

Reclaiming Fatherhood

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**"Wounded Fathers - Why Do They Come For Help?"**

Slide 1 **Attachment injury** – relief in sculpture park in Oslo, Norway

Thank you for inviting me to participate and speak at your conference where we try to reflect on the subject of the conference: Reclaiming Fatherhood. A Multifaceted Examination of Men Dealing With Abortion.

Let me share with you some reflections coming from my work with men who come to me and are willing to talk about their lives. We have therapeutic dialog in groups as well as in face to face setting.

I have heard stories of men involved in abortion experience who are sober alcoholics, who have struggled with other compulsive obsessive behaviors, sex, gambling, have outbursts of anger and depressions. They are not only “under influence” of traumas, developmental and life deficits, but also under influence of human needs for integrity, love and meaningful life and work. They want to regain their humanity and live abundant life. That is why they come hoping for change. They are looking for more clarification of their life experience. Not necessarily explanation of their life. They want to be understood and not explained.

Abortion may be described as “perfect” trauma – it happens within attachment context described as love relationship, performed by doctor whose role is to

provide care and support, rationalized and legally sanctioned by society. There is nothing more confusing. On the other hand trauma caused by terrorists is described as follows: – context of hatred and revenge, performed by anonymous, difficult to identify “enemy”, condemned by society and punished by law.

Unfortunately the more perverted “solution” (abortion) is accepted by society the more natural need of care giving is repressed. What is more, cultural, social situation contributes to confusion. We observe a phenomenon in which pretending/faking love in order to enable oneself sexual relief becomes nowadays most common form of abusing other person.

It is obvious to me that men should be part of healing vision. Also other members of the family system who suffer and struggle burned by loss and death experience should be taken into consideration. We should avoid mistakes of simplification, concentrating only on one part of the problem. The puzzle is much more complex than it seems at the first glance. We should be aware of brothers and sisters, of siblings who survived abortion in the family system. Being selected to live writes difficult life script.

People are not only pushed by their drives and unresolved conflicts that make them reenact their past but are also attracted by the values hidden in their hopes and concerns which provoke their courage to live in spite of loss and suffering..

Men entangled in abortion decision suffer. They develop their own ways of coping. Some of them are self punishment and self destruction. Fathers “wounded by death” are looking for way out when they are confronted with interpersonal

emptiness and lack of meaning in their life. Their struggle for creating life giving relationships is part of their healing journey.

## **EMPTINESS**

Men wounded by death suffer emptiness caused by tragic attachment injury. Death through abortion is devastating experience (literally: makes once life empty); takes away child, meaning of masculinity, projection of fatherhood, marital intimacy and confidence – it turns marriage into relationship which can be described as allergic, tiring or even dead relationship expressed in diminished mutual interest, engagement; lack of meaningful projections/plans/dreams. Stagnation, lack of flow, movement is another name. Standstill, cessation. ( Death stops/kills one's own process of maturation ).

One can see interpersonal isolation usually experienced as loneliness, big theme in therapy. Loneliness which comes from the breakdown of intimacy, of attachment injury is dramatically painful. Group therapy is particularly effective tool of treatment for that kind of loneliness..

We can also talk of intra-psychoic isolation, that is a separation from oneself. Freud described the defense mechanism of isolation as the process of stripping off affect from the memory of some unpleasant event and interrupting its associations so it is isolated from ordinary processes of thought. Therapeutic goal of helping patients reintegrate split-off parts of themselves bringing them to reconciliation, new reunion with rejected parts of their own history and identity. Reconciliation leads them towards health/wholeness.

Men after abortion very often suffer from a highly unsatisfying relationship with themselves, others and the world. And they crave a life witness who would

understand them. Meaningful therapeutic relationship puts us into this role of becoming our patient's life witness.

## **LACK OF MEANING OF LIFE**

The problem of life meaning intrigues all self-reflective beings. And it plagues particularly those with attachment injury. Men with abortion experience are vivid example of this statement.

Trivializing death results in trivializing life. Death devastates, emptifies life from its essential values. It is trans generational experience which affects the whole family system.

Karl Jaspers, German psychiatrist and philosopher introduced concept of the "boundary experience" – irreversible experience which shifts the individual from the everyday mode to a more authentic mode. Of all the possible boundary experiences, confrontation with death is by far the most potent. A confrontation with death often creates a dramatic perspective-altering opportunity. Also Martin Heidegger, German philosopher, spoke of two modes of being. First, an "everyday" mode in which we marvel at *the way things are* in the world. This is a state of forgetfulness of being, of fleeing through distraction and compulsive entertainment, of being tranquilized by the objects surrounding us. And, second, an "ontological mode," a state of *mindfulness* of being in which we live authentically and marvel *that things are*, marvel at the very suchness of things. In this state the individual is primed for life-change.

Death haunts us as nothing else. Confrontation with death and its sting which is emptiness provokes man's search for meaning dynamisms. Life needs to be meaningful if it is to be lived humanly. Regaining humanity is achieved through

rediscovering meaning in spite of death experience. This is a challenge for those with attachment injury.

Viktor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist, says that life proves to be basically meaningful even when it is neither fruitful in creation nor rich in experience. The third group of values lies precisely in a man's attitude towards the limiting factors put upon life. These values he calls attitudinal values. What is significant is the person's attitude towards an unalterable fate. The opportunity to realize such attitudinal values is therefore always present whenever a person finds himself confronted by a destiny towards which he can act only by acceptance. The way in which he accepts, the way in which he bears his cross, what courage he manifests in suffering, what dignity he displays in doom and disaster, is the measure of human fulfillment.

Frankl suggests that the leading maxim of existential analysis (third Viennese school of psychotherapy after Freud and Adler) might be put this: live as if you were living for the second time and had acted as wrongly the first time as you are about to act now. Once an individual really puts himself into this imagined situation, he will instantaneously become conscious of the full gravity of the responsibility that every man bears throughout every moment of his life: the responsibility for what he will make of the next hour, for how he will shape the next day. Very often you can hear "After what I know now, after abortion, I would never do it again".

To ask the meaning of life in general terms is to put the question falsely because it refers vaguely to "life" and not concretely to "each person's own existence and his existential situation." Perhaps we ought to go far back and recollect the original structure of experience. In that case we must perform a kind of Copernican

Revolution, and give the question of the meaning of life an entirely new twist. It is life itself that asks questions of man. It is not up to man to question, rather he should recognize that he is questioned, questioned by life; he has to respond by being responsible. The guide which guides man in his responses to the question life puts, in his taking the responsibility for his life, is conscience. Conscience has its “still small voice” and “speaks” to us – that is undeniable phenomenological fact. What conscience says, however, is in every case a response. Men need to be re-humanized in order to have access to their conscience. They need to regain the capacity to feel, think and behave authentically and overcome variety of forms of mystification of their experience and existence.

Our ongoing search for meaningful purpose in life often throws us into a crisis. More individuals seek therapy because of concerns about meaning and purpose in life than therapists often realize. Carl Jung, Swiss psychiatrist, estimated that one third of his patients consulted him for that reason.

Irvin Yalom, American psychotherapist, says that humans appear to be meaning-seeking creatures that have the misfortune to be thrown into a world devoid of intrinsic meaning. One of our major life tasks is to invent a purpose in life sturdy enough to support a life.

## **MASCULINITY AS CREATIVE BEING**

For man and woman abortion experience rewrites the meaning of sex. Instead of pro-creational, life giving, creative act it becomes destructive, brings desperation (lack of hope) and death. Sex from life giving turns into death bringing experience. In some parts of the world there are more men who through their sexual activity

feel more life eliminating than life promoting. Being father means giving care and protection and safety not rejection and annihilation. Guilt and grief calls for action - suggests reasons to get out of this tragic trap. No sedative chemicals, no alcohol; no sex to distract. No other distractions. Rather honest and painful confrontation with the dilemma.

Life is a challenge which stimulates courage, creative thinking, activity. Children vibrate and stimulate growth of man into father. Yes, man becomes father thanks to a child. A child gives birth to a father.

RELIGIO = BOND / ATTACHEMENT / relationship

### **Overcoming attachment injury**

Broken/restored relationship.

Slide 2 **Concerned and caring**

Slide 3 **Accessible, responsive and related**

Man wants to reconcile with himself, others, the world and God. Reconciliation effect is to lead to reintegration of the broken self, broken relationships and lost meaning of life. Being reconciled in all these aspects means that attachment injury has been treated properly.

The Oxford English dictionary informs us that one of the roots of the word “religion” is *re-ligare* – to tie or to bind. Latin word *religare* connotes a variety of ties – to family, to ancestors, to the state. That meaning - tying or binding together or connecting - discloses the deep need for restoring humanity through religion or connectivity with God.

Yalom reminds that therapists place nothing above the goal of connecting with patients as deeply and authentically as possible. The professional literature regarding the therapist-patient relationship is replete with discussions of encounter, genuineness, accurate empathy, positive unconditional regard, ‘I-thou encounter.’ And group therapists place the highest priority on establishing group cohesiveness. Men wounded by abortion on their way of overcoming attachment injury, deep alienation from others and Life, need to find other humans who are willing to become their life witness and offer them understanding and helping hand.

Yalom refers to the patient/therapist alliance as *fellow travelers*, a term which abolishes distinctions between “them” (the afflicted) and “us” (the healers). A heightened sensibility to existential issues, among them wounded fatherhood issue or attachment injury, will deeply *influence the nature of the relationship of the therapist and patient and will affect therapy sessions*.

## **Final reflections**

Let me share with you some thoughts that seem to me pertinent to the discussed topic. Forgiveness and reconciliation are essential aspects of every healing journey. Also the one that helps to overcome attachment injury or abortion experience of those involved. We all deserve light on this path. Let me suggest reflections which I met long ago reading existential thinkers.

Paul Tillich wrote: “Forgetting in spite of remembering is forgiveness. We can live only because our guilt is forgiven and thus eternally forgotten. And we can love only because we forgive and are forgiven.



But there is another aspect of forgetting that is familiar to us all. Something in us prevents us from remembering, when remembering proves to be too difficult or painful. We forget benefits, because the burden of gratitude is too heavy for us. We forget former loves, because the burden of obligations implied by them surpasses our strength. We forget former hates, because the task of nourishing them would disrupt our mind. We forget former pain, because it is still too painful. We forget former guilt, because we cannot endure its sting. Such forgetting is not the natural, daily form of forgetting. It demands our co-operation. We repress what we cannot stand. We forget it by entombing it within us. Ordinary forgetting liberates us from innumerable small things in a natural process. Forgetting by repression does not liberate us, but seems to cut us off from what makes us suffer. We are not entirely successful, however, because the memory is buried within us, and influences every moment of our growth. And sometimes it breaks through its prison and strikes at us directly and painfully.

Then there is forgetting that liberates us not from the memory of past guilt but from the pain it brings. The grand old name for this kind of forgetting is repentance. Today, repentance is associated with a half-painful, half-voluptuous emotional concentration on one's guilt, and not with a liberating forgetfulness. But originally it meant a 'turning around', leaving behind the wrong way and turning towards the right. It means pushing the consciousness and pain of guilt into the past, not by repressing it, but by acknowledging it, and receiving the word of acceptance in spite of it. If we are able to repent, we are able to forget, not because the forgotten act was unimportant, and not because we repress what we cannot endure, but because we have acknowledged our guilt and can now live with it. For it is eternally forgotten.

And there is quite another kind of forgetting, forgetting that someday we shall be forgotten. Since we cannot endure the thought we repress it. The literature of mankind is full of stories in which kings as well as beggars are reminded of their having to die. Man cannot stand the anticipation of death, and so he represses it. But the repression does not remove his ever-present anxiety, and there are moments in the life of everyone when such repression is not even slightly effective. Then, we ask ourselves-will there be time when I shall be forgotten, forever? The meaning of the anxiety of having to die is the anxiety that one will be forgotten both now and in eternity. Every living being resists being pushed into the past without a new presence. A powerful symbol of this state of being forgotten is being buried. Burial means being removed from the realm of awareness, a removal from the surface of the earth.

A rather superficial view of the anxiety of death states that this anxiety is the fear of the actual process of dying, which of course may be agonizing, but which can also be very easy. No, in the depth of the anxiety of having to die is the anxiety of being eternally forgotten.

Is there anything that can keep us from being forgotten? That we were known from eternity and will be remembered in eternity is the only certainty that can save us from the horror of being forgotten forever. We cannot be forgotten because we are known eternally, beyond past and future.”

At the end of my reflections let me remind you the words that John Paul II in His Encyclical Letter *The Gospel Of Life / Evangelium Vitae*, addressed to women who have had abortion. These are the words of understanding and comfort. They remind us that children, small people, who die in abortion are not eternally forgotten. They live in the presence of God. Attentive meditation may bring healing effect to men’s soul as well.

“I would now like to say a special word to women who have had an abortion. The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and she does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and his peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. You will come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will also be able to ask forgiveness from your child, who is **now living** in the Lord. With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life. Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life.”

Thank you very much for your attention.