting it go can begin.

BE PERSISTENT TO THE END

A common saying about grief work is that “the only way out—is through.” Going through your grief means accepting it for what it is and being willing to experience it fully. In that process, do not be surprised if you discover feelings you did not expect to have, or which surface in the form of fantasies. Regardless, if you give yourself permission to feel whatever is there, you can break through to the other side.

Initially, your grief work may feel unbearable. You must make a commitment to yourself and your loved ones to work at it for as long as the process takes. Don't expect to resolve everything in just a few short days or weeks. Although taking breaks from the work of grief can be helpful, you must continually go back until all your feelings have been dealt with. Avoid the temptation to run away because the work is difficult. Also, make a commitment to avoid numbing yourself with alcohol or drugs. You will need all your resources and faculties to carry out the important work of grief.

In addition, since abortion in many cases can be a symptom of deeper losses and pain, to fully grieve you must be prepared to accept and examine other feelings, such as rejection, ambivalence, abuse, abandonment, desperation, and all the other conscious and unconscious fears and circumstances that may have made you vulnerable to abortion. Feelings of loss and grief can be intensified, especially if you have experienced rejection as a child yourself. In this and many other cases, such as in experiences of rape, sexual abuse, or abandonment, your abortion may have become a storage place for other grief issues that you have not yet addressed.

The support of others is especially important if your abortion is connected to other grief issues. It is not always possible, or even desirable, to limit the grief issues that you need to address. Dealing with an unresolved grief in one area is likely to trigger other areas where painful memories or feelings have been tucked away. Again, this is not a journey to make alone. One should be accompanied by those experienced in helping women and men after abortion. But remember that while the grief process is never easy, even with the help of others, it is always freeing.

RECOGNIZE THAT YOUR GRIEF IS UNIQUE

Despite the fact that you may share many symptoms with others who have suffered from abortion, your grief is distinct to you alone. Some

women struggle for years to overcome their heartache. Others may appear to have an instantaneous cure. Still others have strong religious convictions that may help them move more graciously through the pain of their loss.

Every person is different!

Do not make the mistake of comparing yourself with someone else. Your needs will vary, as will the range of intensity of your emotions. Likewise, your history and previous experiences with grief will shape the way you go through this process. Do not allow the judgments of others to influence the way you feel. The extent of your grief and what you need to do about it can only be understood in the context of what it means to you.

There is no single, correct way to grieve. There are many different ways to reach the same destination. You need to choose the path. You must find the path that is best for you, with the one proviso that you must be constantly alert to any tricks of your subconscious to lead you off the path and back into denial. This is why an experienced guide is helpful. And if you don't feel you are making progress with your first guide, don't be afraid to find another.

BE REALISTIC IN YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Grief takes time. There are no easy, quick cures for post-abortion trauma. I say this even though I frequently see what others might consider to be instantaneous breakthroughs. But these breakthroughs resulting in a complete release of tension are not truly instantaneous. Before they occurred, there was always a lot of hard work done by the woman (alone, or in counseling) in confronting her loss and recognizing its effects on her life.

You may experience breakthroughs, followed by periods of steady progress or periods of no progress at all, and then discover you have yet another new hill to climb. Sometimes, after you have begun to feel you are making progress, you may suddenly feel like you're going backwards. This, too, is normal, especially if your grief work exposes you to other losses and feelings.

Grieving any major loss will always cause old issues, unfinished business, and unresolved conflicts to resurface. The experience of loss can stir up conflicts related to the past—parent-child attachments, dependency, feelings of inadequacy, unwantedness, insecurity, and a lack of control.²

When these losses are coupled with past trauma, and traumas you face in the future, you may feel overwhelmed for a time by this release of your toxic emotions. You might also feel as if you are carrying your grief to extremes. Eventually, however, when you have given yourself

permission to pass through these feelings, you will no longer feel overwhelmed. When grief has been exhausted, you will feel tired and depleted, but the inner tension will be gone. You will begin to feel relief. In addition, the energy you have been using to push away these emotions will be accessible to you, freed up for more meaningful uses.

Be gentle with yourself. Focus not on the distant future, but on taking it one day at a time. Soon you will begin to see a better future opening up than you previously imagined.

Eventually, you can expect to achieve a certain level of healing and peace over what has happened. But do not be surprised if some later event triggers additional feelings of grief that you thought you had already conquered. This is very normal. In many cases, this later event has simply struck an unrecognized connector, which has lain buried in your subconscious like an abandoned land mine. If this happens to you, take time again to honor those feelings and understand the connection that aroused them. Set some time aside to work them through and defuse that connection.

It is unrealistic to think you will ever completely forget your aborted child. However, you can move beyond the intense feelings of loss, guilt, and grief that you may be experiencing now. Fr. Michael Mannion, a Catholic priest who has written extensively about abortion and healing, states: "When a mother is giving birth to a child, the mother is the child's physical lifeline into the world. When an abortion has occurred, the child can become the mother's spiritual lifeline to God." This faith can be the spiritual element that allows us to make sense out of misery and suffering—and give us hope. Faith gives us an object to transcend our losses. You can learn to find meaning in what has happened and look forward to being reunited with your child in Heaven.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Grieving requires a vast amount of energy. Many women mistakenly think that grieving entails sackcloth and ashes, fasting and sleepless nights. This is a foolish and unsuccessful way to proceed.

Grieving is not an exercise in masochism. Don't expect to be able to tolerate your grief if you don't eat or sleep. Don't attempt to confront your grief if you are not taking optimal care of your health. Part of your commitment to recovery involves a commitment to your own health.

In the past, you may have neglected your own personal needs because you felt you deserved to suffer. Now you must get plenty of rest. Embrace a healthy, nutritious diet, and exercise. Physical activity will decrease depression, help you sleep, and release endorphins that will enable you to relax.

Allow your journey toward healing to be a time of inner transforma-

tion. It is a time to be good to yourself and treat yourself with gentleness. No matter what has happened in your life, you are created in the image and likeness of God. He created you for a great good, and He will help to restore you when you feel broken and worn down.

You can use your gifts, talents, and experiences—including even your most painful experiences—for the good of yourself and others. When you have finished all your grief work, you will have a depth of understanding and compassion that will make you more effective in helping others.

It is true that much good can come out of a bad experience. It is your job now to take care of yourself so that you can find that goodness and begin sharing it with those you love.

BUILD CONNECTIONS OF SUPPORT

It is well documented that when mourners are socially isolated, they have greater difficulty resolving their grief. The support of others, especially those who understand your trauma and will validate your feelings, will help you recover more quickly. Knowing that others care about you will also help you restore your sense of dignity and worth.

One way to find this social support is through post-abortion ministries, which I'll discuss more below. But you should also look around at the people in your life who already know and love you. Are there any people who can listen to your heartache without judging you? Are they a resource of understanding, compassion, concern?

If you are not confident of someone's ability to understand and support you through this grief process, you may want to educate that person a bit *before* you share your own story and feelings with them. Ask your friend or loved one to read about the way abortion has affected other women. You can recommend this book, or share a testimony from www.rachelsvineyard.org or www.afterabortion.org. The Elliot Institute publishes a 12-page newspaper-like primer on post-abortion issues called *Hope and Healing*.³ This is a good resource for helping those who haven't had abortions understand what women and men can go through and how they can help create a more healing environment for loved ones hurt by a past abortion. Just hand one of these resources to your friend and say: "I need you to read this. Then we can talk about it, okay?"

If a loved one refuses to talk about it, this may be your cue that he or she has unresolved issues about abortion—either yours, his or her own, or someone else's—and just isn't ready to deal with it. Move on and find another support person.

When you do find a loved one you can talk to, make it clear that it is not their responsibility to "fix" the problem. Don't be hesitant to say, "I don't need you to fix this, but just to try to understand me. I'm about to start on a journey to work through a big, unresolved grief issue, and I

just need to know you're behind me in case I need someone to cry with."

Don't be afraid to tell others what you need. Most of your loved ones will be glad to give you the kind of emotional support you need if they know exactly what it is you need from them. Accepting their support now will help make you stronger in the future.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that you have to do this all on your own. When trying to heal, it is important to learn how to reach out to others whom you can trust—those who will not desert or abandon you. For many, this reaching out may itself be an important part of the recovery process. Sadly, many women have gone through the experience of an abortion completely alone. Reaching out now will help you grow in your ability to become interconnected with other people.

Asking for help does not mean that you are dependent or immature. It means you are human, a social being. Nor are you asking others to do the grief work for you. What you are doing is allowing them to comfort and reassure you at a time when you are experiencing a very heavy loss. Wouldn't you want to do the same for your loved ones? If so, give them the chance to do this for you, now, when you need support.

TELL YOUR STORY

As with any trauma, processing what has happened and being able to tell your story helps to diminish its damaging effects. If you are not ready to talk about it with someone else, or if there is no one you feel you can talk to about it, you may experience some relief simply by sitting down and writing it all out. Let everything you want to say flow out onto the paper.

Reviewing the situation surrounding your abortion, its significance in your life, and the grief you feel over the loss—whether verbally or in writing—will help you understand how and why the abortion occurred. From there, you will be able to put it in perspective and integrate the story into the account of your life. You will be able to find some meaning and sense out of what has happened.

Remember that each time you tell your story, it will get easier. Telling your story is like a slow detoxification process; you can expect that the first few times you tell it, you may experience nervous jitters and monumental anxiety. Yet each time you experience the feelings associated with your memories, you will get more of a grip on what has happened. You will begin to feel more control over your painful emotions, and the anxiety and trembling will diminish a little more. Eventually, the pain will not control you anymore.

AVOID THE GUILT TRAP

Many women cannot imagine ever finding healing, simply because they can never imagine being free from their guilt. Although they may have an intellectual awareness of God's willingness to forgive them, they cannot imagine ever being able to forgive themselves. Such was the case with Bianca:

I couldn't begin to count all the nights I have cried to God. I know He forgives me. But I still have a void in my heart. The hardest part is forgiving myself. Is it *really* possible to get my guilt to go away? To not live in fear of others judging me? I feel that if I could believe that I am forgiven completely, that my whole life will change dramatically! It is this hope that keeps me searching.

Like so many others, Bianca was stuck in the guilt trap. It wasn't God or religion that was keeping her there, it was herself. No amount of preaching, platitudes, or theology is likely to relieve you of a guilty verdict you have imposed on yourself.

It is important to be aware of the trap of using guilt as a way of memorializing your aborted child. Many women are afraid to give up their guilt because they think that without it they will lose the memory of their babies. Those who delve further find that under the guilt is a profound and aching grief. The trick of the mind is to believe that it is easier to grapple with guilt or anger than to be confronted by an abyss of agonizing grief. Yet the possibility for recovery exists only when we give our souls the freedom to grieve our losses so we can move beyond the pain. By acknowledging your grief, you can honor the memory of an aborted baby in a healthier way, one that does not require that you continually sacrifice your own chances for happiness.

Guilt is a universal reaction for any parent who has suffered the death of a child. This is even more true after an abortion, when parents torment themselves by groping for reasons to justify the abortion, or proposing the "if only I had" solutions to all the problems that overwhelmed them at the time of the crisis. Furthermore, individuals who perceive themselves as murderers rather than victims are struggling with a double tragedy. Although some women feel victimized if they were forced to abort against their wills, there are others who struggle with feelings of guilt that they chose to participate in the destruction of their children's lives. Both situations involve complicated levels of guilt that can block healthy grieving.

Many women and men incorporate their guilt into the mourning process, and they seem incapable of separating the two. This is why the most effective post-abortion healing programs include a spiritual component that helps those who struggle with the inability to forgive themselves. After all, guilt is a spiritual issue. I have never seen a woman recover from post-abortion trauma without addressing the

issue of guilt. To resolve grief, it is essential to confront and move past feelings of guilt, as Rebecca describes:

As the weekend unfolded, I was able to reach the grief that was buried so deeply within me. I had dug through all my defenses, and there was nothing left to protect me from the profound sorrow I felt over the loss of my baby. I never knew how to separate the feelings of shame from feelings of grief, but now I was finally there. The experience of grieving my loss was indescribably painful, but it was the key for me to release the guilt and shame.

By confronting feelings of guilt, shame, and the fear of disclosure, you will free yourself to accomplish the real work of grief. It is there that you will discover reserves of strength and courage that you never knew you had. According to Cathy:

I am truly grateful for the opportunity to experience this journey with others in the same situation. I don't feel alone or unworthy anymore. I found sharing our stories and also meditating on our feelings was a beautiful way of releasing my guilt and sadness. I feel that I have let go of so much anger.

JOIN A POST-ABORTION SUPPORT GROUP

I have discovered in my own work in developing a post-abortion healing program that working through the grief process in an ordered and specific way is the most reliable way of providing the necessary support and control needed on this very difficult journey. The process is broken down into stages so that the mourner can identify and confront each potential issue before moving forward. This is why I encourage you to participate in a well organized post-abortion program with experienced leaders. Moving through a specific process, with support, will help prevent a host of potential complications in dealing with your grief.

Support groups allow people to share emotions and pain in a non-threatening environment. While the group does not take the place of private therapy for specific problems, it can serve the function of helping women and men know that their reactions and emotions are not unique, to witness how others overcome their problems, and to reach outside of themselves to help others experience understanding and relief. Whenever there are several people who share the painful experience of having undergone an abortion, their feelings of loss and grief will be quickly validated. Dottie comments on how the group helped her move on:

It was a wonderful experience of release and sharing. Once I realized that everyone was struggling in different ways, but just like me, I felt very safe in sharing my feelings and emotions over my abortions. We shared our stories—we dug into the pain, the skeletons in our past—without being judged. Many of the stories touched me personally, and we began to feel close to

each other in our shared pain and struggle. The years of silent suffering and isolation had ended, and I could make room for the forgiveness and healing that would follow.

Although you may be feeling shame and guilt about exposing your problems, sharing with others who are struggling with the same issues can be a wonderful way to end your isolation and journey together to triumph over grief and find new meaning and purpose.

Personally, I prefer to help those suffering from post-abortion difficulties within the context of a support group or weekend retreat. I have found that group work quickly ends the isolation that many post-abortive women and men struggle with. Furthermore, the experience of being with others is very cathartic for your own emotional release. An individual in your group may be able to articulate thoughts and feelings that you share but have difficulty verbalizing.

The group process will challenge you on many levels. But because people in a group will undoubtedly be at different levels of recovery, the group will also offer the necessary hope that you can and will get better. As with war veterans, there is an unspoken bond among those who have suffered deeply because of abortion. There is acceptance and compassion and, more importantly, a strong desire to see others move beyond their pain. This desire eventually will be extended to you.

ATTEND A WEEKEND RETREAT

The program I have developed for healing is called Rachel's Vineyard, a very gentle but emotionally intensive therapeutic process that combines both psychological and spiritual elements. This curriculum is used by many post-abortion ministries throughout the United States. We offer a support group program that spans a 13-week period. In addition, we offer the program in the format of a condensed weekend retreat, usually from Friday evening through Sunday afternoon.

Rachel's Vineyard offers women and men an opportunity to examine their abortion experience, identify the ways that the loss affected them, and acknowledge whatever pain is there. The program helps them deal with repressed grief, guilt, anger, feelings of abandonment, pressure, and ambivalent attachments to their aborted children.

These issues must be dealt with and validated before an individual is ready to reconcile the experience within herself and move toward healing. It bears repeating that until anger or grief is validated and released, there will be little room in one's heart for hope.

Here is how Connie described her weekend experience:

No words can explain the healing that I experienced on this weekend retreat. It was conducted with love and gentleness in an area of my life that was

war-torn, raw, and bleeding. God's mercy and love were behind this retreat, and He can make all things possible—hope, love, faith, life—where there was searing grief, pain, and desolation. Although this retreat was full of love, the conductors did not back away from reaching into the painful areas of our lives and beings. It was so important for us to dig deep and release the pain and the skeletons of the past. I believe this made room for God, who then filled that room with genuine love for lost children, family, friends, and especially ourselves.

Rachel's Vineyard has a number of powerful rituals that help participants connect with and release their grief and sorrow. These unique exercises help connect the participants to their inner voice, to each other, and to the love and compassion of the Divine Creator. Participants also learn how to internalize forgiveness for themselves and others. Through a memorial service at the end of the weekend, participants have the opportunity to honor and give dignity to their aborted babies in a fashion that reconnects their memories and emotions regarding their lost children in a positive and healthy way.

There is also an opportunity to examine one's entire life. Frequently, abortion can be a symptom of other losses and hurt. Painful relationships with parents, a history of sexual abuse, and numerous other factors can all influence life's patterns and crises. The retreat allows participants a chance to examine these areas, look at the larger picture of their lives, and gain a different perspective.

Whether one participates in the 13-week support group or the weekend retreat, one can expect a lot of work. But those who are willing to journey through their grief will experience the power of resurrection in their own lives. They will find meaning in what has happened and allow God to transform their experience into something that gives hope, liberation, and peace. Following are the comments of four women.

Rachel's Vineyard went far beyond anything I could imagine. It was an incredible journey from grief to joy. The exercises brought depth and meaning to our experiences. I felt like God was very much in our midst. Rachel's Vineyard was a long-awaited answer to years of immense suffering.

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I was terrified to take that first step forward and participate in Rachel's Vineyard. It seemed safer to remain hiding in the darkness, keeping the pain locked up deep inside rather than to risk exposing my shame to another soul. Now I'm grateful to have experienced God's healing and forgiveness with other women in an atmosphere of complete acceptance and trust. Rachel's Vineyard has been a blessing to me.

* * *

At the end of the retreat, I felt relief and hope! Release from the feelings of terrible unworthiness and hopelessness, and learning that so many others

felt the same way and gathered their courage to come on the retreat. I found love and understanding from the many dear women of all ages who made up the body of retreat attendees, as well as help and interest shown by the volunteers who conducted the retreat.

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This has been one of the most memorable and wonderful personal events of my life. Had I not been here and participated, I would still be a wandering soul without purpose. Now I am on my new journey to peace and being filled with the Holy Spirit. I found it most meaningful that God is truly forgiving; therefore, I can forgive myself. Also, all of our babies are God's creation and are happy in their eternal life in Heaven waiting to be re-united with their mothers.

I invite you to come to Rachel's Vineyard. You will be greeted and treated with compassion and respect. You will be helped and guided by myself or one of the many experienced counselors whom I have helped train.

In the vineyard you will experience the support and friendship of others as you move through the levels of your grief. Once your own pain has been emptied out there will be room for God's love. This is why the retreat is psychologically effective and spiritually renewing. It is not theology, or a lecture, or anyone telling you what you should feel. It is an experience. An experience of deep release and mercy, felt within the wounds of the suffering community of which you have become a part.

While this experience is not limited to Christians, and can benefit people of all faiths or no faith, the exercises do draw on familiar biblical images and events. Christians will discover a weekend that is reminiscent of Christ's journey to Calvary, walking with Him through His passion and death. But by Sunday you will also share in His resurrection to new life.

The retreat is an enormous amount of work. But if you are willing to do it, with the help and support of myself and others, you will find incredible healing and peace.

REDISCOVER THE REAL YOU

If the emotional and spiritual wounds of abortion have been sapping faith, virtue, and joy from your life, you can be certain that once you enter a spiritual process for healing, your life will change. There can be fear at accepting this change, because the pain of bearing that burden is very familiar. To move beyond that familiar pain entails the risk of discovering a new you.

Who would you be without the heartache and grief? If your identity has been wrapped up in shame and guilt, self-loathing, or despair, the thought of living without the weight of these chains may seem strange

or even frightening. Don't let this fear paralyze you.

There is a saying that came out of Alcoholics Anonymous: "*Religion* is for people who are afraid of going to hell—but *spirituality* is for people who have been there." This saying explains why the quest for healing of the deepest emotional wounds frequently becomes a spiritual journey.

Perhaps, like many others, you have experienced a deep sense of alienation from God. In that case, you may be afraid that healing will involve allowing God into your life, and you are uncertain what that may mean. Will He demand something of you? If you are healed, will He change your life more than you want it to change?

The spiritual part of our being, which shares a spark of the Divine through our capacity to create life, suffers a terrible shock during an abortion. Annie's faith was lost the moment she stepped out of the abortion clinic.

As soon as I stepped out into the sunlight, I knew that God could not exist. I figured that if there was a just God in the world, He would have struck me down dead. Since I was still there, I knew there can't be a God.

Other women live in constant fear of God's impending judgment, meted out to them through an early death or the deaths of loved ones. Others simply drift away from the faith they once had because they no longer feel worthy to have a relationship with God. Just as you can be filled with anxiety about approaching a loved one again after a major fight, so it is natural to feel nervous about how you will ever be able to restore your spiritual relationship with God. The amazing thing is, God wants to restore His relationship with you even more than you want to restore it with Him. There is no need to be afraid. Even at this moment, as you read these words, He is reaching out to you, encouraging you, offering you the peace of reconciliation. Working through your loved ones, your post-abortion counselor or group, or through a pastor, priest, rabbi, or mullah, He is reaching out to draw you back to Himself.

Kathleen made that journey, and in doing so discovered a new depth in herself and others, as she described in her very moving poem:

There Is a Place

There is a place within a woman
no man has ever known.
A place touched only by God,
tucked somewhere behind
memories of the heart.
It is the place where
babies come from,
where dreams are stored
of things to come,
and children yet to be . . .

There is a place within a woman
no man has ever known.
A God-less place
her soul inhabits
that only God can heal.
Abandoned by man
she abandons God
sacrificing her unborn child
and herself . . .
In the abortionist's room.

There is a place within a woman
no man has ever known.
A place touched only by God
and a few who do his will.
"Remember," says the priest,
"He does not make mistakes;
Before you were conceived,
God thought of you and loved you.
He has cried real tears for you.
Let Him heal you . . ."

There is a place within a woman
No man has ever known.
A place touched only by God
and a few brave souls
with healing hands
and prayerful hearts
who dare to journey with her.
They weep with her
and rock her gently
leading her back to herself . . .

There is a place within a woman
No man has ever known.
A place touched only by God
where memories are born
from memories
and forgiveness is carried
on the voice of a child.

Few ears can hear,
Few hearts will know
Except for Him and me
And, now, maybe, you . . .

The spiritual process of grief work and reconciliation with self, God, and one's aborted child can truly result in the birth of a new you—still connected to the old you, but more whole, balanced, complete, and free. The result of this reconciliation process is a softening of the heart, a deeper compassion for yourself, and a reclaiming of the aspects of yourself that

you treasured before your trauma. It is also a process that will give you a new appreciation of your strength and ability to learn and grow from every event that has and will occur in your life, even the tragic events.

By integrating all of these components, you will create a new self, a self liberated from the repetitions of trauma and the sense of hopelessness. You will have the potential to revisit abandoned goals and dreams, articulate your truest and deepest desires, and dare to live life fully. Consider Michelle's description of her journey:

I was a participant in the Rachel's Vineyard weekend. It was a wonderful experience. Of course, when I first arrived, I was filled with great anxiety and very little desire to actually be there, but I knew it was time to face what I dreaded so much.

Although the retreat was exhausting on an emotional level, I now feel renewed and revitalized. I feel reborn and find myself sensitive to my surroundings. It is difficult to explain, but I have a sense of softness about me. I have to turn down the volume on my radio because my ears are sensitive to noise. My skin is sensitive to touch, and my taste is more acute. For the first time in my life, taking a shower is a wonderful experience because I actually feel clean.

I know I was healed at the retreat, and I feel such an infusion of God's spirit in me. It is truly awesome. I felt like I was dead before, numb and senseless. My senses have returned. I feel alive, and like I am truly embracing my life now, with joy and hope.

I would like to close this chapter with the reflections of Josie, who also traveled the path into her grief and discovered an unexpected rebirth.

As I look out upon God's creations, I am struck with awe by His love and mercy for us.

Life is so resilient. Even after destruction and seemingly total decimation, life is there. The seed for rebirth is there, waiting; waiting to be watered and nurtured, and with just a little tender care, a shoot will sprout from what was once a wasteland.

In nature God has shown us what we are capable of; He has given us examples of the power of life. A whole forest is laid bare by fire, and yet, out of the ashes comes growth. It is said that there are certain seeds which remain dormant until there is a fire and then, and only then, when they have gone through fire, do they sprout new life.

I feel inside of me that seed. That seed has lain dormant for so many years, protected by an outer shell. Now I feel that I have walked through the fire of my fears, faced the agony and pain and grief; I have been ripped asunder, but all this was necessary, for only in facing what I fear, by facing the pain, can I grow and feel the sprout inside of me grow. It is being nurtured and tended to by God's Holy Spirit. I feel a warmth fill me and a light reaching into the darkest recesses of my soul. Everywhere I look, there is life and growth, beauty and joy.

The irony is that it has always been there; it was I who could not see, for I was blinded by my own fear, by pain over something that was over long ago. But God has been so patient, so kind, so gentle. He has provided me what I needed when I needed it, even when I was totally ignorant of my needs. I look back over my life and see the stepping stones—the people who have been there doing the Lord's work, and some not even aware of the impact they had on my life. God has lovingly protected me and gently guided each step of my journey. I praise God for his infinite wisdom, mercy, and love. I rejoice, for I have been washed clean, and this day is a new beginning on a journey which began long ago. Now there is new life within me, joy, and comfort.

Although I grieve the death of my children, I rejoice, for they are with the Lord. I rejoice, for I have been blessed and given the privilege to know that their souls live with the Creator. I have also been given the promise and the hope that we shall be reunited when my journey here on earth is completed.

Be not afraid. Go forward and find the same.