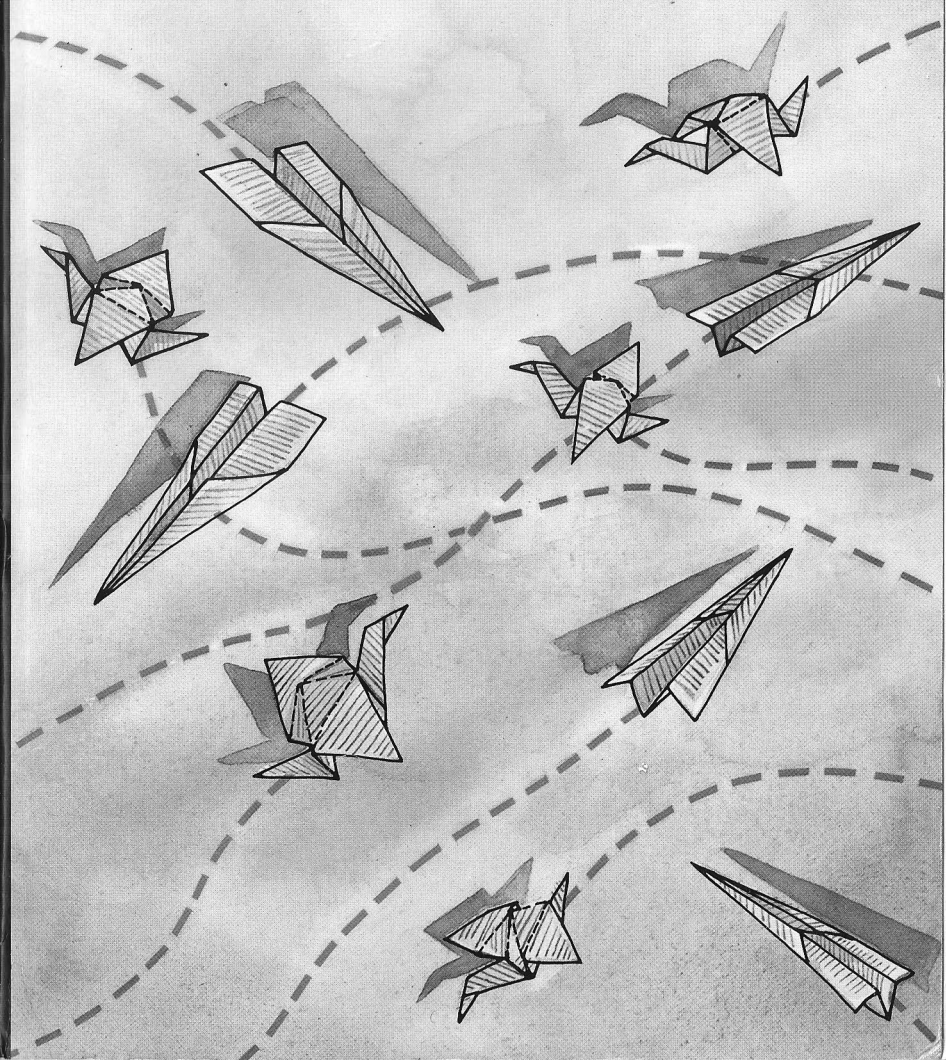


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Living with the Sphinx

Papers from the Women's Therapy Centre



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Abortion – a woman's right to feel

Abortion is experienced by women in many different ways. Post-abortion groups at the WTC were set up to give women a chance to explore their feelings about having had an abortion in a group setting with other women who had also had an abortion.

The aim of this chapter is to draw up a theoretical analysis based on my working experience with women in these post-abortion groups. This will include an attempt at understanding the external political situation and our own social conditioning as women in a patriarchal society, as well as the internal expression of it in women's individual experience with pregnancy and abortion.

Before beginning, I would like to clarify the three different levels I will be talking about. The first and most immediate level is the experience itself, what actually happens, and the feelings surrounding it. The second level is that of the unconscious. These two levels obviously interact and overlap in everything we do, even if we are unaware of it in our everyday behaviour. Many people live their lives without having to recognise the existence of the unconscious. It may take an unpleasant or painful experience such as an unwanted pregnancy and its termination to force a person to face the fact that there may be other forces at work besides the apparently straightforward and obvious ones. These two worlds have their own languages: the language of common sense, which we use to discuss events, feelings, issues, relationships, etc., in a day-to-day factual way; and the language of the unconscious which involves unconscious motives and meanings as well as patterns that we carry with us from our childhood.

The third level is the social level. Neither families nor individuals exist in isolation, but are influenced by the society in which they function, by its norms, morals and value systems. It is impossible to understand personal behaviour, both conscious and unconscious, without linking it to women's conditioning and position in our society. The experience of abortion is one in which these three realities meet – conscious, unconscious, and social; this chapter attempts to show the connections between them.

I would also like to acknowledge two points which have affected my understanding of abortion. Firstly, my own experience of abortion was very painful. This may at times in my work have biased me towards looking at the painful aspects of having an abortion. Secondly, the women I have worked with, both individually and in groups, sought help because they also had had difficult and painful experiences.

What I have to say will not necessarily apply to all women. And my analysis only represents one aspect of a large spectrum of issues, both personal and political, most of which are very controversial in a changing society. Some issues I can only acknowledge and not discuss in detail. They include, for example, the unsatisfactory nature of available contraceptive methods, and the lack of choice for many women about whether to have a baby, because of their lack of social, economic, practical or personal support.

Before the 1967 Abortion Act thousands of women took the legal and medical risks of backstreet abortions resulting in many cases in severe physical complications. Much of the effort and energy of the women's movement went into fighting an impossible situation.¹ Abortion was against the law, a taboo, and had to be kept a secret. The 1967 Abortion Act was an enormous step forward in the political battle – it has, at least, given grounds for many abortions to be performed legally. Yet liberal as it may have seemed, it in no way challenged the medical and moral hierarchy upon which many of society's attitudes to abortion are based. The law may be open to a liberal interpretation in both the public and the individual's eye, but it only allows abortion if there are sufficient medical or social grounds and this has to be judged by doctors. It does

not allow for abortion on demand. Some doctors interpret it in this sense but others hold it to mean that only women in dire emotional and social circumstances should be given abortions. Women are 'free' to have abortions, but the power is left firmly in the hands of the medical hierarchy. This has led to huge anomalies, allowing individual doctors to decide according to their own individual bias, be it in relation to religion, race, class, physical appearance or marital status. Taken to its extreme, this can mean that a working-class woman may be discriminated against whereas a well-educated woman may have a better chance of convincing her doctor to allow her an abortion.

In 1975 a first attempt was made at restricting the law and it was at this point that the National Abortion Campaign was formed. It was set up not just to fight proposed restrictions but also to assert positively 'a woman's right to choose'. At that time it was still too 'dangerous' to talk about the painful emotions surrounding abortion because the anti-abortion pressure groups had monopolised the emotional and moral ground. It was they who spelt out the emotionally painful aspects of having an abortion, they who argued that abortion was killing. Because of these threats to women's right to abortion, it was almost impossible for feminists to engage with the emotionally difficult aspects of abortion or the complex moral issues involved. And it was hard to realise that acknowledging the painful and damaging aspects of abortion does not invalidate women's needs for freely available and safe abortion. (This is interesting in terms of the cultural denial of pain – the way in which early feminism could not really take on board both women's past pain and the pain which making changes might entail.)

Since 1975 restrictive bills have been a regular occurrence. As the years have gone by, however, the threat – while not disappearing – has lessened. This has allowed women involved in the abortion campaign to begin to look at the situation more broadly. Women have started to say that the slogans no longer correspond to their experience and to the very wide range of issues raised by a campaign for full reproductive rights: the issues, for example, of black women being encouraged to have

abortions, or to be sterilised as a condition of having an abortion; of infertility; or of lesbians and artificial insemination.

The campaign has therefore had to widen its interest to other aspects of reproductive rights, and in 1983 the Women's Reproductive Rights Campaign was formed. The legal and political pressure having slightly declined, women were able to turn their attention to their own feelings, to explore the effects of these past years as well as the emotional aspects of having an abortion. There are now more and more post-abortion groups in which women can break the secrecy that has been imposed upon them for years and look at their feelings before, during and after abortion. There has also been a new recognition on the part of the pregnancy advisory agencies of the need for counselling not only *before* but also *after* an abortion.

Some feminist writers have pinpointed the complex and difficult situation women find themselves in:

Abortion is hardly the 'final triumph' envisaged by all, or the final stage of the revolution. There are deep questions beneath and beyond this, such as why should women be in the situation of unwanted pregnancy at all? Some women see abortion as a humiliating procedure . . . few if any feminists are deceived in this matter although male proponents of the repeal of abortion laws tend often to be short sighted in this respect, confusing the feminist revolution with the sexual revolution. . . .²

And again: 'The demand for legalized abortion, like the demand for contraception, has been represented as a form of irresponsibility, a refusal by women to confront their moral destiny, a trivialization or evasion of great issues of life and death. The human facts, however, are hardly frivolous.'³ Here Adrienne Rich gives examples of the risks women go through in attempting to terminate their own pregnancy when denied a legal abortion. 'To become pregnant with an unwanted child', Adrienne Rich says,

is no light experience. Guilt about abortion can serve as the channel for other, older feelings of guilt, and the need to atone. It can also be the result of a life-long exposure to the

idea that abortion is murder. If a woman feels her guilt or depression as a kind of punishment, she may try to disavow such feelings. It is crucial however, in abortion, as in every other experience, that women take seriously the enterprise of finding out what we do feel instead of what we have been told we must feel.⁴

It is important therefore that both painful, 'negative' feelings as well as 'positive' feelings should be discussed. It is these feelings, expressed by women with whom I have worked, that I would like to present throughout this chapter.

The myth of motherhood

One of the most important and oppressive aspects of our social reality is the myth of motherhood which becomes, through conditioning – in the broader sense of discovering one's own gender – a part of the inner world of every woman. This myth and its reflection in a woman's inner world is part of the reason why the experience of abortion is so painful for women.

Many of the myths in our Judæo-Christian society are to do with the bond between mother and baby. Take, for example, the story of Solomon. Two mothers both claimed ownership of the same baby. When Solomon judged that the baby should be cut in two, one woman agreed but the real mother said 'No – she can have him, let him not die.' Both motherhood and unconditional love between mother and baby are hereby glorified: the true mother can only be recognised by her unconditional love.

The 'myth of motherhood', the portrayal of women as essentially mothers, takes place on several levels. On a social level, in a society in which the nuclear family is an idealised and desired unit, women's role is primarily as mother. Furthermore, in terms of their relationship with people around them, women are brought up to become mothers, the carers of

others, meeting other people's needs, often having to put their own needs in second place. Mothers thus produce daughters who will repeat this pattern. Lastly, in terms of her deepest sense of herself as an individual, a woman's identity is traditionally invested in becoming a wife and mother and that is where she is to find her sense of self. Added to this is a woman's biological potential as a mother and the unconscious processes that are formulated with the interaction of all these factors. The picture that emerges to a woman of herself is that motherhood equals womanhood.

This is further complicated by the fact that psychoanalytic theories have increased the idealisation of women's maternal role by emphasising the crucial importance of the mother-child relationship to the child's psychological development and internal world. This creates still another idealised standard that women can seldom if ever achieve. Winnicott's term of the 'good enough mother' comes as a great relief. In reality, being a wife and a mother is far from an ideal situation. In the role of mother women are devalued as people in their own right, frustrated and unappreciated.

In an attempt to change women's situation in our society and to address the kind of frustrations they experience, the women's movement has helped to create alternatives for women. Women are making different choices in their lives: to be single, not to have children, to have children in different situations, such as lesbian couples, single mothers and so on. Feminism has overall brought about a change in women's awareness of their sense of self, their identity as women and their creativity in the world.

However, the more traditional picture is still very powerful for many women - understandably, given the fact that these social and psychological myths have been operating for so long and are underpinned by the power relations of our society. Many women still see motherhood as the most creative act in their lives, still equate womanhood with motherhood and still invest their sense of self and identity in that role alone. Far from wanting to reduce the importance and very creative nature of having children, I wish to emphasise that it is not the *only* way in which women can express their creative powers.

Moreover, for all of us there is no simple answer to such questions as: What does it mean to be a woman? Who is feminine? What is femininity? How and when does a woman become a 'real woman'? Given this lack of a clear concept of femininity, it is not surprising that motherhood – that tangibly creative, practical role – is grasped at as a prime symbol of femininity.

It thus becomes clearer why abortion is such a painful and difficult experience for so many women. If motherhood means womanhood, what does abortion which is its opposite, its 'negation' mean in terms of external – social and internal – personal definitions? It cannot fail to raise many issues about femininity and womanhood, for the woman concerned as well as for society at large.

I will talk later in this chapter about the emotions that emerge as a result of this conditioning in women who have had abortions. Here I just want to pose some of the basic conflicts involved in that experience. Women have expressed this in sentences like 'I feel I am not a woman. I feel I have lost the chance to become one.' (Considering the exaggerated danger of infertility claimed by the medical profession, this can seem a real fear.) Or 'I did not fulfil my creativity, myself.' For many women the issue is therefore not motherhood *per se*, but motherhood as a symbol of their fertility and thus of their womanhood. I realise that this is more true for women who have not yet had children, but I have also worked with mothers who still carried these feelings, as if they had spoilt their womanhood or had doubts about whether they ever had or deserved it in the first place.

As we have seen, an important part of the myth of motherhood is the picture of an unconditional, all-giving, all-good, never-harming mother, and of an eternal, incomparable, inseparable bond between mother and child. The mother will sacrifice her life and happiness to save that of her child. She will always love it and will never do anything to harm it. Without ignoring the very powerful, intense and unique relationship that does exist and develop between mother and child, the myth sets up an extremely beautiful image which allows no ambivalence. No murderous, angry, hateful, negative

emotions, least of all no 'killing'. Many of the women I have worked with have expressed feelings that they have 'killed' their baby and experienced deep feelings of guilt and sadness to the point of relating to the abortion as 'murder'. Eileen Fairweather, in her article 'The feelings behind the slogans'⁵ puts the argument about the issue of killing in a very clear way: 'One of the defensive slogans the National Abortion Campaign used is that the foetus is a potential human life incapable of independent existence'. Another slogan was, 'The egg is not a chicken, an acorn is not a tree, a foetus is not a baby . . . ' 'Why', she asks,

do we have to make support for women's right to choose dependent on seeing the foetus as no more than a bunch of splitting cells? In doing so, we lose potential supporters and that includes those women who have had an abortion, but think of it as a killing. Some women experience nothing but relief after an abortion. Others only feel guilty because they don't feel guilty. But for many women it is not so simple . . .

The 'potential human life' argument implies that a woman is merely suffering from feminine fancy and sexist conditioning if she feels she has in any way 'killed' her foetus/baby. It may have seemed the most 'revolutionary' position, but it was not always helpful to women, since it denies so many of women's actual experiences and feelings.

Therefore there are many different ways of viewing abortion – as killing, as a simple removal of tissue or as the termination of a potential but not actual life. Whatever one's views, the important thing is to acknowledge these views and for each woman to be allowed to express her own.

For many women, the reality is that a potential life has been terminated. This reality, however, will echo in each woman's feelings and internal experience in a different way. The knowledge will have a different mark on her psychic life and fantasy world, according to her life experiences, her beliefs, current circumstances and emotional make-up. It is peculiar, then, that women as a group and as individuals are stigmatised, accused of murder and made to feel guilty about it, when at the same time socialised mass murder such as men going to

war or shooting at people in demonstrations is socially acceptable and permitted, or at least is not defined as murder, with blame attaching to individuals.

Abortion as an expression of internal conflict

Here I would like to discuss how women's unconscious life is reflected in the experience of pregnancy and abortion. In this part of the chapter I therefore talk mainly in terms of the unconscious. So that when talking about the element of 'choice' in getting pregnant and having an abortion it is not a 'conscious' choice that I am referring to.

Pregnancy and abortion may be a 'straightforward' situation – but they may also be the product of all sorts of unconscious conflicts. The important point is to try to understand the unconscious motivation so that we are better able to act freely in our lives, causing less pain to ourselves through being compelled to act out these conflicts without awareness of what they are or how to deal with them in a direct way.

There are some women, of course, who do not use contraception or use it incorrectly, who really do want a baby but may not consciously admit it. On becoming pregnant they go through with it and have the baby. This means that there is a difference between women who just 'want' to be pregnant, and those who actually want to have a baby.

I believe that for some women, getting pregnant and having an abortion is one *joint* experience. Let me try to make this point clearer. If such a woman were asked what she would do in the event of becoming pregnant, she would know more or less what she would intend to do. In the light of this knowledge, not using contraception is taking a risk if she knows her circumstances do not allow her to have a baby at that time. The risk includes both getting pregnant and having an abortion. Here I am mainly talking about women who do not use contraception or use it incorrectly, not about contraceptive failure.

Let us take, for example, a student in the middle of her final year at university. Her exams are due soon. She lives in a squat and can hardly manage on her grant. Her relationship with her boyfriend is very rocky; they have split up recently and are assessing their relationship. They spend the evening together and unexpectedly go back to his place, she having left her cap at home, and he saying, 'Oh, it will be OK.' She is somewhat drunk and excited and forgets about contraception.

Another example is a woman who has just had a baby and is intending to go back to work which is, for her, of prime importance. She is using the low-dose pill, knowing it has to be taken at the same time every day. She forgets to take the pill one day, has intercourse and the next day remembers and takes two pills on the same day. Obviously it takes two to have 'unsafe' sex, but it is the woman who usually carries the consequence.

All such examples have an unconscious meaning. Though the word unconscious is widely used in day-to-day speech, it is important to emphasise that it really means a person is completely unaware of their unconscious feelings, conflicts, meanings. The assumption I am making here is that many women who do not use contraception or who use it incorrectly do so for unconscious psychological reasons which include becoming pregnant and terminating the pregnancy. If you like, there is an element of 'choice', i.e., a woman unconsciously 'chooses' to become pregnant.

I would like to state here that this concept of 'choice' in a woman becoming pregnant could easily be used to blame women and abuse them in a way I strongly object to. My aim in introducing it is not to blame. On the contrary, I believe that through understanding the conflicts underlying her actions a woman can deal with these in a more direct way and be able to take responsibility for what she felt and what has happened. Through this she can gain more control over her life and understand consciously the choices that she faces, thus not having to act out these conflicts in such a painful way as having an abortion or several abortions. In psychological terms, the more the unconscious can be made conscious, the more the woman is in control of her life.

A woman's body

Before we look at the different meanings of these conflicts it is important to make clear how much a woman's body becomes a vehicle for the indirect expression of them. There are many examples of this, but getting pregnant and having an abortion is a very painful way.

Throughout patriarchal mythology, dream symbolism, theology, language, two ideas flow side by side: one, that the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleeding dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, 'The devil's gateway'. On the other hand, as a mother the woman is beneficial, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing, and the physical potential for motherhood. This same body with its bleeding and its mysteries is her single destiny and justification in life. These two ideas have been deeply internalized in women, even in the most independent of us, those of us who seem to lead the freest of lives. In order to maintain two such notions, each in its contradictory purity, the masculine imagination has had to divide, to see us, and force us to see ourselves as polarized into good and evil, fertile or barren, pure or impure and all these fantasies are symbolized in and centred around a woman's body.

This is only one of the social contradictions that women have internalized as 'facts of life' and internally, in silence and solitude have been made to carry the pain of those internalized notions and the burden of social guilt as their own.⁶

The way in which social conditioning affects women's perception of their bodies is again illustrated in *Outside In . . . Inside Out* by Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum.

Women's social position means that the woman's sphere of influence is limited and that it is confined very much within her own home – if you like within her own body. A woman's body is her primary asset in the world, for with it she gains a man, a family, a home, a place in the world. A woman's body therefore, is integral to her social position of wife and

mother. At the same time, as we know, certain aspects of a woman's life inevitably cause conflict which it may be impossible to express. The distress a woman feels, the conflicts she experiences, the taboos against her longings often show themselves not surprisingly in woman's terrain: her body. A woman may unconsciously express her distress through her body.⁷

Getting pregnant and having an abortion is one such expression of distress.

Society and life in general are full of contradictions and conflicts for both women and men but as Jean Baker Miller suggests: 'Conflict has been a taboo area for women and for key reasons. Women are supposed to be the quintessential accommodators, mediators, the adapters and soothers. All of us, but women especially, are taught to see conflict as something frightening and evil.'⁸ Women are not expected, allowed or even given 'normative channels' to express conflicts. So, women will more often than not find indirect ways to deal with this conflict.

Ambivalence

The unconscious working out of ambivalent feelings about ourselves can be deeply involved in the experience of abortion.

Ambivalent feelings, similar to conflicts, are often expressed and dealt with in indirect ways. Ambivalence seems to be unbearable and not fully incorporated into our lives. We often strive for perfection, and see things in terms of good or bad, right or wrong, all extreme attitudes that leave little space for ambivalence or for an understanding or tolerance of both sides. This attitude provides neither the permission to have ambivalent feelings, nor the ability to tolerate the anxiety they produce. Because of a woman's emotional state when pregnant and the very rich fantasy she experiences in that state, many characteristics of her own internal world are projected into the new entity that is now growing inside her. Sometimes,

the foetus will have projected on to it bad aspects of the woman, for example ugliness, nastiness, stupidity. This means that if an abortion is done, a 'bad' part of the woman is got rid of and she may experience relief. This relief can, however, only be temporary. As human beings we are all bound to have feelings of 'badness' inside us which make us uncomfortable. One way of avoiding dealing with these feelings ourselves is to project them on to others, as in common racist attitudes, but these feelings do not go away. Through projecting the feelings of 'badness' on to the foetus and then having the abortion, a woman may unconsciously fantasise that she has rid herself of those feelings. Unfortunately the feelings will return in full force as it is not possible to rid oneself of them in that way. If, however, what is projected on to the foetus are her 'good', tender, warm, loving feelings, to have to separate from these because of an abortion will also be extremely painful and cause great distress. What actually needs to happen is an acknowledgment that both 'bad' and 'good' feelings belong to the self.

The acknowledgment of ambivalent feelings toward the pregnancy is thus very important as well as difficult when the pregnancy and the woman's relation to it are on a fantasy level.

Relationship with mother

The relationship with the mother is a most important element affecting both getting pregnant in the first place, and the decision as to whether or not to terminate.

In *Inside Out . . . Outside In* Susie Orbach and Luise Eichbaum spell out very clearly the well-known way in which babies are born in the parents' (especially the mother's) expectation that they will be a source of unconditional love. I have extracted a few points relevant to my discussion. Women learn to transform the need to care for themselves into caring for others. Inside every woman there is a repressed, arrested, dependent part, a figure whose needs were never sufficiently attended to, recognised or cared for. This part of her is forever

hungry for that recognition, care and acceptance that she never got enough of from her mother. The woman is ashamed of this part, believing it to be bad, unacceptable, weak, and not to be expressed or even considered. This may create a conflict. The conflict is magnified and comes to the fore when, say, in an intimate relationship with a partner the opportunity opens up for that deprived childhood figure to be seen, recognised and cared for. This opportunity is both attractive and terrifying for the woman considering how unacceptable she feels it to be and how repressed it has been.

One indirect way of dealing with these conflicts and fears is by externalising this needy, uncared-for childhood figure and transforming it to a fantasy of a figure who will provide unconditional love, bond, care, for example – a baby. The woman may act on this fantasy by getting pregnant. In other words, wanting to be cared for is translated into wanting to care for. (In her chapter on separation Sheila Ernst describes this whole issue of merging with and separation from the mother.) The prospect, however, of being the actual carer of a real baby can be so overwhelming that the woman decides to have an abortion.

What other aspects of the mother–daughter relationship might affect a woman's decision of whether or not to have an abortion? Dionora Pines, in an article on the effects of early psychic life on pregnancy and abortion, analyses the relationship with the mother and how it affects a woman in pregnancy and abortion.⁹ (In the article she talks about a first pregnancy.) The first point she makes is, as I have often found in my work, that there is a marked distinction between the wish to become pregnant, and the wish to bring a live child into the world and become a mother. What seems to dictate the difference for each individual woman is her own early experience with her mother. When a woman is pregnant, she often finds herself going back to the feelings and fantasies of early infancy, like being a baby in her mother's womb. In experiencing this regression, she identifies with her mother's feelings towards her as a baby and with her own feelings as herself in the womb, or as a tiny infant in an almost symbiotic fusion with her mother.

The particular feelings that she had as an infant will influence her feelings towards the foetus and whether or not she wishes to carry on with the pregnancy. For example, if she feels that her mother was blissful and loving towards her as a baby then she is likely to have similar feelings towards her own baby. If, however, her mother was deeply ambivalent about having a baby, her attitude towards her own baby may include ambivalence, insecurity, conflict, and in interaction with other aspects of her life (her partner, the support she gets and her external reality) may determine her decision for or against an abortion. For some women pregnancy may be one of the most enriching times of their lives. For others, it is a painful and frightening experience.

Dionora Pines then goes on to explain how separation from the mother and becoming an individual, separate person is a life-long process for women. Pregnancy is an important point in this process.

If the woman is re-experiencing her own intra-uterine life and her own birth, many feelings and fantasies from that period will be revived. She will feel anxious, vulnerable, angry, overwhelmed with love, for no apparent reason. Positive and negative feelings and aspects of the self will therefore be projected on to the unseen foetus as if it were an extension of her self. Pregnancy provides many women with an alternative to resolving these conflicts directly. These conflicts may affect whether the foetus will be given life or physically rejected through abortion.

Lastly, a woman who feels unseparated from her mother will have little sense of herself as a separate individual and she may use getting pregnant and having an abortion as a way of expressing these ambivalent conflicting feelings. Becoming pregnant will then be an expression of the non-separation, the similarity, the fusion, and merging with mother, and will also at the same time bring about these regressed symbiotic feelings: 'I am like you—I got pregnant.' In the same way, terminating the pregnancy may be saying to the mother, 'I am not like you. You had me—I am not having this one.' The abortion is a statement that perhaps symbolises gaining a sense of self separate from the mother. Hence the experience of abortion could be a way for a woman to separate from her mother.

The feelings before, during and after having an abortion

Having discussed the internal unconscious level of pregnancy and abortion, I would now like to describe some of the more immediate feelings accompanying this experience.

Feelings when pregnant

Being pregnant is experienced by different women in many different ways. For some, the experience is a very positive one. They like the feeling of fullness; the idea that something inside them is growing; that a part of them has come to fruition. Some, on the other hand, experience it as an invasion which is very frightening. One woman described being pregnant saying: 'I felt as if a monster were growing inside me. I couldn't stand it. I hated the feeling and couldn't wait to get rid of it. I sat and imagined how this monster looked, growing inside me. It was terrible.'

During the few weeks of uncertainty about whether she is pregnant or not, a woman may oscillate between fear, hope and disappointment. When she finally discovers that she is definitely pregnant, many conflicting and ambivalent feelings may come to the surface. The immediate emotion is quite often that of shock, confusion and vulnerability. Sometimes there is a feeling of numbness, quite often a feeling of terror. Predominant feelings may be: 'I wish it were not there'; 'I wish it were taken away by a miracle'; 'I must get rid of it somehow.'

The woman becomes much more aware of her body, feeling vulnerable and sensitive to her environment. Both body sensations and emotions are more available to her. She cries for no particular reason; gets hurt easily; most of the time feels weak and tired. This is a time of emotional turmoil. Even a woman who knows for sure that she cannot, does not want and will not continue the pregnancy often experiences these feelings. Questions like 'Can I?' 'Should I?' 'What is the right thing to do?' constantly disturb her.

In this context, the woman knows that the final decision is in her hands and that whatever she chooses is going to be painful or unacceptable. Things become much more difficult to deal with but somehow she has to get on with doing them, while having to put a lid on the 'volcano' inside. At this stage, the woman is often looking for someone to help her make the decision. The feeling of confusion and helplessness makes it difficult to know clearly what she wants. In this state of ambivalence about the decision, she tends to oscillate from one fantasy to another: each carrying the attractive, pleasant and reassuring, as well as the negative, frightening, rejected aspects of it. From the one fantasy of being a mother and its implications – being tied down, dependent, having demands made upon her, yet loving, being loved, caring and being mature – to the other fantasy of terminating it – to be free, independent, yet losing the love and care, the promise of motherhood. This is a very difficult stage when she needs much support, understanding and acceptance but not advice.

Making a decision to terminate a pregnancy is one of the most difficult decisions a woman has to make. In our daily lives we have to make decisions all the time. Most major life decisions such as getting a job, leaving a job, moving house, etc., could be reversed or changed. Having an abortion, however, is final. It is an absolute decision that cannot be changed or reversed, which is what makes it so powerful and frightening.

Once the decision is made, it is of enormous importance for a woman to know, in detail, how the termination is done: what the physical stages of the operation are, what complications there could be, what dangers or pains could occur, as well as to discuss the emotional turmoil she may expect. A woman who does not get such detailed explanation is often shocked by the intensity of feelings she experiences on coming home, and without knowledge or support is often unable to deal with them. She pushes the feelings aside and gets on with her life. These feelings, however, do not go away and will come up in many disguised ways for a long time afterwards. A woman recently told me she was having some renovations done to her home. For some reason she had to go out to the yard to look at the drains, inside which she saw a dead bird. Having been there

for a few days it had no feathers, and therefore looked like a foetus. She dropped everything, ran back into the house and was crying, sobbing and howling for hours, without realising what it was about. After a few hours of crying it became clearer in her mind what the crying was all about. The vision of the bird had sparked off in her mind the feelings she had experienced twenty years earlier.

*Emotions after abortion*¹⁰

Having an abortion is often painful in the best of circumstances, but there are some external factors that may operate in an unwanted pregnancy and its termination to make the feelings of loss doubly unbearable and impossible to deal with. These are unnecessary difficulties which could be avoided.

1. Often very little information is given to her about her pregnancy, the termination, the physical or emotional repercussions, and the whole episode is veiled in silence.

2. She is burdened with an internal sense of shame for not being able to go through with the pregnancy. This is confirmed and even increased by her environment; friends, families, hospital staff, who with words or actions may say to her: 'You should be ashamed of yourself.'

3. There is acknowledgment neither on her part nor on that of her helpers of a woman's relationship with a new being growing inside her. In order to feel that she has lost something, she has to acknowledge that she had it in the first place.

4. The fact that she wanted to 'get rid of it' seems to mean she forfeits any sympathy. Why should she feel sadness or loss about something that she wanted to get rid of? On the surface it looks like a contradiction: 'I wanted to get rid of it. Why am I not happy to be rid of it?'

5. The fact that it was her decision which caused the loss often does not allow space for mourning. Since it was her decision she surely has to be courageous and stand by it. She thus has to bear the consequences without grief or mourning.

6. She often feels that she has to punish herself in some way

and that she has no right to feel overtly and directly sad about the abortion.

7. The abortion often is dreamlike: the process is over so quickly that under a full anaesthetic it is difficult to grasp whether the abortion has happened or not.

8. Because of its nature, the termination may become connected with other losses she has experienced in the past, but without the conscious acknowledgment either of this loss or the connection. When I say past loss I don't necessarily mean death. It could, for example, be a parent who left home, or an important relationship with a friend that has ended.

9. The secrecy and non-acknowledgment I have mentioned earlier tends to inhibit the yearning and sadness, and to cause the anger and the guilt to be misdirected. It is usually misdirected on to herself, with blame.

All these factors create a situation where there is no space for a woman to feel the loss, let alone express it and mourn or grieve openly, and will affect the way she feels immediately after coming out of hospital. This will differ for women according to their previous feelings about the abortion and the way in which they have learnt in their lives to go through an episode involving loss. There are, however, three general reactions many women display immediately after an abortion and on coming home from hospital.

Euphoria

Many women will feel euphoric. They will go out a lot, meet friends, feel lighter and happier. They might even be surprised at how easy and smooth it has all been. This is an expression of the feeling of relief and freedom at having solved a problem, having rid themselves of a burden and having executed a decisive action. They will feel strong and in control of their lives. They will feel the need to laugh and have a good time. They will usually keep excessively busy. The feelings of loss, anger and guilt are of no relevance to them in this period. These emotions are bound to come later, sometimes even months or years later, sometimes in a disguised form, apparently with no connection to the abortion.

Detachment

Some women experience a sense of shock or a feeling of inner numbness. They go on with the ordinary activities they are used to doing but with a sense of detachment, distance and unreality. This detachment is an attempt to avoid experiencing the painful feelings connected with the termination. It gives a woman a distance, a non-involved perspective on her environment and her inner world. She may feel an inner emptiness as though what is going on around her is seen through a glass wall. This state may go on for a while. It is not always as strong as I have described.

Depression

Some women get into a state of depression which could be described as a general sense of hopelessness and a diffused feeling of darkness. This state is usually experienced as feeling bad about herself and her life and environment but without actually knowing what it is. At times it comes with the feeling that 'something has taken me over', 'it is all out of my control', accompanied by feelings of worthlessness, emptiness or meaninglessness. Although this state may seem on the surface as appropriate to having had an abortion, in some way it is not dealing with the feeling of loss directly, since the depression is often diffused and not focused or concentrated on the termination.

Some women are able to experience what they have gone through more directly and feel their emotions such as anger, sadness, fear, love and hate. There is, however, no one way that is 'right' of dealing with abortion and no one feeling that is more 'appropriate' than another. What is important is to listen to one's own emotions and try to be with them however difficult it may be.

Anger

Anger is an emotion that is invariably connected to loss. Often a 'normal' response to losing something important, it is directed

outwardly with such questions as: 'Why did it happen to me?' 'Why now?' 'Why is life so unfair?' In a termination of pregnancy, there are two factors that make it difficult to direct the anger outwards. Firstly, the abortion itself may be an indirect expression of the woman's initial anger that she was unable to express directly. Secondly, a woman may direct her anger toward the hospital and any inadequacies in the treatment or towards her partner or her family, but her feeling is that ultimately it was her own decision and therefore she is to blame. She feels she was wronged and it is of her own making, hence she misdirects the anger on to herself with self-hate, judgment and blame. She often feels she will be punished and that she deserves to be. Usually, the fear of punishment centres around the fear of not being able to bear children when she really wants to have them.

Guilt

Guilt is sometimes a form of anger directed on to oneself. Many women feel guilty after an abortion. Their guilt can take many forms, centring on difficult areas in the woman's life. Some feel guilty about hurting their mother and father, some about their partner. Some women who were brought up in a religious setting will feel guilty about having committed a sin before God. For some women the guilt is more general or existential and for some it is more specific or personal but in most cases, coupled with the guilt, is a sense of deep shame, of self-accusation and the fear of punishment.

Fear of sexuality

An abortion brings most of the conflicts between motherhood and being a sexual woman into the fore. These conflicts are strongly present throughout the experience of getting pregnant and having an abortion. One common reaction after termina-

tion is a fear of sexuality and its consequences. Many women who came to the workshops took some time after the abortion before they relaxed and were able to have sexual relationships again. Another fear of this kind is that of another abortion. I have many times heard the statement, 'I will not go through this experience again.'

Ambivalence

An abortion is an ambivalent action that carries many ambivalent feelings and actions within it. It is saying: 'I want something but I can't have it now.' Or: 'I want something but I don't actually want it.' This ambivalence is, I believe, not only about having a baby. There are many issues in a woman's life about which she feels equally ambivalent but which get 'hooked' on to the one issue of having a baby. It may be a part of herself which she is ambivalent about giving voice to or expressing overtly. The feeling of ambivalence emerges after the abortion in many different ways and it is helpful to look for what the initial ambivalence was about, as well as what the symbols and fantasies attached to the pregnancy and termination mean. For example, a woman who felt ambivalent about her creativity, wanted to study art to create something of herself but was scared of failure on the one hand and of competing with her artist-mother on the other. The abortion came at a crucial time when she had to make a real decision about these things. Her ambivalence about the abortion covered up and diluted the rest. She had to work through these feelings to get at her initial ambivalence about creativity.

Envy

Women often feel envious after a termination, envious of other women who have babies. At times they will walk through the streets looking at babies in prams and feel very sad. Some women cannot bear to visit friends who have newborn babies, as it is too painful to be with them.

These are all relevant feelings. There are no correct ones that one 'should' feel. It is important, however, to have enough time after the abortion to look at what one's feelings and conflicts are, to be able to feel the loss, sadness, relief, lightness, etc., without believing that one is 'obliged' to feel one or another.

Some positive aspects of abortion

An abortion, painful and destructive as it may seem, is not always just a negative experience. Some women have expressed the positive aspects of pregnancy and termination even though the pain, sadness, and negative aspects exist as well. For example, for some women, the experience of pregnancy was exhilarating. Becoming pregnant in spite of the wish not to have the child constituted an important event for them. To feel something had been created inside and was growing within them, without the actual need to carry it further and have a dependent baby, was very meaningful. One woman felt that what she wanted was the creative aspect of it, the sensation of being pregnant. Many women had feared they were infertile so that getting pregnant was an affirmation of their fertility, proof that they were able to conceive, which was important since so much emphasis is put on being fertile in our society. Connected to that is the feeling of wanting to 'try out' being a woman.

Some women have a feeling of power and being in control in a life where they often feel powerless and out of control. For some women this was the only time in their lives when they allowed themselves to be irresponsible. Ordinarily they felt they had to be punctual, responsible, do everything the right way, and somehow they felt trapped by always being tied to the rules and having to be perfect. Being irresponsible was a different experience for them.

Making an important decision was another aspect that was a new experience for some women who felt their lives were for the most part dictated by others. For some women, the act

meant, on a symbolic level, a statement of separation from the mother and becoming an individual, a woman with her own power.

It is clear that the price to be paid in a case of termination of pregnancy, emotional and otherwise, is enormously high and none of the positive aspects that I have mentioned would outweigh this; but it is important not to ignore these aspects.

Men and abortion

The issue of abortion not only touches very deeply the women who have had an abortion, but also women who have never had one, and even men. This may be one of the reasons why it is such a taboo subject. The issues it brings up include questions of life and death; women's and men's roles in society; questions of power and control; the power of reproduction in women and men's fear and envy of it. It brings up the issue of being unwanted and the potential rejection that each one of us ponders on at some point of our lives. 'Was I wanted?' 'How did I come into this world, this family?' It brings up many existential queries from time to time. Each one of us has strong feelings concerning motherhood lurking somewhere. As well as these issues, there are important aspects of pregnancy and termination which, in my opinion, affect a man's attitude towards his partner. The first one is men's fear of women's ability to reproduce. This brings up many feelings for the man as the 'potential' father: the fear of control, the power, the self-sufficiency that women sometimes feel when they become pregnant; the fact that, in the end, it is a woman's decision, and hers alone. Staying with a woman who is pregnant by him seems to some men the utmost commitment and some may find this daunting. On the other hand, staying with a woman who has an abortion may feel like a rejection of himself in some way. Either way, men find the experience of abortion very difficult and threatening. This is the reason why this experience is a 'make or break' issue in many relationships.

Sometimes a man supports a woman fully, goes with her to

the hospital, gives her space, safety and encouragement to talk about what she feels, accepts the anger she is expressing and generally supports her during and after the experience. For many women, however, the reality is quite the opposite. Often the man cannot cope with the strain and leaves. Often, he doesn't want to know, and the woman is then left with having to deal on her own with two losses at the same time: the loss of her pregnancy and the loss of her relationship, involving pain, anger, sadness, and despair.

Men often feel a sense of loss, guilt, anger, and lack of control about the decision. These feelings are difficult for many men to express or even acknowledge, both because of their conditioning in our society and because the experience is 'at one remove'.

Both because abortion is so strong a taboo and so contrary to social concepts of what it means to be a 'woman', *and* because it involves so many painful, unconscious feelings, women need a chance to talk about it, free from any preconceived notions about what their feelings/reactions, etc., 'should' be. What needs to happen is that the taboo should be broken to give a chance to more women to talk to each other about their abortions and attendant feelings. Women should be allowed to have and express whatever feelings arise in them and not feel obliged to have any specific set of feelings. In talking about the experience of abortion more women should aim to understand the conflicts underlying it. Abortion should become, rather than an experience unnoticed, denied, unimportant, one that is easy and immediate to talk about.

This article is dedicated to Jeanette and Rami, my parents, with love.

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