

The Need for a Creative Approach to Abortion Counselling

by Karen McLaughlan

Karen McLaughlan is the Senior Social Worker at one of Auckland's Abortion Clinics where she has worked for several years. She is an experienced psychodrama trainee and the Administrator of the Auckland Training Centre for Psychodrama.

The purpose of this paper is to write about my work with clients who are pregnant and considering an abortion. Pregnancy presents an opportunity to produce a new life and to make a gift to the world in the creation of this new life. There is an awakening to our divine origins through pregnancy generates new ideas and ideals. The commitment to continuing to bring forth something new in oneself is often the point of growth as someone decides not to continue with a pregnancy and proceeds with having an abortion.

My Inner Preparation

The picture I have of myself in the future is being able to embrace all that life presents and to consciously connect with this. It is necessary for me to meet each and every person with freshness, hope and commitment to interactions that will uplift and further a person's progress. My inner process enables a strength and inner quietness that lifts me from my own day to day turbulence. Working to accept that there is a purpose and value in certain life experiences provides me with a constant source of challenge.

Naivety in Meeting

I warm up to meeting this person as though I've never, ever talked about this before. I'm new to it. I am the Artist with a New Canvas ready to paint the uniqueness of this person's experience. "What is it like for you to have become pregnant? What is it like to know you can become pregnant? What are you noticing about yourself now that you have become pregnant?"

Meeting with a Counsellor

For many the meeting between myself and them is the first time they will have met someone who is called a counsellor. To assist the client to be receptive to the relationship has meant that I have worked to develop the role of Naive Explorer, not having a fixed idea about what somebody might think. In this first meeting I have two primary aims that will determine the basis of the counselling. Firstly, I aim to value everything a person says; secondly, I aim not to relate to anything as a problem at this point but as an opportunity, even though the clients

have a strong tendency to do so. The social and cultural conserves are very powerful forces in influencing a person to feel shamed, a social outcast, guilty, unusual, ... and sinful. It is a major task to see that the work is framed in an open way where possibilities can be explored freely. When facing abortion, guilt is a natural response and not to be seen as a problem. The more pertinent question is 'What is the real affect of the experience of feeling guilty?' such as a renewed awareness of our ability to create life and to diminish life, acting on internal desire – free of external constraints; standing alone in the face of restrictive family, and religious beliefs.

The Need to Learn the Difference Between Feeling and Emotion

Having worked under siege conditions at times with anti-abortion protesters, this maximised the urgency to see the difference between feeling and emotion and its implications for the decision-making process. The siege conditions constantly provoke an intense semi-hysterical, highly political atmosphere stimulating the emotions that clients already inwardly are experiencing and therefore it has been vitally important for me to strengthen my ability to mirror in a clear, objective and simple way and create a non-crisis atmosphere where a completely different range of roles can emerge for both the client and myself. If coping roles continue to dominate the clients functioning then there can only be a survival solution. If I continue to relate to the situation as one of crisis then I am totally submerged in the sensational and highly political climate and will not be able to promote the development

of spontaneity in the client. This mirroring has the significant effect of strengthening the client's relationship with themselves and the growing and steady capacity to make sense of the experience – to push through the cloudiness of emotion and come to the calmer thinking and deeper feeling elements. The decision making process is then simplified and the person experiences a release.

Strengthening the client's relationship with themselves encourages freedom from the conserved attitudes, such as 'it's the woman's right to choose', 'women who have abortions are heartless', 'women should accept the responsibility of a child if they become pregnant'. If a person is truly self responsible they know they are making decisions and it is not a matter of a 'right' given from an external source. A personal freedom is gained. The place of self responsibility gives way to viewing '*the abortion issue*' as something that is neither right or wrong.

Giving Expression to the Unspoken

I warm up to being a Daring and Willing Learned Guide to talk about the difference between spirit and flesh. My aim in doing this is to assist people to see themselves as spiritual beings, something more than flesh. Doing this creates a certain amount of freedom and releases people from their worry about destroying a potential life. Making sense of their own internal experience and putting words to it brings awareness of their human-ness. The person becomes aware that their experience is 'natural'. Also, this has assisted me not to be hung up with the destruction aspect of abortion but to realise this is one small aspect of the total life situation.

In a public and private way, there continues to be shame and silence about abortion in our society. It is not conversational. Bringing out in the open the feelings of cruelty, feeling like a murderer, a mutilator, often leads on to further discussion about ourselves as spiritual beings and connections with our life purpose. For the person a reconciliation occurs between the feelings of cruelty and guilt and the place of the whole experience in their life. This balance gives the person an expanded experience of themselves and a re-evaluation of attitudes.



Another Step Towards the Future

The next step is for the person to hold that reconciliation and to picture themselves in the future. A surprising number of people don't think about the future at all nor themselves in the future. The past and the present are very much alive for these clients but the future is blank or empty and appears to be inconsequential. This contributes greatly to the situation being defined by the client as a time of crisis only. There needs to be a

meaningful pull of the future created by good aims and goals.

The New Zealand law pertaining to abortion requires that the pregnancy be detrimental to the person's physical, emotional, or mental health. Consequently, in applying the law, people warm up to negative ideas about themselves. Often the fact is that they don't *want* to be pregnant. Simple as that. However, they have to go through the hoops, it requires that they assume a one down or subservient position, be inept, and show that the pregnancy is going to be detrimental to them and that they can't cope with it. They are required to see themselves as unable to cope emotionally. They think about *can't*, and often don't make the next step to *can* and *will*. 'I can't have a baby because ... and I can't have an abortion because' so the situation can very readily become intransigent. What are they recognising about themselves – their inability. This restrictive thinking has a diminishing and introverting effect.

The other side of the picture is less recognised and valued, that is 'If I don't have a baby the future is going to be really different.' 'I can, I will do something other than being a mother.' 'I warm up to being a Thoughtful Pioneering Visionary to assist the person to picture a scene sometime in the future when they are not pregnant. "What will you be doing? Who are you doing this with? What have you become?" Concretising and application of role reversal is very helpful in expanding the exploration here. This process enables the client to give form and expression to their own ideas about the future and to bring new life to themselves without having a child at this time.

An Opportunity for Social Atom Repair

I notice that pregnancy makes a person to reflect on how they have been living some aspects of life. The social and cultural conserves about abortion make a person to have a particular kind of dialogue with themselves. This is often oriented to the past. 'What I should or should not have done, I wish I had..., If only...' Regret becomes a feature. The relationship with the original social atom is standing out like a beacon and the nature of the old solutions is more obvious. With the assessment of the original role system, a new plan can be made for further role development that will assist an adequate solution to be arrived at for the individual as they are today. A typical role analysis would be as follows:

At the point of the initial crisis, significant roles include:

Progressive roles

Well developed

- Determine Seeker of Guidance

Developing

- Yearner for Life
- Independent Planner

Coping roles

- Rebellious Rejecter of Conserves
- Frightened Isolate

Overdeveloped fragmenting roles

- Guilty Mutilator
- Shameful Sinner
- Disbelieving Creator of Life
- Punitive Moralising Critic
- Wishful Regretful Thinker

As the work progresses, there is role development that includes these roles:

Progressive roles

Well developed roles

- Sad One
- Sense maker
- Self Respecting Decisionmaker

Developing

- Hopeful Future Seeker
- Creative Planner
- Reverencer of Life

Coping Roles

- Rebellious Rejecter of Conserves
- Quiet non-reactive listener

Diminishing Fragmenting Roles

- Shameful Sinner
- Regretful Thinker
- Moralising Critic
- Harsh Standard Setter

The relationship with a counsellor during this time can be crucial to the progress of the person's ideas and to make the decision-making process about abortion a freedom-making experience. To wake up to life – to sharpen the focus on the person's ability to create their own future. This is what I have come to regard as the most challenging and central element in making abortion counselling a creative process.