

# *Ribbon of Redemption*

*True Stories Offering Hope and Healing  
After Abortion*

**Jenny A. Farrell**

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Published in the United States by  
*Testimonies of Hope Publishing*  
PO Box 3951, Rock Island, IL 61204

Library of Congress Cataloging-in Publication Data

ISBN- 13: 978-0-692-76359-9  
ISBN- 10: 0-692-76359-7

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## *Introduction*

### **How long will it hurt?**

I have written *Ribbon of Redemption* for two reasons. The first is to extend hope. If you are suffering from an abortion, or if someone you love is struggling with a past abortion, I want you to know healing is available. As you read these intimate accounts, remember these are people just like yourself. At one point, they were filled with despair and hopelessness, yet now, they continue to discover new levels of healing and freedom.

Following each story, you will find a *Ribbon Reflection* and a *Going Deeper* section. These are designed to help you reflect on an aspect of that person's journey. Then go deeper, by seeing how their story might give insight into your own situation. This works in a small group setting as well as for individuals.

### **So why should I care?**

I also wrote *Ribbon of Redemption* because abortion impacts every single person on the planet. Each day, we rub shoulders with people deeply affected by abortion. People just like you, who out of desperation took the "cure" offered. But instead of finding the relief they sought, their lives have been forever altered. For many, although their pregnancy ended, untold pain, grief, and shame took its place.

Prior to becoming a nurse at a life-affirming pregnancy center, abortion was simply a word. I was one of those people who held an opinion, yet hadn't truly delved into *why* I believed what I believed.

Now that I've been performing limited ultrasounds for the past ten years, these little lives have touched me deeply. Seeing a baby's heart beating as early as four weeks from conception demonstrates both to my patients and to me that this is indeed a *life*.

So what qualifies me to write this book? I have not personally experienced an abortion, yet after listening to hundreds of men and women scarred by abortion, I can no longer remain silent. I am a storyteller, and these brave men and women's stories deserve to be told.

Every year, we mourn the loss of nearly 3,000 American lives that were cut short on September 11, 2001. And so we should. But did you know that in the U.S. alone, there are over 3,000 babies aborted *every single day*? Or that 21% of all pregnancies in the U.S., excluding miscarriages, end in abortion? According to the Guttmacher Institute, since the Roe vs. Wade decision in 1973, there have been an estimated 58 million abortions.

As you read these accounts of lives nearly destroyed, and the ripple effect that a *single* abortion has had on them and the ones they love, how could

we ever begin to estimate the damage done to our nation by *58 million* abortions, and counting?

I chose the title *Ribbon of Redemption* because I believe each journey demonstrates how God can reach into the mess of our lives and transform it. Only He can take our tangled threads and weave something truly beautiful, even from the darkest strands.

My prayer is that you will be deeply touched, as I have been, by these journeys from tormented lives, to lives that have been redeemed. It's time for us to stop pointing fingers of blame and to start becoming part of the solution.

Together, we can make a difference, and demonstrate the love of Christ to a hurting world.

*~Jenny*

# *Mary's Story*

Nothing about the day was right. It was beautiful, but that in itself was a betrayal. How could the sun be so calloused as to show its face on a day such as this?

Instead, the traitorous sky was a deep, azure blue. Trees edging the clearing were dressed in every shade of red, yellow and orange; the sunlight filtering through the collage of leaves like a beautiful patchwork of stained glass. The brilliant colors shone in sharp contrast with the black worn by those in attendance.

I couldn't look again. I knew better. Maybe if I just avoided the jarring image, I could still get through this. At least with my sunglasses firmly in place, no one could tell where my eyes were focused.

The man at the front was speaking words of comfort, reading from the book of Psalms, holding out hope. Still, when a heart is breaking, it takes time to heal.

Tears were expected on a day like today. But what if I lost control? I wasn't even part of the family.

How many years had it been since I broke down? Even cried just a little? I had become adept at keeping tears at bay, and this would not be the place to break my resolve. That would be far too great a risk.

*Do what you do best, Mary. Take a deep breath and pull yourself together.*

That's when I made my fatal mistake. Eyes betraying me, I looked up toward the front, hearing the cries of the young girl. Why had they put her right in front of the box? Such a glossy, pearlescent white, with pretty silver accents. But knowing what the small rectangle contained made admiration for the workmanship impossible.

The pastor's voice finally stopped, and one by one the people filed up to the front. Some paused to gaze at the box once more, others hugged the young woman, gently leading her away.

At last, everyone was gone except the midwife, the grave digger, and myself. Staring at the tiny coffin, hovering over the gaping trench in the earth, I watched the midwife scoop up precious soil for the mother and put it in a jar—a remembrance of the brief life of her baby.

Why on earth had I agreed to give her a ride? Turning quickly away from the sad scene, it was as though I were truly taking in the rest of the cemetery for the first time. Wherever my glance rested, there were little markers dotting the earth; so many countless other tragedies on display.

The pressure was building inside my chest. Unable to catch a full breath, lava-like



tears burned behind my eyelids, desperate for escape. Somehow, not one spilled over.

Now, when finally free to escape, I found myself rooted to the ground, unable to move. Stomach clenching tightly, my body trembled. Finally, I lifted my eyes up toward the heavens, crying out inside my heart:

*God, what am I doing here?*

## *Abandoned*

For years I wondered why my life had been spared—not once, but twice. From the moment I was born, life was a struggle. With weak, under-developed lungs, my first year was spent more in the hospital than out of it. My health became so precarious the doctor said unless I was moved to a warm, dry climate, I would never survive another Midwest winter.

My parents resisted at first, especially my mother. But after my doctor offered to pay our family's way, they finally agreed.

The day we began our train journey I was ill. Mother thought that if she waited for me to get well the day might never come. So with me in her arms and my two other brothers following close behind her, we boarded the train.

We had been on the train for many miles before the conductor discovered I was a very sick baby. Quickly, he found a physician on the train who took one look at me and whisked me away.

Mother said I was gone a while before the doctor returned. His news wasn't good. I was burning up with fever. Despite packing my body in ice, my temperature had soared to 106°, and I was convulsing. The doctor insisted Mother needed to get me to a hospital right away, or I would die.

But Mother refused to leave the train. She was completely overwhelmed. She only knew one thing; she had to get to my father as soon as possible. Besides, with very limited resources and not knowing a soul in the area, how would she be able to get me the help I needed?

So the doctor took charge and arranged for an ambulance to meet the train. They would transport me, my mother and brothers, to the nearest hospital in Tucson, Arizona. It was my only hope.

When the ambulance arrived, the attendants quickly assessed the situation and refused to take us. Our shabby clothing told them all they needed to know. *Who's going to pay for this? We're not running a charity!*

But once again, a physician fought to save my life. He insisted they would indeed take me with all haste to the hospital. He handed them money for the journey, with the promise of additional funds once he received word I had arrived safely. He also provided his private billing information, authorizing the hospital to do whatever they

could for me at his expense.

What doctor would do such a thing? When I was older the Biblical story of the Good Samaritan became one of my favorites. It appeared that for some unknown reason, God very much wanted me to live.

~

The minute the ambulance made it to the hospital I was whisked to critical care with little hope offered. For two days my life hung in the balance, while Mother and the boys slept in chairs in the cramped waiting room.

Once Daddy finally arrived, the head doctor met with my parents. He was quite blunt. He suggested my family should leave me. Nothing could be done but to keep me comfortable. It was uncertain how long I would linger, but they assured my parents I would not survive. What should they do? For the betterment of the family, they got back on the train and headed to Phoenix.

On one level my rational mind could understand how my parents made such a drastic choice. My heart reacts differently. How does a parent leave their dying child? How does a mother walk away? In my mind's eye, I see a tiny baby girl on a bed too large for her. Big people are all around, poking and prodding. But she cries because the faces are unfamiliar.

All I knew was I had been left behind.

A week later, they received a startling phone call. Expecting to hear I had died, my parents learned I had made it through the worst of it and was steadily improving. Two weeks later my family once again boarded a train to Phoenix. This time, I was with them.

~

The constant Arizona sunshine and lack of humidity proved to be a wonderful combination for me. Just as a healthy plant thrives on sunlight, apparently so did I. With fresh air and daily doses of sunshine, I was soon running around like any other active toddler.

We remained in Arizona for ten years. During that time Mother gave birth to three more sons. With six children to feed, money was tight. Daddy worked hard but could not adequately provide for us. Abandoned by his family for choosing a wife outside the Amish community, he was shunned. Coupled with having a limited education, Dad had a difficult time securing a good job. To make ends meet, Mom went to work

as a certified nurse's aide.

The appearance of faith was important, or maybe it was something we just did. During the early years, we all attended church together. Somehow, though, the message of love and belonging never seemed to penetrate our lives. Resentment colored my mother's world and consequently mine as well.

At the time, I didn't understand all Mom gave up when we moved to Arizona. Other than her husband and children, she left everything that was familiar. Some people can adapt to such a drastic change, but my mother wasn't one of them. For her, it was crippling.

Mom's resentment echoed through every aspect of my life. I craved her approval, but when things got difficult Mom would throw my illness in my face. *If you weren't so sickly, we wouldn't have needed to come here in the first place!* I heard those words over and over. They cut deep, creating a wound that would fester for years.

## *Approval*

When I was in the sixth grade, we returned to Illinois. I struggled with respiratory infections, but thankfully, I rarely missed school. By the time I was in eighth grade, I had nearly outgrown my tendency towards pneumonia. I was stronger.

Having five brothers predisposed me to be a tomboy. Despite my health issues, I had always been a determined little girl. I was just as good as anyone else, including boys. Maybe even better. Thankfully, my brothers never babied me, and through the years I was always included in the baseball and football games which were played on a daily basis.

Sports was something I both loved and excelled in. When deciding on a career, it made sense to pursue a degree in education, with the goal of becoming a high school coach.

Mom was pleased since it was very important to her that we all go to college and have careers. She struggled with my father's lack of even a high school diploma, and his consequent inability to earn a good wage. She wanted more for her children.

The first year I was at the university my maternal grandmother died quite suddenly of a massive stroke. I could hardly believe it. For the first time, I had to deal with the loss of someone who was very precious to me. Grandma had loved me unconditionally. I had never even considered the world without her in it. It was as though an earthquake had hit our family, and I was left surrounded by rubble.

If Grandma's death was traumatic for the rest of us, it affected Mom far more. She struggled during the next couple of years, spending more and more time working at the hospital.

I lived in the dorms at college but came home on the occasional weekend. I began noticing Mom becoming increasingly more irritable with Dad, but I chalked it up to Grandmother's death. Still, her resentment was quite obvious.

Why couldn't she see how exhausted he was, trying to meet the needs of our family? He worked extremely hard at the local steel mill. It wasn't easy. Nearly every night his arms were burned from carrying the hot, galvanized steel. He spent numerous hours of overtime at the Mill, to ensure all his children attended college. I tried to encourage Mom to go easy on Dad. But it was obvious the toll it was taking on my father.

~

In my final year of college, I met Tom. He was a wonderful guy—there was just

something about him that drew me in. But I couldn't afford to be distracted. I was just finishing my student teaching, as well as handling my heavy academic load. I had to stay focused.

Still, Tom was persistent, making his interest clear. He contented himself with the occasional phone call, eventually letting me know he was willing to wait for me as long as it took. Occasionally, after a long day, I would return to the dorm to find a beautiful bouquet of flowers waiting for me. Tom was definitely making points.

When graduation day arrived, Tom was there along with my family. Everyone liked him and got along well, even if my brothers enjoyed giving him a hard time. It was all in good fun. What a perfect day to have the people I most cared about there to celebrate my achievement. I had a substitute teaching position in town that would begin in a couple of months so I would be living back home for the year. In the meantime, Tom and I began to make the most of our time together.

~

One day I came home from teaching and found Mom and Dad fighting. When I asked what was going on, Mom informed me she was filing for divorce.

At first, I was sure she was kidding, even if it was a terrible joke. But I saw the set of her jaw and the narrowing of her eyes. She was absolutely serious. The shock was like someone had punched me in the gut. What in the world was going on?

Daddy walked out of the room, a look of defeat on his face. I tried to talk some sense into Mom, but she was determined. She claimed she had never really loved Dad—It was time for *her* to be happy.

The boxing match continued, and I was about to get knocked out. I didn't see it coming. She told me she'd been having an affair with a woman from work for some time. The woman also planned to file for divorce, and they intended to move in together to start a new life.

In a single moment, the axis of my world suddenly tilted, and everything I held dear began sliding at a rapid pace towards the cliff of uncertainty. I shook my head, trying to clear it. This couldn't be happening.

What about my father? He had walked away from his family and his Amish roots to spend his life with my mother. Now, she was walking out on him, making a mockery of their life together and of his love.

Then in the midst of the divorce, the other woman's husband stepped in, putting an

end to the relationship and cutting off all contact between them. Mom had already filed for divorce and had said things that could never be taken back. She continued with the divorce proceedings, but instead of moving out she remained under the same roof as my father. Talk about confusing.

I stood by helplessly, watching my dad close himself off. It was obvious he was in pain, but I didn't know how to reach him. I knew he was incapable of navigating such treacherous waters, but so was I. My siblings were suffering too, but I didn't know what to do for them.

My mother became quite depressed. With all her plans falling apart, she withdrew from everyone. I came home from work one day and found her on the floor unresponsive. Having swallowed a bottle of pills, she needed her stomach pumped. What was I to do? I couldn't be with her night and day, nor did I want to. I was angry for all she was putting my father through.

My heart was filled with gratitude for Tom during that time. He was my rock of reason when nothing else made sense. He turned out to be very caring and instinctively knew what I needed, even when I had no clue. We were falling in love. Lonely and confused, seeking solace, I turned to Tom for comfort, and for the first time we became intimate.

Mom made another suicide attempt, only this time she very nearly succeeded. According to the attending doctor at the ER it was a miracle that she had survived. She voluntarily committed herself to an inpatient mental health facility. Once she was released, I could see it had made a difference. She seemed more at peace with herself.

Growing up, Mom had always been reticent to share details about her past. But one day, out of the blue, she revealed she was the product of an affair. Later, her mother had married her stepfather, and the fact that Mom was not his child became common knowledge. Despite being the oldest sibling, she was treated like an outcast by her brothers and sisters. Far worse, her stepfather had repeatedly beaten and molested her for years.

Hearing her story made me want to empathize with her. What a terrible thing to have endured. No wonder she was so broken.

But how did I offer grace when my own heart was so bitter? Her attempt to gain my sympathy fell short. The way my mother had treated Dad was inexcusable, and resentment, even rage, had been building for months. She may have wanted compassion for her difficult life, but that was something I did not have to give.

## *A Choice*

Then, I got a real break. One of the high schools where I had once substituted called, offering a full-time, permanent position. Not only would I teach Health and Physical Education, but I would also be the women's head varsity coach. Quickly agreeing, I did a happy dance. Things were looking up.

~

The next day I realized I had not had a period in two months. I'd been so busy with all that was happening I simply hadn't been paying attention. How could I have been so stupid? Suddenly, my physical symptoms added up. I was pregnant.

No! This had to be a mistake. Not like this. Not now, when everything I'd worked so hard for was about to come true. A baby would be impossible at this point in my life.

I wasn't sure how Dad would react to the news, but there was no question in my mind what Mom would say. How many times had I heard her ridicule single women whose babies she cared for at the nursery? *They should have just aborted! The baby doesn't even have a chance at a real life.*

Tom was in shock when he heard the news. Raised in a very conservative home, he knew his parents would see a pregnancy outside of marriage as almost unforgivable. Even if we got married right away, the math wouldn't have added up.

After going back and forth for a while, Tom got the number of an abortion clinic, and with my full agreement, made an appointment for later that week.

The clinic looked like a storefront, but without the presence of other businesses. Chairs lined the room, filled with women and a handful of men. Tom was sent on an errand to purchase supplies for the ride home.

When my name was called to officially check in, they wanted immediate payment in full. I felt so foolish. Why didn't I think to ask Tom for the money before he left? There was zero negotiating—full payment had to be received immediately in order to secure my appointment. Since there was no way to reach Tom, I was informed I would now have to be the last case of the day.



The waiting was difficult. I had brought nothing to read or do. Nothing to distract myself from the thoughts of what lay ahead. The silence was deafening. Even though the room was packed, not an idle word was spoken. The only sound that occasionally shattered the stillness was when the next woman was called back. The noise caused all eyes to turn, watching as she followed the worker back.

When Tom returned, he immediately apologized for not thinking about leaving the cash. For hours, the two of us sat waiting in the unnatural stillness.

Finally, my name was called, but I wished it was for anything else than to have an abortion. I didn't *want* an abortion. It just seemed the only possible answer to an impossible situation. A door I thought I had to walk through.

Without preamble, I was taken straight to a surgical room and told to remove my clothing. There was no explanation of the procedure nor any time allowed for questions. I was instructed to lay on the table and to cover up with the sheet provided. That was the extent of my preparation for what was to come.

When the abortionist walked in, he sat down without saying a word. There was the sound of clanging metal, then a horrendous pain sliced through me, as though all of my insides were being ripped from my body. I wasn't given any anesthesia or pain medicine. I tried to distract myself; to focus on the nurse beside me. But there was no way to block out the sensations overwhelming every cell in my body.

Lifting my head, I craned my neck trying to see what could be causing such horrific pain. I saw the glint of surgical steel and watched it disappear beneath the sheet. The pain was beyond anything I could have ever imagined. I never dreamt the procedure would feel as though I were being raped by metal instruments. It seemed to go on forever.

Finally, it was over. As I got off the table, I had the oddest sensation of being disconnected from my body—as though I wasn't even sure how to operate it.

Led to a room full of army cots, I was told to lie down and be still. Several other women were there, but once again, an eerie silence permeated the area, except for an occasional sound of whimpering.

Eventually, a woman in scrubs came over and asked if I was "okay." Once I nodded, that was it. I got up on shaky legs and walked out. No instructions. Nothing as to what to expect, or what would be considered an emergency.

The drive back with Tom continued in silence. Neither of us referred to the abortion. We acted like nothing unusual had happened. He dropped me off at my house and

continued to his place. Each of us acting oblivious of what had just happened.

After that, I tried to resume life as though nothing had changed. But when I was alone, I couldn't deny that something was very wrong. It felt as though I had just been sexually assaulted, only worse. The memory of both the physical and emotional pain never left me. Somehow, I wasn't able to put the two traumas together; it was as if they existed on two separate planes.

Part of me longed to tell someone. But who? Mom was wrapped up in her haze of pain. Was she even capable of understanding how traumatic it had all been? Who else could I trust with something this painful? This shameful?

It would be years before I told another soul.

## *Achieve*

Attempting to move on with my life, I behaved as though nothing had happened. No matter how hard I tried, the abortion was never far from my mind. There was a pervasive sense that something was desperately wrong, though exactly what was unclear. But there was no going back. What was done was done, and somehow, I had to move on.

~

I started my new teaching position in a small community an hour from my hometown. I was kept incredibly busy, which was a good thing. I truly enjoyed my new job, yet it seemed like somehow my “mute button” was on. Laughter and excitement were a rare thing. Still, I loved interacting with the young women and watching them grow.

Tom and I continued to see each other as often as we could, and the following year I moved closer to home. A few months later we were married.

My first two pregnancies ended in an early miscarriage. I remember almost nothing about either one. I never cried a single tear. It was as though I were frozen.

I couldn't allow myself to feel the loss, let alone mourn for my babies. If I started, I might never be able to stop. I was numb, as though the anesthesia I

had never received during my abortion was somehow administered to my emotions instead.

There was also a secret fear that I kept completely hidden: What if I was like Mom? What if I totally lost my mind?

After accepting a full-time position at the local Catholic high school, I found myself immediately drawn to Sister Mary. Something about her demeanor told me I could trust her with anything.

Several months later, I finally found the courage to let my guard down. I told Sister Mary, who listened intently to my story without interruption. Sensing no judgment, that alone brought a level of healing to my soul.

Although I had given my heart to God when I was young, after the abortion it was as though a distance sprang up between us. On one level, I believed God had forgiven me the moment I had repented. I knew He would never abandon me.

But how could I truly accept that forgiveness? Even more, how could I ever forgive myself? I had grievously sinned when I sacrificed the life of my child, and I had erected a wall with the stones of shame, guilt, and fear. A wall so thick and so tall that it seemed to shut out God's love and light.

God never left me. But the wall I had believed would

serve as my protection, limited my ability to access His love and forgiveness fully.

~

Tom and I were delighted when I delivered a baby boy later that year. We named him Jeremiah. He was such a precious little guy, and we both loved him dearly. At times I would be seized with an irrational fear that something terrible would happen to him, but I pushed it down. I was an expert at doing that. Out of sight, out of mind.

After four years, I accepted another teaching position in a neighboring town. I still needed much healing, but I would always be grateful for Sister Mary's love and grace in my life.

~

Jeremiah was three months old when I began my new job as the Physical Education Director and the coach of women's volleyball and track. I remained at the school for several years and loved it. In addition to my regular duties, I always seemed to end up listening to a student who was going through a difficult time. It was my way of giving to them what I had once longed for as a teenager.

After a few years, I was approached with an offer of a new position as Director of Student Activities. I never thought of myself as a counselor, but the idea intrigued me. However, to officially meet with students in a way I had already be doing for years, I would need to get my master's in counseling. It was a huge decision. With both full-time work and full-time school, who would care for Jeremiah?

After praying, Tom and I agreed this was what the Lord had planned for me. My husband did the lion share of caring for our son, while I spent hours poring over books as well as working one on one with the students. It was exhausting, but I loved every minute of it.

## *Redemption*

Several years later, as a high school counselor, I had been helping a teenage girl, named Beth, through an unplanned pregnancy. A few weeks from her due date Beth experienced complications. After hours of labor she delivered a beautiful little girl, who never took her first breath.

Later that day, the whole school knew about the tragedy. Almost immediately it was as though everyone went into mourning. Teachers and students alike were experiencing much sadness and confusion. I was grateful Beth had a good support system around her, but knew I needed to attend the funeral to show that I deeply cared.

A few days later, as I entered the sanctuary, my eyes were riveted to a tiny white casket up at the front of the room. Such a glossy, pearlescent white, with intricate silver accents. But the lid was closed, and knowing of the small form that lay within it, nothing about the box was attractive.

Something like a jolt of electricity hit me, even as my chest tightened. Finding it hard to take a deep breath, I quickly slipped into one of the empty seats. What was the matter with me? Had I imagined there could be a funeral without a casket?

But there was nothing ordinary about the casket—nothing ordinary about any of it. I just needed to get through the service and get out of there as quickly as possible.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. Turning around, inwardly I cringed, although attempting to return the smile. It was Susan Thompson, the mother of one of my former track students, who had slipped in behind me. Was she going to talk to me here? Now?

I remembered Susan as a bit flamboyant—an extrovert. Leaning forward, till her mouth was mere inches from my face, she started whispering loudly. Did I know that she had been the midwife taking care of Beth and the baby? Such a sad case.

I wanted to clamp my hands over my ears and disappear into the carpet. By now, people had begun to stare. That was the last thing I wanted. So, I gave her my most polite this-is-the-end-of-the-conversation smile and turned back, facing the front.

During the service, I felt bad, but I tuned the preacher out entirely, trying to distract myself with all the things I needed to do the rest of the week. I had to get through this in one piece, and I was sure the words in the sermon wouldn't help me do that. Just being at the service alone was stirring up the ghosts of memories best left forgotten.

After the service, I was trying to get to my car as quickly as possible, without being rude, when Susan caught up with me. Would I mind giving her a ride

to the graveside service? Apparently, the people she'd ridden with had decided against going to the cemetery.

I heard myself agreeing, even as I led her out to my car. Why was I such a pushover? Why couldn't I have come up with a good excuse for not being able to help her?

Before I'd even put the key in the ignition, Susan began talking again, this time even sharing details about the difficult delivery and how tragic it was. So much for HIPPA regulations. Head beginning to pound, I told myself I would insist we leave as fast as we could. I couldn't wait to put the nightmare behind me.

But there would be no quick getaway. On top of everything else, Susan said she'd promised Beth she would collect a little dirt from the gravesite for a memory. We wouldn't be able to do that until everyone else left. I didn't mind a few extra minutes, did I?

What could I say? So I simply nodded and as soon as the car was in park I walked to the far edge of the trees, away from the open tent with the neat rows of chairs already filled with family. Beth had cried throughout the funeral, and I wished I had been able to go over and offer her some comfort. But I knew I needed to keep my distance.

What an awful day. It was beautiful, but that in itself seemed a betrayal. How could the sun be shining when our hearts felt so dark? There should have at least been clouds.

Thankfully, I had grabbed my sunglasses from the car before stepping out. At least I had something to hide behind. The preacher opened his Bible and began talking. Again, I assumed he would speak some words designed to comfort, but I didn't dare focus in that direction. I couldn't look at the tiny coffin again. Maybe if I just avoided the jarring image, pretending to listen, I could get through this without breaking down.

Tears were expected on a day like today—but what if I totally lost it? I was the school counselor—the one who was supposed to help everyone else in a crisis, not the other way around.

I'd become adept at keeping tears at bay. How many years had it been since I broke down? Even shed a tear? That was a risk I was unwilling to take.

Finally, the pastor's voice stopped, and one by one people began to scatter. Some

walked over to gaze at the sad little casket once more. Others hugged Beth, her family gently leading her away.

At last, everyone else was gone, except Susan, the grave digger, and myself. I couldn't seem to avoid the sight of the tiny coffin any longer, hovering over

the gaping trench in the earth. I watched as Susan gently scooped up the dirt, placing it in the small jar. A gesture to preserve a tangible memory of the brief life of her baby.

Then the thought struck, like a lightning bolt across my mind. What tangible memory did I have of *my* first baby? In a flash, I was back in that room. Could hear the clink of the metal instruments of death, feel the pain and the emptiness.

What had they done with my baby? My miscarriages had occurred very early in my pregnancies. But how far along had I been with my first? Twelve weeks? Far enough that everything was already intricately formed—a tiny replica of a full-sized baby, just needing time to grow. Time I hadn't been willing to give.

My heart burned within, as though the sun had scorched it, exposing it as a fraud. Pulling my eyes away from the mournful scene, I glanced around. There were so many little markers dotting the earth; countless other tragedies on display.

Suddenly, pressure built inside my chest. I couldn't catch a full breath, even as lava-like tears banked behind my eyelids, desperately needing an escape.

Now, when I was finally about to leave, I found myself rooted to the ground, unable to move. Stomach clenching tightly, my body trembled.

Finally, I lifted my eyes up toward the heavens, crying out inside my heart: *God, what am I doing here?*

Into the stillness, I heard God's voice: *It's time to begin grieving your aborted baby.*

I was stunned, but the message resonated within the core of my being. It was time. Time to finally look at what I had been unable to acknowledge for a very, very long time.

~

Later that day, I called a trusted friend, asking if she knew of any place that helped someone dealing with a past abortion. She told me about Rachel's Vineyard. It was a weekend retreat program focused on post-abortion healing.

That night, I told Tom what had happened to me. Told him about how difficult it had

all been. How I was totally out of my element.

Other than years before when Tom shared his vision of seeing our son in heaven, this was the first time we had ever spoken about our abortion in twenty-seven years.

Tom broke down when he saw the pain reflected in my eyes. I had hidden it for so long, not wanting to burden him with my grief. But gradually his tortuous journey emerged. How he had agonized even while he sat in that waiting room so long ago, wishing he'd had the courage to jump up and take me out of that awful place. How he'd endured many dreams where he had woken up crying, the threads of the dream gone, and only the acute pain of tremendous loss remaining.

I told him about the Rachel's Vineyard retreats and how I wanted to book a weekend for the two of us as soon as possible.

At first, he was more than a little resistant. He was sure he would be the only man there. How would a bunch of women crying be of any help to him? But eventually he reluctantly agreed, and I immediately signed us both up.

The day of the retreat arrived, and we were both filled with apprehension. What would it be like? Who else would be there? At the same time, I was also excited about the prospect of finding even a small measure of freedom from the guilt and shame that I had carried for so long.

Halfway to our destination, Tom proposed that we spend a romantic weekend in a nearby city instead of going to the retreat. We could do whatever I chose. We could even talk about the abortion if I wanted to, he just didn't want to talk about it in front of a bunch of strangers.

My heart went out to him. I identified with his fear more than he knew. But I also wanted the healing I desperately hoped was coming. God had led us to this point, and He wouldn't abandon us now.

I gently told him I *had* to go. That we had to face this together. Finally, once again he reluctantly agreed.

It took a few hours to get there, but it was a beautiful drive. What a contrast between the drive we had taken twenty-seven years before and the one we were now on. Instead of driving towards death, we were moving towards healing and wholeness. Despite our mutual anxiety of the unknown, there was no comparison to the silent dread we had both experienced on the way to that clinic.

Walking up to the retreat house, the sight of yellow roses along the walkway was like



a sweet message from the Lord. Seeing my favorite flowers was a reassurance that we were indeed on the right path.

We were greeted warmly by Dr. Theresa Burke, who we later learned was the founder of Rachel's Vineyard. What a genuine person who completely emanated the love of Christ!

Tom was pleasantly surprised when he learned there were four other couples there. He wouldn't be the only man. Also, the priest who was there would play a large role in helping Tom find a measure of comfort.

Part of the biggest opportunity for healing occurred on the final day. We were instructed to write a letter to our aborted child/children. When it was time for me to read mine aloud, I found I was unable to read more than a few words before I broke down. Tears poured out, turning into sobs. It was the very first time I had cried in the twenty-seven years since my abortion.

In the presence of such warmth and acceptance, it was as if a frozen river had thawed, causing the dam to break and the water to overflow its banks. But in the atmosphere of love and compassion, my emotions weren't as frightening as they once were. I began to experience the cleansing and healing properties of tears. They became a balm to my soul, washing away the debris of self-hatred, guilt and shame.

In addition to the letters to our aborted or miscarried children, we had been instructed to write a letter to our "inner child." Over the past few days, I had learned we all had deeply wounded parts of ourselves we had shut away, unable to acknowledge due to the painful memories attached to them.

In my letter, I apologized to my "inner child" for shutting her out of my life—for not letting her express the grief that had been bottled up for so long. It was such a freeing and cleansing experience.

Before we even left, I knew that Tom and I needed to be part of such a wonderful and necessary effort. I longed to help others find wholeness and healing from the pain of abortion. We were part of Rachel's Vineyard Ministries for several years. Eventually, I became the counselor for many future retreats.

I will be forever grateful to those who served us on our weekend. I had been like a shadow for so long, cut off from vital parts of myself. The Lord used those loving and compassionate men and women to administer Christ's love to my wounded soul—helped me face the fear, the guilt, and the shame. With their support, I was able to experience healthy repentance and to receive Christ's forgiveness, as well as to begin

to forgive myself.

~

One evening, I heard an advertisement on the radio. It was for an executive director position at one of the local life-affirming pregnancy centers. Instantly, I sensed in my spirit that I was to apply for the job.

There were several obstacles. One, I had never worked in the capacity of an executive director before. Two, it would mean I would have to give up my significant teaching retirement which was nearly funded. It would also mean a huge loss in salary.

But I had been learning that those things were nothing in comparison with the joy of obeying and pleasing my God. He was calling me, and I would listen.

I quickly applied for the position and wasn't surprised when I received the call telling me the job was mine. That very week I began serving women and men facing an unplanned pregnancy. Also, I continued to minister to those who suffered from the heartache of a past abortion. I've been serving at the Center for over eight years now and have loved every moment of it.

I will always regret my abortion. I long to see my child in heaven, and to hold him in my arms. To this day the sound of clinking metal in the doctor's office can take me back to that abortion room. But it's temporary. I know what to do with those feelings of guilt and shame. Jesus died on a cruel cross and paid the debt for my sin. I have been forgiven! And I have forgiven those who lied to me or wounded me as well.

Sometimes, I wonder how I ever walked through those doors. Why hadn't I listened to the Lord and found a different solution? I am still facing consequences because of that decision. I endured much heartache for years, and there will always be someone missing from our family.

My parents are both gone now. Dad lived to the ripe old age of eighty-six, having learned to love God with all his heart. Once my youngest brother was out of the house, my father moved to Oklahoma where his family lived. He never joined the Amish church, but reconciled with his family and the community, so the elders lifted the Bann.

My mother struggled throughout her life. Although she knew about God's love, she was never able to fully receive the healing available to her here on Earth. Echoes of her abuse still haunted her.

Our relationship continued to be strained. In my head, I knew my mother loved me,

yet in many ways, her actions denied that.

In the final days of her life, she was slipping in and out of consciousness. Even when she was awake, we never knew when she would have a lucid moment. They had become rare, due to a brain tumor. But one day she looked at me and spoke with perfect clarity. *You do know that I love you?*

As the tears coursed down my cheeks, I understood my hunger to hear those three words. *I love you.*

~

I marvel at how God is now using me to help others. By speaking the truth in love, and by providing a window to see their child through ultrasound, many have made a choice about their pregnancy that they can feel good about. I also continue to minister to those wounded by abortion.

In addition, I have been blessed beyond my wildest dreams with a husband who still adores me and with my son Jeremiah, who has grown into a remarkable young man.

The Bible says the one who has been forgiven much, loves much. That certainly applies to me. I am astounded at God's amazing grace and mercy extended to me, and long to see others freed from their chains as well.

What if those of us who have been set free from the bondage of abortion were to reach out and help others? I believe if we all did our part, we would witness a huge healing occur throughout our nation, as well as literally around the world.

*"You have kept count of my tossings, put my tears in Your bottle, are they not in Your book? Then my enemies will turn back in the day when I call. This I know, that God is for me."*

*Psalm 56:8-9 (ESV)*

## *Ribbon Reflection*

One of the threads of Mary's story that struck me deeply was how she suppressed her emotions. I was stunned when she told me she had not shed a single tear in the twenty-seven years since her abortion.

Unfortunately, hers is not an isolated case.

I recall a beautiful young woman who came to our center for a pregnancy test. We'll call her Maria. The result turned out to be negative, but while taking her health history, she admitted to having had an abortion about two years previously. Finding herself somewhere safe that day, and not sensing judgment, she began sharing her experience.

Mary and Maria had something in common. Mary was about to launch into her career, while this young woman was due to begin university with a full-ride scholarship. She didn't want anything to get in the way of her dream, so without telling even the father of the baby, she immediately obtained an abortion.

Maria went on to college in the fall, as planned, and excelled academically. She was where she had always wanted to be. But something was very wrong.

Living in the dorms was always part of the dream—experiencing “campus life.” Now, none of that mattered anymore. In fact, she found herself avoiding her fellow classmates as much as possible, preferring to remain alone.

I noticed that as the interview continued, Maria used a phrase quite frequently. When she told me that her so called “best friend” got angry with her and posted on Facebook that she'd had an abortion, I was appalled. Knowing how painful that must have been, I expressed how sorry I was that she had suffered such a betrayal.

Her response? “It doesn't matter,” with an accompanying dismissive flick of her hand.

Finally, I asked her, “You say “it doesn't matter” frequently.

Does *anything* matter to you? Maria just paused, looking at me.

“No. Nothing matters anymore. Nothing at all.”

She went on to say that since the abortion, she never laughed or cried. It was best to live in the safety zone of blunted emotions; avoiding all highs and lows. Those meant the possibility of losing control, something that had to be avoided at all costs.

What about you? Have you experienced an abortion, and now you're tiptoeing

around life, trying not to wake the sleeping giant? Or perhaps you're dealing with a past abuse, or another secret, that is tearing you up inside.

I strongly encourage you to check out the section at the back of the book called, "Where Do I Go from Here?" There are places you can call and speak confidentially with someone who cares about you—finally ending the silence. Healing will take time, but rest assured, the God of all comfort longs to see you set free.

And so do I.

## *Going Deeper*

1. Mary's story as a baby is so remarkable. To have two different doctors fighting to save her life, to the point of paying great sums of money so that she would have a chance to live.
  - a. Think back over your own lifetime and share about a time when someone showed you a kindness that helped you survive a difficult season.
  - b. As you look back, in the midst of the struggle and the pain, can you trace a thread which reveals God is *for* you?
  
2. Whether you know it yet or not, you have an enemy. John 10:10 says. "The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (ESV) Looking at Mary's life, identify ways it is evident that someone is trying to "steal, kill and destroy" her.
  
3. Mary believed she had to keep a tight lid on her emotions or she might crack wide open. Maybe even lose her sanity.
  - a. Can you recall a time in your life when you were afraid to laugh or cry? What helped you get through that time?
  - b. If you are still in that place of "blunted emotions," can you identify what helped Mary face her pain and begin to heal?
  
4. Psalm 56 is one of my favorite chapters in the Bible. I love verses 8-9. Something about knowing that God cares about my pain and tears is extremely comforting to me.
  - a. Read the verses aloud, listed just prior to *Going Deeper*. How does the fact that God loves you enough to keep track of the pain and confusion you experience impact you?
  - b. What does verse 9 mean to you when it says that God is *for* you?