



Promoting Post-Abortion Spiritual Health

by Rev. Rebecca Turner

I offer this paper from my own reflections gained from ten years' experience in pastoral counseling with women before and after abortions. I cannot claim any scientific research to prove these reflections and realize that my experiences and my perceptions of those experiences may not be universally valid. Nevertheless, I think my careful observation and evaluation of my experiences have provided some insight that may be helpful to others in beginning an important dialogue about post-abortion spiritual health.

If we are to offer suggestions for promoting post-abortion spiritual health, we must first come to some understanding of what we mean by "spiritual health." Measuring spiritual health is open to wide interpretation depending on one's theology and religious tradition. I know of no instrument that we can use to measure spiritual health. We can assume that every individual possesses differing degrees of spiritual health, and may exhibit behaviors that are both spiritually healthy and unhealthy. Spiritual health may look very similar to mental health, the only significant difference being the religious language that is used to interpret the behaviors and feelings.

For our purposes, I will define spiritual health as a condition evidenced by the presence of several of these characteristics:

1. sense of inner peace
2. finding comfort and/or strength in one's spiritual beliefs and values
3. a belief in divine or perpetual goodness
4. a belief in one's own worth and/or goodness
5. ability to receive and offer love and care
6. strong connection to people
7. sense of place or purpose in the world
8. ability to forgive self and others
9. hopefulness in the future
10. sense of some control over one's own life

And conversely, a lack of spiritual health may be evidenced by the presence of several of these characteristics:

1. persistent fear
2. excessive guilt
3. addictions
4. inner turmoil
5. sense of hopelessness
6. frequent conflict with others
7. victimization of self and/or others
8. judgmental, punishing, and/or harsh behavior toward self and/or others
9. needing constant approval from outside one's self
10. excessive anger
11. sense of worthlessness
12. rigidity
13. And perhaps most significantly, the tendency to justify any of the above negative behaviors with religious teaching or values

Our desire, then, is that a woman who has an abortion will soon be exhibiting behaviors from the first list. What influences whether a woman will be spiritually healthy following an abortion, or whether she will experience guilt, fear, anger, and a need for punishment?

Spiritual Understanding Before Abortion

The greatest indicator of a woman's post-abortion spiritual health is her spiritual understanding before the abortion.

- Does she view God as a loving and caring presence who will be by her side throughout trouble? Or is God a harsh judge who stands over her, ready to punish?
- Does she see the pregnancy as an accident of nature or a test from God?
- Does her religious community offer support and understanding or rigid laws that she must follow?
- How did her family describe God to her when she was very young? Was God the invisible presence that would catch her in her secret acts of disobedience?
- Does she describe her parents as nurturing and forgiving, or were they strict disciplinarians that withheld their affection? (The view of God will likely mimic the view of parents.)
- In her religious community, is abortion described as "murder" or "sin"? Does she know anyone else in her family or religious community who had an abortion? What have they told her?
- What spiritual value does she attach to her sexual life? Does she think God punishes sexual behavior?

Even when a woman thinks that she has left behind the religion of her childhood, she is often surprised to hear those voices return to her head when she is under the stress of an unplanned pregnancy. She may even think the pregnancy is a punishment from God for leaving her faith behind.

If a woman is not spiritually healthy prior to an abortion, she is at very high risk for spiritual conflict following the procedure. This is even truer if her normal support system of family and friends articulate strong religious values that condemn abortion.

However, with the right spiritual support, an unwanted pregnancy and an abortion can provide a unique opportunity for a woman to take charge of her life and come to more mature understandings of the nature of God and God's role in her life. This is most likely to be successful if the woman does not exhibit much dependence upon authority figures in her life, and if spiritual support is ongoing rather than episodic.

Religion can promote guilt or health

Religious teaching has been used over the centuries to comfort, control, strengthen, admonish, improve, and destroy. It has been used to justify pacifism and war, tolerance and racism, cooperation and domination. Religion in itself is neither good nor evil, neither constructive nor destructive.

There are religious leaders who want women to feel guilty throughout their entire lives. They would have women feel guilty about growing breasts, menstruating, wearing lipstick and fitted clothing, and enjoying sex. They want women to live in shame and to hide their sexuality. They paint a picture of woman as the temptress and the whore, and not one worthy of God's compassion. Women in these religious communities have little say in the internal workings of the community, and may not have learned to express their own opinions. Those who have heard these teachings their entire lives will likely experience extreme anguish over any sexual relationship that results in an unwanted pregnancy. Their consideration of abortion will likely be accompanied by intense feelings of guilt and worthlessness. It is important to note that these feelings were present pre-pregnancy; they are exacerbated by the pregnancy. These feelings can't be easily overcome by the usual pre-abortion counseling.

But there are also religious leaders who take women seriously and who want women to be happy and healthy and to gain strength rather than guilt from their religion. Many women have never known such clergy, and when introduced for the first time, they express disbelief, surprise, relief, and hope. It is profoundly important to help women connect with these clergy.

Is An Abortion Clinic a Place of Prayer?

For women who have no experience with such clergy, the beginning of spiritual health might begin in the abortion clinic. This is a radical concept for many clinic staff.

The unwanted or problem pregnancy is first and foremost a spiritual crisis. While clinic staff may view it as a medical problem, the woman does not. It is a spiritual crisis because she connects the pregnancy with God's purpose for her in the world, her morality, her ability to create a future, her satisfaction with her life circumstances, her beliefs about life and death. If we are to be successful in helping women achieve post-abortion spiritual health, spiritual nurture must be provided in the clinic.

Various ideas have been suggested:

- Create a sacred space, a quiet room, a chapel. Some small quiet space where a patient or her family members might go for a few moments' reflection or prayer. A book of multi-faith prayers might be available. Words of encouragement might be painted on the walls. A candle or incense might be burning. Quiet music could be playing and a fountain could be flowing. Comfortable chairs and pillows on the floor help to calm anxiety.
- A chaplain could be on duty to talk to patients or family members.
- Counseling might include handing a prayer card to those who want to receive it.

- Counseling might include giving the patient a list of “safe” clergy to call in the area.
- What if the patient asks to pray? Respond “I’m so glad you feel comfortable praying in our clinic. What would you like to pray for?” If the patient expects the counselor to do the praying, consider a compliment! Even if she isn’t particularly religious, this is her opportunity to help the patient imagine a better future.
- Just giving her a chance to voice her concerns about her spiritual life is enormously helpful.

Post-Abortion Feelings

In the days immediately following an abortion, a woman may experience dramatic shifts in her emotions. She may feel relief, joy, sadness, shame, freedom, and fear all at once or within a short time span. She may be quite confused by the conflicting emotions. Some of this can be attributed to pregnancy hormones, but she may interpret it as regret or even as God trying to tell her something. It is very important that a woman have a number of trusted people to whom she can turn during these days. Helping her identify these people before the abortion is critical. She needs to know there are friends, family, and/or clergy who do not judge her, who will listen to her feelings without interpreting them, and who will give her encouragement to plan her future.

If she does not have this system of support and instead shares the abortion with no one, she is likely to view the event as a dirty secret. Such secrets increase one’s sense of shame and worthlessness. Spiritual health cannot be achieved when a woman is afraid to share her secret and lets it fester for years.

Women sometimes call a clinic many years after their abortions. They may only ask to have their medical records sent, but we should once again assume that the real question is spiritual and not medical. Perhaps their daughter is now pregnant, or they lost a child in an accident. Perhaps they’ve been attending a fundamentalist church, or they just learned they have cancer. They are looking for answers that may not be found on the ultrasound or in the medical record. Because the abortion was a major event in her life, it may easily come to her mind when life poses the question “why?” This is another opportunity to help women toward spiritual health. We can train our staff to say “Some of the women who ask for their medical records really have other kinds of questions. Is that true for you? Would you like to speak to a counselor or a clergy person?”

Women often ask if God will ever forgive them. An older woman, confessing her long-held secret, may renew this question as she considers her own mortality. It is a tough question for those of us who do not view an abortion as sin, and therefore not requiring forgiveness. I have come to respond in this way: “I believe that God is always forgiving, and that there is nothing you can do to separate yourself from the love of God. I believe that God knows that you have done the best you could with your choices, and that God is always ready to welcome you with open arms. I believe that God was loving you and watching over you every day of your life, including the day that you had an abortion. Now, isn’t the real problem that you haven’t forgiven yourself?”

Spiritual health, like mental health and physical health, fluctuates over the years and is impacted by the changing circumstances of our lives. If our desire is to see women achieve post-abortion spiritual health, we must understand that to be a long-term goal highlighted by ups and downs, and we can view every spiritual question as an opportunity to help women face the difficulties of their lives with grace and strength.

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