

The subject of abortion is one that is very emotive. Each one of us will have come here tonight with some strongly held beliefs about the morality of abortion. I have not come to engage in intellectual arguments about those beliefs, or with an agenda to change anyone's beliefs. I have come however to share a very personal story...one of pain, sorrow, confusion, healing and redemption. This is a story that I have kept hidden for years. In many ways hidden from myself as well as hidden from others, and the reason for keeping it hidden is that I believed my dark secret to be so sordid and evil that no-one could accept me or forgive me if I shared it. And by no-one I mean not just the church but God and myself also.

I have chosen to share my story now because through a series of God appointed events and circumstances my secret came to the surface, and through this I have reached a place of healing and a far deeper understanding of God's incredible grace, mercy and forgiveness.

My hope is that by sharing my own story, others like me who carry similar feelings of guilt and pain may realise there is "hope after abortion". I also hope that those of you who never face this experience yourselves but have contact with women who have had or may be considering an abortion will have a deeper understanding of the struggles the woman may be facing and be better equipped to support her in life affirming decisions.

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge those people in my life who have been impacted by my abortion. Whilst this is my story, I did not stand alone and know that my decision impacted and hurt others. I thank them now for the grace and support they have shown me as I have gone through this process of healing and reconciliation as I know that they too have wrestled with my decision, I also thank them for encouraging me to share as freely as I would like with others and in this public way.

Pause for prayer.

The 2005 statistics document that 1 in 4 pregnancies end in abortion. I have recently discovered that friends I have known for years, and known intimately have also had

abortions. But I have only become privy to this knowledge since I have shared my own experience with them. It seems to me that others felt like me that an abortion was a secret too dark and deep and personal to share. Therefore I need to acknowledge the likelihood of there being people in this congregation who have experienced abortion as very high.

Probably you will not be aware of anyone else's experience, but if you are one of those people who have faced abortion my story may trigger strong emotions within you. If this occurs please feel free to talk to myself, or one of the panel members after the service personally or if you wish to remain anonymous there are brochures available for Pregnancy Problem House and the Abortion Grief Counselling Association, each of these agencies offer counselling and a listening ear. Please feel free to take these brochures for yourself or a friend.

Statistics show that in 2003 there were almost 8000 abortions in WA alone. In the 5 ½ years between July 1998 and December 2003 there were 50,000 abortions in WA. Yet we rarely hear women talking about their experience. Our society claims that abortion is "a woman's choice" and that she should have freedom to decide about her own body, yet I have discovered that largely it is not a decision of choice, but rather one of desperation, fear and shame.

For me personally I was raised in a Christian home with supportive and caring parents. My parents were not overly strict but had strong moral and ethical values and clear boundaries. My father was in full time Ministry as the pastor of a church and as a child and teenager I had a very strong sense of God's presence and reality in my life. I had a strong sense of right and wrong (and was able to articulate this to others quite clearly at times) I also had a strong desire to serve God. I was writing and leading Sunday School classes by the age of 13 and by my 15th year was rounding up kids from school for Bible studies and prayer meetings.

At the age of 16 I began dating a boy I had known for 4 years and it was not long before the relationship progressed beyond what I knew to be safe. The week before my 17th

birthday and a couple of weeks before my TEE exams I found myself pregnant. I had very mixed emotions about the pregnancy. I can honestly say that my career goals as a teen had always been to get married and have children; I spent most of my spare time babysitting and carting babies around on my hips.

So here I was on the one hand in absolute awe and amazement that a life could be growing within me, but also filled with fear. Fear that I would bring shame upon my family, fear that I would be rejected for being an unwed mother, fear that I would not be able to support the child financially. I was also very ashamed that I had fallen pregnant, and knew that others would know by my pregnancy that I had been sexually active, and oddly enough this was one of the biggest issues for me at the time.

It is strange but with this pregnancy I knew the morning after I conceived that I was pregnant. I told my boyfriend that I believed myself to be pregnant and was laughed at. Yet 2 weeks later I did not get my periods and after waiting another 2 weeks went to the doctors to have my suspicions confirmed. All through out that 4 week waiting period I was excited by the prospect of becoming a mother and I immediately felt a bond with my forming child. My boyfriend on the other hand spent the 4 weeks panicking and telling me that we could not have the child. It was too early we were too young, we couldn't afford the child, he didn't have a job, it was impossible...

When we went to the doctors and were told we were pregnant the doctor asked if we wanted to proceed with the pregnancy or if we wanted a termination. He gave me the referral there and then and it seemed that as far as he and my boyfriend were concerned that was the end of the discussion.

We went from the doctor's surgery to my boyfriend's parent's home and told them that we were pregnant. Silently I hoped that they would offer some support and the possibility that we should live up to our responsibilities and raise the child, they however re affirmed the doctors comments and my boyfriends slant that we were foolish to even think about

keeping the child. There were “OPTIONS” such as abortion and we could have another child later, when the timing was right.

I then went home and told my parents...filled with shame and remorse. I informed them of my pregnancy and the decision to terminate. I believe that to me at that point in time I felt I had no other choice and no support, even though I did not want to take the option of termination. To my parents credit they listened to me and then attempted to offer alternative options, unfortunately for them and myself the first alternative they offered was adoption. My mum told me of a friend who had placed a child for adoption rather than have an abortion. This was too much for me.

Don't get me wrong, I think adoption is a good option, far better than taking the life of your own child...but I knew I could not carry a child to term and feel it kicking and moving with in me and then give it up. I knew that if I continued with the pregnancy I would keep the child and it seemed to my ears and my heart that even my parents were telling me this was not an option by suggesting adoption. Therefore in my mind the only 'CHOICE' I had, was, to terminate, before I became more attached to the child.

I have always had the ability to think and act very logically and practically, at this point in time I chose to use that ability for my self protection. Partially this was an informed choice, but I believe that innately this to be a coping mechanism of my mind to block out the emotions and experience far beyond what I thought possible. There was one close family friend of my boyfriend's parents who was about 10 years older than us. It was to her that I turned to express my confusion as she had recently had a child and I trusted her.

I remember sharing with her that I could laying on the floor face down with my hands under me resting on my stomach and could feel the small lump inside me. I shared with her my desire to bring this child to life and how hard the waiting to have the termination was. She told me of another friend of hers who had had a termination and who had experienced deep psychological problems because of her mixed emotions. She in her desire to help me told me that I would need to switch of the feelings and deal with this as

a cognitive/logical problem in order to survive. I believed her as I think I already knew the decision was affecting me and my understanding of who I was. Eugene Kennedy says that “Abortion is such a profound event in one’s life that the woman must either thoughtfully integrate it into her life or fearfully suppress it” At this point in time I chose suppression.

The appointment was made for the abortion and I switched off. I think I switched off all of my emotions, not just those related to my child. I refused to discuss the decision with anyone and told anyone who mentioned it that it was my choice and had nothing to do with them. I now know that my parents were deeply concerned for my wellbeing at this time and kept trying to help me to open up, but it was as if something within me had died when I made the decision to terminate.

On the day of the abortion my mum drove me to the clinic. There were well meaning people outside picketing with banners that abortion was wrong. My mum drove around the block hoping that this would be enough to stop me from going through with the abortion, but again I informed her it was my decision and those people out there had nothing to do with it...it was none of their business. In fact I felt angry at them for being there and felt that they were judging me. This just confirmed to me that I could not tell anyone about my experience as I must be a bad person to do something so bad that others picketed outside the clinic. I don’t think I was aware at the time of this thought but know it to be the truth of how I now thought about myself.

On entering the clinic I was offered ‘counselling’ which was required by law. All this meant was that a nurse asked me if this was my choice and if I had any questions. My only question...I believe a last ditch effort to act as a mother and protect my child was to ask if the procedure would hurt my baby. This question was ignored and I was informed that at such an early stage of 10 ½ weeks there was just a lump of cells and it would all be over soon. I didn’t really buy this but accepted it as it was the only way I could continue with the termination. I participated in the conspiracy of self deception that is common amongst women who have abortions.

Once the procedure was over I was taken home by my mum and never again mentioned the subject to anyone, not even my boyfriend, even though we ended up marrying one another and had a child to the marriage, the termination and our first baby was never mentioned. I closed down so effectively that it was as if I had forgotten the event. Yet my beliefs about myself had changed profoundly.

I now believed that I was a bad person, don't get me wrong I did all the right things, I acted responsibly and worried constantly that people would not like me or accept me. I became a people pleaser in many ways and whilst I looked like I was happy and together and okay, deep down I felt ashamed and soiled and rotten to the core.

Throughout my adult life this belief that I was bad stayed with me. Even as I grew in my relationship with God and entered into ministry situations I still held a belief that others could not possibly truly accept me if they knew who I really was, so I pretended to be okay and always wore a mask to hide myself from others. My relationship with God only went so deep as I didn't really think God could love me. Oh he could forgive everyone else for their sins, but mine were so big and so bad that I didn't think he could or even should want to forgive me or love me, so I just tried to do what was needed to be good in the hope that it was enough.

I continued to block out my abortion experience, I never spoke about it or thought about it. God however knew it was there even though I acted as if it wasn't. And because God is a God of grace and mercy he put circumstances in my path that brought my experience into the forefront of my mind.

Having told you I had my abortion at 17...it may surprise you to know that it is only in the last 3 years that I have experienced healing. I carried my secret for over 20 years. As part of my ministry at Bethesda I work with patients who have experienced pregnancy loss. In my first few months working there I spent time with a couple whose forming baby had miscarried at 15 weeks gestation. I asked the couple if they would like to spend

some time with their child and arranged this. I was absolutely oblivious to the impact this event would have upon me.

When I saw the forming baby and its perfection I was in awe, it was so beautiful, so perfectly created, everything was in proportion...and there was no denying that this was a small life that had been growing. I did not at this time relate the experience to my own, but kept finding myself thinking of this small foetus and its beauty, the image was engraved in my mind.

On another occasion I had the experience of working with another pregnancy loss patient who had previously had an abortion; she questioned whether her inability to carry a child to term was a punishment of God upon her for taking the life of her child. As we worked through the issues her miscarriage raised and considered God as a God of love and mercy I began to remember my own experience.

At first it came in snippets that I shared with my spiritual director and my parents, until the pictures became more vivid and the memory more real. I began to feel the emotions attached to the pregnancy, the fear, the excitement, the grief and the loss. I also began to realise that in my mind the child I had aborted was a girl, and I began to think of that child not as a blob or foetus but as my baby. It was quite overwhelming.

I became aware that there was a very deep part of me that did not want God's forgiveness, and did not want to stop blaming myself or judging myself. It is hard to explain but it was as if I felt I had no right to grieve the loss of this child as I was the one who took her life. Therefore the only tangible link I could allow myself to have with her was one of punishment, as if by holding myself in a place of contempt I somehow gave some credence to her life. It was the only tribute I allowed myself to have and I felt that if I punished myself enough or hated myself enough she might know that she was important to me. I now know from research that many post abortive women feel the same... that "physical and emotional pain are the only fitting tributes which can be made for a life denied".

Gradually I was able to bring these emotions and memories before God. I knew at one level of my being that God already knew my sin, yet I had never really acknowledged this to myself or before him. At one point in time I was sharing with a fellow minister about the way that I viewed myself based upon my decision to abort and he helped me to consider the character traits I had and how they had been engaged in the decision making process. By doing this I was able to see that whilst I had made a wrong choice, one that I continue to regret, the making of that choice was actually true to who I was, whilst I had always considered that I had gone against who I was and denied myself. I need to unpack this a bit to help you make sense of what I am saying.

I believed and continue to believe in the sanctity of life. I also have a very strong sense of loyalty and care for others. Relationships are important to me and I did not want to break relationship or bring shame or difficulty to others. It was these traits that led me to determine the need to terminate. Whilst I can see these traits as good traits I can also see how they were used against me in this decision. My experience is not that uncommon. Many women make the decision to abort based upon pleasing others; it is not a decision of choice but more an act of despair.

Largely we do not make decisions because we are selfish, but often the opposite, or we make the decision due to a feeling that there is a lack of support or resources to enable us to make another choice. Many feel forced by circumstances to violate their own conscious for the sake of the 'other good' and we then learn not to trust our own judgment or to believe that our opinions have any worth.

Yes I could say I was coerced, yes I was vulnerable and young and did not have the strength to declare what I wanted or what I believed to be true and right, but despite that I also needed to accept the responsibility that was mine in the decision making and forgive both myself and the others involved. If all I did was justify my behaviour based on my new knowledge I would not be better off, I would actually just be in another place of denial.

As I began to read more on the subject of abortion grief and began to pray through my thoughts, feelings and memories I became more and more aware of God's grace. Not just to me but also to my baby. As I read my Bible I continued to be struck by passages I had previously read that suddenly seemed to relate to this situation and God's incredible love for me and the power of forgiveness.

One day as I was praying I realised I needed to name my daughter, and so I called her Casey, the name I had chosen in the first few days of my pregnancy should I have a daughter. I then specifically asked God to forgive me for taking her life. As I was crying in my living room I became aware that I also wanted to ask Casey for forgiveness, and so in prayer before the Lord I asked for her forgiveness and the most amazing thing happened. It was as if I felt and knew that she was with the Lord, and as if she told me that she was okay. I did not hear voices or see anything it was more an inner knowing that it was okay. Okay for her as well as okay for me with God and myself. It was as if in this instance I finally reached a place where I could forgive myself and allow myself to grieve the loss of my child, the loss of my innocence, and in many ways the loss of who I was before the abortion, as well as accept who I am now.

It is only when I was honest with myself and God about my sin, which he already knew, that I was able to give myself permission to grieve and to be forgiven. I no longer have to carry the burden of guilt and secrecy as I know that I am forgiven, I know that I am loved by God regardless of what I have done or will do, and so is my child. I have not committed the unforgivable sin, the hopelessness and aloneness that I felt could only be healed by God's love, mercy and forgiveness. I would never have been able to heal myself. In this honesty I am also free to remember the child I conceived with love and recall the moments of her life that I shared.

I recognise that many women who have abortions may not have had moments of joy and anticipation, their stories will be different to mine, but I also know that God's love for the woman and for her child is unfailing. No matter what emotions the woman may have

experienced and what the circumstances surrounding an abortion God is able and willing to forgive and heal the pain, grief and guilt...but only if we let him. We only have to look at the Gospel accounts of the Prodigal son, the woman caught in adultery or the Samaritan woman at the well to realise that God's mercy, forgiveness and love goes beyond what we imagine or even hope for.

I also want to acknowledge before I finish that there may be men here who have participated in the decision to abort. You too may have similar emotions and thoughts to those I have described. You are a parent to that unborn child and you can receive God's healing and forgiveness for the part that you played in the decision. If you are a man who knows that a woman you were with aborted against your will or without your knowledge you may also feel anger, this too is open to God's healing as you forgive the woman and grieve your loss.

Psalm 32:1-7 says ¹ Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ² Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ³ While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. ⁶ Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. ⁷ You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

Oh what an amazing gift to recognise our sinfulness as an opportunity to re-establish and strengthen our relationship with God out of a bond of love rather than hiding from him for fear of punishment.

BLESSING TO CLOSE:

Blessing and laughter, tears and loving be yours,
The love of a great God prepared to be vulnerable:
Who names you and holds you
While the earth turns, the years pass and the seasons flow.
Who gathers the dead seeds of your past,
And provides a resurrection soil.
Continue to fall in love with living,
Wrestling with the chaos and pain within yourself and within the world.
Join the celebration of life, dancing with the angels and the clowns...
And may the God of peace and joy who is continually making all things new,
Embrace you as a partner in announcing the kingdom of God
Within you and within your world. Amen

COUNSELLING AGENCIES MENTIONED:

Pregnancy Problem House: 342 Wanneroo Road. Nollamara. 9344 8110 or 9344 8337

Abortion Grief Counselling Association: Administration 9313 1784
Counselling 9450 6091

BOOK RESOURCES:

2000. Giving Sorrow Words. Melinda Tankard Reist. Duffy & Snellgrove. Sydney.

2002. Forbidden Grief: the unspoken pain of abortion. Theresa Burke with David
.Reardon. Acorn Books. Ill.

Both can be purchased from:
Respect Life Office. 45 Wellington Road. Morley. 9375 2029.