

THE HUMAN LIFE REVIEW



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Introduction	<i>J. P. McFadden</i>	2
“No-Sting” Death: The Final Taboo	<i>Rita L. Marker</i>	7
Unplanned Parenthood: Easing the Pain of Crisis Pregnancy . . .	<i>Frederica Mathewes-Green</i>	30
Practical Compassion	<i>Mary Cunningham Agee</i>	48
Silence Is Death	<i>Faith Abbott</i>	55
Pagan Queens: The Power of Woman	<i>Maria McFadden</i>	75
Abortion and the Compromise of Fatherhood	<i>Stella Morabito</i>	83
Appendices		101

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Practical Compassion

Mary Cunningham Agee

In the summer, on Cape Cod, you can watch the tides throw starfish by the hundreds up on the beaches. Unless the next tide pulls them back into their home in the sea, the penetrating rays of the sun quickly immobilizes them. They are doomed by the heat and lack of moisture; they simply die there, unwanted by fishermen and, ironically it seems, by nature itself.

There is a story that a young woman watched this strange phenomenon and noticed a little boy, wearing only swimming trunks, frantically running along the beach picking up starfish and throwing them back to the safety of their home in the sea, never stopping, knowing that unless he acted quickly the starfish would die.

The young woman watched his efforts for a long time, shaking her head at the enormity of his task. She finally wandered down and asked the boy rather cynically: "Do you think what you're doing is actually going to make a difference?"

The little boy looked up briefly, and then looked down at the starfish in his hands. He smiled and said: "It makes a difference to *this* one"—and he cast the starfish back into the sea.

Until seven years ago, I was that young woman. I was grieved by the massive body count of abortion on the shore that is America. I was shocked by the statistics and troubled by the casualness with which life was disregarded and discarded. I recalled words as old as the Mosaic Law which admonished "Choose Life" and the words of that Man from Nazareth, "Whatever you do for these, the least of mine, you do for Me."

I was personally opposed to abortion, but I was also silent about my conviction. I was casual to the needs of women, for I had not walked in their sneakers nor their high heels.

Complacency is such a comfortable place. But then, one day, I became their sister.

The concept of The Nurturing Network did not come to me in

Mary Cunningham Agee is the founder and executive director of The Nurturing Network, which provides life-supporting help to women facing a "crisis" pregnancy.

a dream, but in the nightmare of a miscarriage, when the pain of emptiness makes you want to shout that angry prayer, “Why me, God—why me!” But there is great if frightening truth in what Bishop Fulton Sheen said so often, “There could never have been an Easter Sunday without first a Good Friday.”

In meditating over this at length, I’d like to believe it was the Holy Spirit who whispered to my heart the wonderful possibility that *the life of many could be born out of the death of one*. If I could feel that much pain and loss over a child I had wanted, how must other women feel when they are coerced by circumstances or “interested parties” to surrender the life of their child to abortion? How deep must be their grief, how tormenting their thoughts of what might have been.

In my anguish, I was initiated into a sorority of loss—listening in the darkness for the cry of a child that I would never be able to hold. This was the beginning, my starting place for understanding how so many women feel when their child is aborted. This is how I began to empathize with their trauma, to share in the tragedy of their feeling that the only choice is abortion.

It was at this moment that I was transformed from the casual observer with a cynical question to that innocent little boy on the beach who believed he might make a difference.

It was over six years ago when The Nurturing Network was born. That was over 3,000 babies ago, 3,000 mothers ago—women who were unwed, facing a crisis pregnancy—women who believed they didn’t have a chance and the only so-called choice open to them was the open door of an abortion clinic.

I structured The Nurturing Network with the all-consuming hope that one day we would live in an environment that would not require our services. My prayer was that we would literally be put out of business by compassion and love.

- Love of a parent, so strong that it might withstand the onslaught of a thing called shame.
- Love of a mate or boyfriend, so binding in fidelity that it would not cut and run.
- Love by a community, which would not cast the first stone of judgment but rather transform that stone into the bread of support.

Is love too much to ask? Is there room for love to slip in between the pronouns me, myself, and I—even in a society with no moral absolutes, where nothing is considered wrong as long as you don’t

get caught? I can't answer that, just as a battlefield surgeon doesn't have time to evaluate the arguments for a just war.

There are hundreds of thousands of women out there who deserve a chance to make an informed, valid, and *real* choice without surrendering the possibilities of their own tomorrows—an education, a career, a meaningful relationship. Choice is a two-sided coin, not a one-dimensional dictate that deprives another of the chance for life.

In formulating The Nurturing Network, we set goals and standards that we hold to be sacrosanct:

- If a woman is cast out of her own home or abandoned, we will provide a loving family, a home where the insulation is compassion and the environment is pure, unadulterated, non-judgmental love.
- If shame drives a woman from her own community, we will re-locate her in a safe haven away from those who presume that they are "without sin."

Contrary to the widespread stereotype of an impoverished, uneducated teen, our experience shows that the most likely candidate for an abortion last year was between 20 and 26 years old, white, middle-class, with at least a high-school diploma. These facts do not diminish the severity of the teen-age pregnancy problem; they simply focus attention to a large group of women who, until now, have been largely overlooked. There is, after all, an unspoken assumption that the college-educated or career-oriented middle-class woman knows how to avoid an unwanted pregnancy; that she is rarely if ever faced with one and, if so, she can take care of herself—a prescription for apathy if I have ever heard one.

Our experience reveals just the opposite. We see the woman who, without support, often feels she has "too much to lose" by continuing an unwanted pregnancy. She is the one whose college peers are most apt to say, "You should have been smarter than that. This isn't supposed to happen to someone like you." She is the one whose boss is still apt to find a good excuse for terminating her employment and whose family is still apt to respond with shame and rejection.

This woman is your neighbor, your waitress, your colleague at work, and maybe even your own daughter, women you encounter every day. When a social issue becomes as controversial as abortion it is too easy to lose touch with the human faces behind the numbers. The rhetoric tends to overcome more noble human emotions like compassion, and vital energy is diverted from desperately-needed practical assistance.

THE HUMAN LIFE REVIEW

In getting to know our clients, we've found that there are three basic explanations for why these women have become pregnant under such unfavorable circumstances.

First, the woman was engaged to, was living with, or at least had a long-term relationship with the father of the baby, who then abandoned her when she became pregnant. These women have no reason to believe that their men will not marry them or help shoulder the responsibility of a baby. They are faced with a dual crisis—an unplanned pregnancy and betrayal.

Second, the unplanned pregnancy was a result of a failed birth-control device. To put it bluntly, these women learn first-hand the painful reality that every birth-control device has a failure rate—except abstinence. Having a Ph.D. does not guarantee that these devices will be 100% effective. Again, these women represent our daughters, our friends, and those with whom we are closely associated.

Third, the pregnancy is a result of a “lapse of judgment.” These are women who are not promiscuous, but who make a one-time bad decision and are then faced with a regrettable consequence.

Each of the conditions or circumstances described suggest a woman who is more a victim than a culprit. She is a victim of broken promises, a misplaced trust, a flawed societal norm that cuts more heavily against a woman, a biological reality that leaves little room for maybes.

I have found that there are four sources of pressure directed toward a woman facing this most personal and vital crisis. The influences end up having a lot more to do with impossible trade-offs and Catch-22s imposed by those with vested interests than a liberating opportunity to express freedom of choice. To put it simply, the vast majority of women who submit themselves and their babies to abortion do so, not by “choice,” but because they feel they have no *other* choice.

These are four influences that weigh heavily in most abortion decisions:

- *The father of the baby.* More often than not, the frightened father will issue an ultimatum: “Either me or the baby.”
- *The family.* The embarrassed family, concerned about the social stigma and economic costs, will issue a different ultimatum: “Either your family or the baby.”
- *The peer group.* Well-intentioned friends tend to judge a single, pregnant woman and tell her “she should have been smarter than to let herself get pregnant.” Their subtle ultimatum: “Either your social standing or the baby.”
- Finally, the *employers.* It is disheartening to note that discrimination still takes place in the work-place toward a woman who is pregnant. A woman

is told, "this will not enhance your credibility" and is frequently derailed from better-paying jobs and faster career tracks. This discrimination is also found at educational institutions where students may be asked to leave for fear they might represent a "bad example" to alumni and other students. Their ultimatum: "Either your career and education or the baby."

None of these ultimatums have anything to do with "freedom of choice." All have to do with unfair trade-offs.

This is why The Nurturing Network was created—to give women a real alternative, one which recognizes their unique values, needs and circumstances. Our purpose is not to remove an option, but to create one. It is not to spend time debating the merits of one alternative over another, but to make sure that no woman feels she has "no other choice."

The irony of our Network's efforts is that we are already starting to find a higher incidence of the adoption choice among the clients we serve than is often reported by programs addressing primarily the teen population. It is perhaps precisely because of our mothers' promising futures that they may be more willing to consider the adoption alternative. After all, the cause of their crisis pregnancy is far more likely to be rooted in a failed relationship or birth-control device than in weak self-esteem. And so their assessment of what would be best for their child's upbringing is often more pragmatic.

At a time when last year alone we learned of two million qualified couples who were unable to adopt, it seems unfortunate, to say the least, that we persist in failing these mothers, both biological and adoptive. Our clients have shown us, time and time again, *an unwanted pregnancy does not have to mean an unwanted baby.*

I believe there is an obvious correlation between how much support we are willing to give women with crisis pregnancies and how many infants will be available for the thousands of potential parents wishing to adopt. But unless we are willing to offer the emotional, social and financial support needed by women facing this kind of pregnancy, we cannot legitimately express either condemnation or surprise when we discover that they have chosen a less hopeful solution.

This is how we operate: we assist in every facet of a pregnant woman's needs, from pregnancy testing to delivery of her baby and provision of information on parenting and adoption. We specifically offer the following:

- *Nurturing Homes* in all 50 states, where a woman is given more than just

THE HUMAN LIFE REVIEW

another place to stay. Each nurturing family is carefully selected through a detailed questionnaire and interviewing process. All nurturing families understand the challenges our clients face and are committed to providing the nurturing that is needed at this sensitive time.

- *Medical Assistance:* each client is offered competent medical care to protect her health and that of her unborn child. Among the members of our Network are literally hundreds of dedicated doctors and nurses throughout the country. Each is prepared to assist, often at a reduced rate, in planning a balanced program of nutrition, exercise and good health.
- *Counseling:* licensed nurses, social workers and professionals with specialized training are able to promote healing and self-esteem. Each counselor is prepared to provide valuable information on the resources available through our Network based upon a detailed evaluation of each mother's needs.
- *Financial Assistance:* clients are offered a coordinated plan for handling the many expenses associated with pregnancy. We are able to accomplish this through privately-donated funds and the extensive resources of our 8,500 volunteer members.
- *Educational Programs:* there is no need for a healthy pregnancy to limit a woman's educational opportunities. If a client wishes to protect the confidentiality of her pregnancy or is receiving undue pressure at her current academic institution, we can arrange for a temporary transfer to a college of comparable academic standing through our extensive network of participating schools and universities.
- *Career Programs* that enable each client to preserve her own future and that of her unborn child. Through an innovative program of mentorships at participating companies throughout the country, a working woman can take a temporary leave of absence and work for an employer who respects her accomplishments and supports her decision at this vulnerable time. If a woman chooses to relocate, our Network is also able to offer a nurturing home, medical care, counseling and any other supportive services she may need in a new area.

The Nurturing Network is that perfect square with four corners—family sheltering, total medical care, continued education, and job placement. It is surrounded by the Circle of Nurturing: counseling, caring, financial support when needed, and always, love.

The circle continues to grow, encompassing all 50 states and a dozen foreign countries as we reach to support another 3,000 women, children—indeed, *families*, by next Mother's Day.

The Nurturing Network six years ago was, you might say, my "Field of Dreams," with the recurring and haunting voice that said, "Build it . . . and they will come."

Indeed they did, and they continue to come. For it is no longer a dream but a reality to the women and children of this country. A reality that is only a toll-free phone call away: 1-800-TNN-4MOM.

That is Life's 911 emergency number throughout America from posh suburbs to urban ghettos.

It is noble and devout to say: "Don't have an abortion my friend; we will pray for you." But there is a higher biblical command uttered almost 2,000 years ago when Christ said "Feed my lambs."

We have the opportunity and challenge to follow the Master of Galilee in loving as He loved. We, too, are invited to stand on that sandy beach, reaching out to save, not the starfish, but the stars; the stars of a new generation that will glisten with hope and bring to this world the light of new understanding and life.

Amidst that galaxy, perhaps there will be a few bright stars—a doctor to find a cure for the incurable, a scientist who will open up the secrets of the heavens, or perhaps even a spiritual leader who will explain heaven to us.

But maybe not. Maybe the little stars we save will be so ordinary they will just grow up to be good, decent people who love one another. That will be enough for me.

Then we can stand on that beach together and look up and smile like that little boy and know that, like him, we made a difference.



'If you rush it through in six days it will go lumpy.'

THE SPECTATOR 3 August 1991