



THE NURTURING NETWORK:
SERVING THE URGENT AND PRACTICAL NEEDS
OF MOTHERS IN CRISIS
FOR 25 YEARS

*Personal Reflections of Mary Cunningham Agee
Founder of the Nurturing Network*



www.nurturingnetwork.org

It is an honor to be invited to address you about a topic that matters more to me than any other. Instead of addressing the myriad of vital issues concerning the termination of life for an unborn child, let us focus today upon the life and well-being of another victim, the mother. I believe that it is time to shift our emphasis from the obvious harm that abortion causes an unborn child to the tragedy it inflicts upon the life of the mother.

Introduction:

My name is Mary Elizabeth Cunningham Agee. I am the mother of three children - one of whom died in a second term miscarriage twenty years ago on January 8th. It was this personal loss that riveted my heart and redirected my mind to the pivotal societal issue that we are addressing today.

You might appreciate knowing a little more about the person whose perspective you are about to hear. Please allow me to introduce myself:

Professional Background:

You may recognize my name as having been one of the first women in America to "break the glass ceiling" by serving in the Senior Management of two Fortune 100 Companies as the Vice President of Strategic Planning in the 1980's. I wrote a best-selling autobiography about my experience at the Bendix Corporation and Joseph E Seagram & Sons and was twice voted by World Almanac as one of the "Twenty-five most influential women in America." I have been given the opportunity to share my thoughts about corporate culture, women in business and professional ethics at the Commonwealth Club, in the Wall Street Journal, Reader's Digest and Newsweek, and on many prime time television shows including Barbara Walters, Peter Jennings, Donahue, the Today Show and Good Morning America.

Educational Background:

My education includes a BA with Honors from Wellesley College ('73) where I was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and received two Danforth nominations in Moral Philosophy and Ethics. I have also earned an MBA from the Harvard Business School ('79) and studied Law and Jurisprudence at Notre Dame University and Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. I have been awarded six honorary doctorates primarily for my work over the past two decades in trying to alleviate the suffering of thousands of women and children whose circumstances have caused them to be vulnerable to abortion.

Particular Expertise:

My primary expertise on the topic we are addressing today is based upon two decades of experience as the Founder and President of the Nurturing Network (TNN.) TNN is an international charitable organization comprised of over 42,000 volunteer resource members who provide for all of the urgent and practical needs of women with unplanned pregnancies. Over 17,000 pregnant women and unborn children have been served through the practical compassion of the Nurturing Network during the past twenty years.

While I must admit that it took the personal anguish of a mid-trimester miscarriage for me to grasp the horror of prenatal death, it has taken the daily, life-saving activity of the Nurturing Network to teach me the importance of translating my reverence for human life into concrete action. This growing awareness enabled me to not look back for even one moment to the comfort and grandeur of an executive suite in midtown Manhattan. I chose to leave that way of life and a six figure salary for the far more rewarding and, I dare say, more vital work of managing and directing the Nurturing Network.

Viewpoint:

While TNN's mission has had nothing to do with debating the merits of abortion or trying to remove that alternative, the performance of my counseling role has required me to listen to the unsolicited testimonies of literally thousands of women. To a person, each woman has shared her profound regret and lingering emotional wounds as a result of an abortion experience. It is this unexpected, and yet, undeniable revelation that compels me to share what I have learned with you.

When the option of abortion was first presented for the Supreme Court's consideration, scientific and anecdotal evidence was very limited. Since 1973, valuable medical and scientific research has been conducted and revealing anecdotal testimonies have been collected. The insights gleaned from these sources offer a compelling case for reevaluating a procedure that was once considered to be a safe and private solution for women in crisis.

Unlike thirty years ago, we now have a generation of women who are prepared to open their private lives and expose their wounds in the hope that their experience might prevent others from the grief and emotional harm that they have known. I hope that you will agree that we cannot afford to turn a deaf ear to these women who provide such an eloquent witness to the dangers caused by a procedure made available to them in the hope of providing assistance.

At the close of my remarks, I hope to have a few moments to share several moving testimonies of actual TNN clients who profoundly regret their choice of abortion. Their words convey an anguish and loss that the passage of time or euphemistic rhetoric cannot repair. Their experience is a haunting reminder that what many once hoped would provide a "reproductive freedom" within a woman's "private

choice” has, instead, resulted in a prison of tragic regrets for a generation of women who now know that they deserve better than abortion.

TNN Facts:

Approximately 50% of all TNN clients have already experienced at least one abortion at the time they contact us for help. This fact is revealed in either an initial toll free phone call requesting assistance, a referral from a local crisis pregnancy center, a first counseling session, or a confidential online questionnaire.

What the Clients Are Saying:

TNN clients express fear in having to “go through” another abortion. They candidly share their profound remorse and the conviction that they do not want to augment the emotional anguish they have already endured. They often share a sense of having been betrayed and then abandoned by those who convinced or coerced them into having an abortion.

It may be difficult to imagine how utterly sincere and blatantly honest these confidential counseling sessions are between a TNN counselor and a client. More often than not, I do not have the opportunity to meet a TNN client in person. Our relationship usually takes place in the relative privacy of a phone call or by internet which seems to afford more freedom to express what their hearts have wanted to say for many years. A bond of trust is readily established when a client discovers, often for the first time in her life, that TNN wants nothing from them: No fees, no baby to adopt, no promises, no work in exchange for our services.

To more fully understand the wrenching sadness and lasting regret that TNN clients describe following an abortion, it may be worth examining the forces and influences that drive a woman to make this choice: An immediate escape from shame, the possibility of enhanced economic security, the hope of saving a fragile relationship.

The actual testimonies of the betrayed and the abandoned in TNN’s client files expose the miscalculations and illuminate the disillusionment that inevitably follows:

- Most women readily identify four primary sources of pressure or coercion that lead to an abortion “choice”:
 - The father of the baby: “It is our relationship or the baby.”
 - The parents: “It is either our financial support or the baby.”
 - The boss: “It is either your job or the baby.”
 - The peers: “It is either your social standing or the baby.”

Of course, none of these tradeoffs have anything to do with offering a woman in crisis the “freedom to choose.” Each ultimatum threatens to impose an emotional toll calculated to force her to make a desperate choice. And yet, as the attached testimonies indicate, she alone will suffer the agonizing remorse, the hidden grief, the debilitating guilt.

- Most women who have chosen abortion do so not out of “freedom of choice” but out of a desperate sense that they have no other choice.
- Most women believe that the only “freedom” an abortion affords is experienced by those “significant others” who have much to lose if she continues her pregnancy.
- Most women express regret in having made the “choice” to abort and many become pregnant again in an effort to remedy their error and “recreate” their deceased child.
- Most women admit that very practical needs influenced their decision to abort a pregnancy. I have heard many say:

“If only I had been offered an alternative educational opportunity; my peers were so cruel when they found out that I was pregnant.”

“If only I could have been given a different job; the father of the baby was my boss and I just couldn’t put up with his ridicule and pressure every day at work.”

“If only I could have had a peaceful, affirming place to live; my parents were so disappointed in me that every day would have been emotionally devastating living at home.”

“If only I could have seen a good counselor to help me understand what I was about to do and what was at stake.”

“If only I could have had some financial support for college, rent and medical bills; my parents withdrew all support and I just couldn’t make ends meet.”

Listening to these women articulate what forms of practical support would have permitted their pregnancy to continue is how the Nurturing Network was actually formed. Before founding TNN, I interviewed and listened to hundreds of women who shared the practical needs that were not met when their own support networks let them down. These unmet needs had directly led to their abortion “choice” and helped to write the strategic plan that formed the Nurturing Network.

CONCLUSION :

There have been other times in history when a solution initially considered to be helpful or at least useful was eventually exposed as being dangerous and even harmful. It requires a certain humility, honesty and open mindedness to admit when a judgment must change in light of new and more compelling facts. This is what the women whose painful experiences are captured in the attached testimonies are calling for today.

The simple but profound truth is that abortion has not turned out to be the private, painless, safe solution that many had hoped it would be. Yes, it is quicker and seemingly less complex than alternative solutions. It surely is final. But the living testimonies of TNN clients reveals that this procedure, often sought in haste and without a full understanding of the emotional risks, has inflicted profound and lasting harm a generation of women. Their voices say better than anyone else ever could: *Women deserve better than abortion.* It is time for this tragedy to end.

I need only to reflect upon the thousands of women whom I have had the privilege of serving since founding the Nurturing Network to say with conviction that *the binding of deep wounds and the healing of broken hearts is an intensely intimate and time-consuming process.* In a society that prides itself on finding quick fixes and expedient solutions to any inconvenience or problem, it is understandable that we would seek a short cut to solve the crisis of an unplanned pregnancy. But time and experience reveal that no fast solution exists without causing profound and lasting harm to both the mother and the child.

The simple truth is that there is no efficient or effective substitute for what my two decades of experience tells me every woman in crisis yearns for most of all: Love and practical compassion. She does not seek our hand-washing absolutions or an easy means of hiding or "getting rid of her problem". A generation of women now courageously stands ready to tell us of a sobering reality: *Abortion does not heal, it harms. It silences a beating heart... and breaks a mother's too.*

ADDENDUM: FROM TNN CLIENT FILES

HEARTBREAKING:

TNN counsels thousands of post-abortive, grieving women. Here are several actual examples in each client's own words:

SARAH: TNN Valentine Card 2004

"I was not able to carry through with my pregnancy. I wanted to say, 'No,' but couldn't gather the strength given the extreme pressures. I am completely overwhelmed with grief and depression beyond anything that I can describe. If only I had know about your Nurturing Network a month ago. I can't forget how exposed and humiliated I felt lying on that table. The pain, sense of loss and crippling nightmares just won't let up. I can't work and have lost my job. I have lost everything! Will there ever be peace for someone like me?"

TRACEY: "Heart to Heart" Newsletter, Mother's Day 1992

I read about your organization in Ligourian and it is as though a prayer was answered. I am twenty- eight and gave birth to a son September 29, 1991. Since then I have been looking for an - outlet for my intense feelings and need to help someone else by sharing my personal experience in not going through with an abortion.

I was raped (the acquaintance variety) and have endured all of the post-traumatic syndrome symptoms. The father of the baby threatened to "throw me down the stairs" to get rid of 'it" when I told him I thought I was pregnant. I went to a clinic to find out for sure if I was pregnant and told their counselor what had happened to me. She assumed that I wouldn't want to keep the baby due to the situation and scheduled my appointment.

I drove directly to the father of the baby's apartment and on the way there, the light looked different. The sky was brighter. the clouds bigger and fuller, the sun more vivid than I remembered. I was slowly waking up from my shock and realizing I had a baby inside me. . . something I had wanted since I was nine years old. I had been in a relationship where the man couldn't have children and it nearly ruined us because I wanted children so badly, and here I was planning to get rid of one. I desperately wanted this man to marry me out of a sense of obligation as a father. After six hours of unsuccessful pleading, I left and planned to run my truck off a cliff.

Having been thoroughly humiliated and insulted. I turned to the man I left a year earlier (and still loved) and he helped me for the weeks and months it took to decide the fate of my child. He said to me. "We'll find a way. We'll make it work:" Hearing these words gave me strength and hope. and I've learned what a real father is. He's a man who fights for your life, makes life possible, and loves you in spite of everything.

I was lucky I know ... not everyone has someone to turn to like your Network. But the point is the same, if you open yourself to the possibility of this incredible love that a child generates, people and things open up for you.

We have a beautiful, healthy, energetic. tranquil boy and there isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about what I almost did. Well, that is pretty much it. I would like to be able to

share this and the rest of my experiences so that maybe someone in a similar situation can benefit sooner, and not go through the agony and torture I did. I would very much like to volunteer as an inspirational counselor and perhaps offer my services as an artist in some way. Please find a place for me as this would mean the world to me.

My son, Henry, has been on my lap for much of this letter and at three months, thinks he can type! Thank you for letting me share my story with you. Please call if I can be of help right away. Again, thank you for your organization. I wish I had known about you sooner.

JOANN: "Heart to Heart" Newsletter, Thanksgiving 1992

"In December, I lived through what today is so glibly referred to in the press as 'date rape.' Two weeks later I graduated with honors with a freshly minted MBA...only to have my dreams shattered. Any course of action, other than abortion, would have meant total abandonment by my family. When I asked for support, the aggressor accused me of 'emotional' rape and then abandoned me. I have kept this secret to myself until now.

Last fall I had surgery for ovarian cancer and am now unable to have children. When I die I will leave no legacy. Had I known about the Nurturing Network, I would have carried the child to term and my story would have had a happy ending. If I encounter someone in the future whom you may be able to help, I will tell them about your Network. If only I had known..."

TONI: "Heart to Heart Newsletter," Mother's Day 1993

"Ten years ago, Toni, married and a mother of two, found herself facing an unintended pregnancy. A baby simply did not fit into her career plans nor into her family's work schedule. Seeking the advice of her obstetrician, Toni was assured that an "early pregnancy termination" was the best alternative and that he had never heard of anyone having any adverse effects from this procedure. Tony chose to abort her baby and struggled with this decision for many years. Through painful years of grieving and professional counseling she now shares her heartache and hopes with Mary:

My wish is that I had known about The Nurturing Network. It would have taken so little to convince me to have our child. On this Mother's Day, I urge other abortion victims to come forth with their heartbreaking stories in the hopes of bringing an end to this national tragedy. I want to assure you that there is no need to suffer in silence anymore. Compassion, understanding and support is available and is only a phone call away."

JANE: TNN Valentine Card 1995

"When I found out that I was pregnant, I felt frightened and trapped. I felt that if I continued my pregnancy, I risked humiliating my family whom I love dearly. The thought of my boyfriend leaving me and the knowing looks of my friends at work was beyond anything that I could bear.

Deciding to end my pregnancy was the loneliest moment of my life. I knew then that this 'choice' would bring a sadness that would never leave me. A day doesn't go by that I don't think of what I lost. Perhaps it would help me to heal if I could encourage someone else who is feeling as desperate as I did. Please keep up the work you are doing! I only wish I'd known about you sooner."

MARGARET: TNN Valentine Card 1997

"Many years have passed since I was 23, frightened, unemployed and facing the stark reality of an unplanned pregnancy alone. I felt trapped with no idea of where to turn knowing that my family would be deeply humiliated and angry beyond words. I made the desperate choice to abort my son because I could think of no other way to go forward.

The pain of that choice will forever haunt me in the quiet moments of every day. Just last week I learned about your Network. If I could help even one mother who is feeling as desperate as I was, I would be so grateful."

JANET: TNN Valentine Card 1998

"On February 7, 1995, I had an abortion. One week ago, I picked up my sister's issue of Today's Christian Woman. As I was flipping through the pages, I ran across your article and cried throughout the whole reading. I wish this article was put on every corner and available at every place that provides abortion. If only I had known about your Network, my baby could have been saved. I miss my baby so much. I think I understand how God is helping me to heal. I think He wants me to do something like you are doing. How can I help someone else avoid this pain and loneliness?"

KIM: TNN Valentine Card 1999

"Several years ago, I had a second trimester abortion. My uterus was punctured and emotionally I was devastated. Years of grief have taken their toll on me. I only wish I had known about the Nurturing Network back then. I am pregnant again and after many calls you are the only place that has given me hope. What a comfort it is to know there is an organization such as yours. I know that as I work through the practical needs of my pregnancy with your kind staff, I will be able to deal with the emotional wounds still scarring my heart."

MARTHA: TNN Valentine Card 2001

"Many years have passed since my senior year in college when I felt deserted by almost everyone important to me and made the desperate choice to abort my child. I could think of no other way to go forward. The fear that haunted me then was not being able to finish my education and fulfill my dream to become a teacher. The fear that haunts me now in the quiet of each day is that no matter what I accomplish professionally, I will never hear my child's voice or laughter. I can only hope that at least one mother who may be feeling as alone and trapped as I was will read my letter. I am living proof that your work is needed."