

## The Wounded Generation

by Victoria M. Thorn

With over thirteen years of experience in post-abortion ministry, I continue to ask myself, "Who are the people who phone our office?" Their stories are so consistent-both in the pain they experience and in their feelings of abandonment. I believe we could better help these wounded people if we could better understand these *formative* issues that have shaped their lives.

A little over a year ago, a couple of experiences coincided that led me to begin an in-depth examination of societal influences on this generation of adolescents and young adults. I attended a national conference on trauma that brought together experts from very diverse fields to share their information. This experience started me questioning whether there were some traumatic events that had touched the lives of many young adults - events that are now being played out in their lives. Conferences like this always raise more questions for me than they answer. At the same time, my husband introduced me to a book entitled *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* In this book, the authors Neil Howe and Bill Strauss examine issues which they believe are significant events, personally and societally, in the formation of what is called Generation X or Generation 13. This generation is arbitrarily defined as those born between 1961 and 1981 or 1965 and 1985, depending on whose schema you use. In either schema, included in the group are individuals on either end of the spectrum who might also carry the described traits.) The information in the book fueled my questioning and led me deeper.

Howe and Strauss speak of six influences which they believe have shaped Generation 13. I would add one more influence and, while they allude to it, it is not specifically named. These influences are as follows:

- Readily-accessible birth control
- Legalization of abortion on demand
- Increase in divorce
- Increase in mothers in the workplace
- The Zero Population movement
- "Evil child" movies
- High societal mobility (my addition)

Certainly there are those who would argue that these are not all bad things-that, indeed, people have new freedom and a sense of control over their lives that was not there in the past. However, let me explore exactly what some of this has meant in terms of the lived experience of our young people.

## "Wanted" Children, No Longer "Welcome"

Birth control is certainly one that most Americans believe is a good thing. In fact, many claim that the availability of readily accessible and easy-to-use birth control has ushered in the first era in which there has been an open discussion of "planned" or "wanted" children. The drawback, however, is that as children become more "wanted" they also become less "welcome."

Dr. Philip Ney, a child psychiatrist from Canada who has done a great deal of work with abortion survivors, points out that there is a significant difference between "wantedness" and "welcomeness." Dr. Ney makes the point that for something (or someone) to be "wanted," it must fit into a plan or an agenda. The object is wanted precisely because it fills some need. This means that "wanted" children are, by definition, desirable because they fit into some plan of their parents. But the fact that they have been made part of a plan is confining.

In contrast, when unplanned children are simply *welcomed as a "gift from God,"* they face fewer parental expectations for how they are to fit into the "plan." This is why a child who feels "welcomed" into the world, rather than "wanted" as part of a plan, feels freer to find and be his or her "self."

This welcoming attitude was far more common in the past. With the arrival of the birth control pill in the early 1960's, however, there was a dramatic and widespread shift in mindset toward the importance of planning when and how often couples would have children. This simple decision to *plan* childbearing has fundamentally shifted the mindset of parents to a more controlling mode. Couples must begin by deciding *how many* children would best fit into their life plan and *when* they should most optimally be conceived. Proper planning requires an effort to anticipate their lifestyle decades into the future. How big will the education budget be? How many children can they put through college? When would the pregnancy least disrupt the mother's career? Should they save for the mini-van before becoming pregnant or "risk it" now?

In this way, even before children are conceived, planning parents have begun "fitting" their child into a planned life. This invites even more planning and expectations that will be attached to the child. So we find pregnant couples who are already worrying about what preschool the child will attend. Should the child be allowed to play football? Should she be in ballet or gymnastics? Perhaps more than in any previous generation, the dreams of parents have become a script for their children. When the plan goes awry, family anxiety, tension, and conflicts are exacerbated.

This mentality of wantedness also feeds into abortion decisions. Many planned and wanted children are aborted because it is discovered that the child may be challenged with physical limitations that would prohibit him/her from fulfilling the parent's expectations. Other children, who would be welcomed in just a few years, are aborted because they were conceived "too soon"-before the plan allowed.

The "wanted" mentality makes children into objects and not people. They become possessions, and as such are expected to meet the expectations of those around them. The children of Generation 13, individually and collectively, carry an enormous burden of expectations.

These issues play a formative role in the self-identity and self-esteem of Generation 13. This generation has been exposed to issues of "wantedness" that were never openly discussed in prior times. Many children now know if they were originally planned or "wanted." Some have been told they were conceived because Mother's contraceptive failed, or because Dad didn't want to go to Vietnam. The unintended subtext to such an explanation is that "your conception was a mistake" or "you were a convenient excuse."

Others have been told they are loved so much that their parents can't possibly consider giving them the sibling they so deeply want. Children are confused by this message that there is only room for a specific number of children. They observe that their parents have two or three cars, perhaps a home and a summer home, several televisions-and the logic of what they have been told escapes them. If they, their children, are so wonderful, why wouldn't their parents want another child? These mixed messages lead to confusion: maybe they really are not such special gifts in the eyes of their parents. Maybe children are more of a burden than a blessing. It is almost inevitable that this perception will color their own attitudes toward their own children.

All of this is a far cry from the traditional explanation that children are a gift from God who come whenever God sees fit-the result of a three-way love between a man, a woman, and our Creator. While modernists may scoff at this "mystical nonsense," none can doubt that this message gives young children a bedrock upon which to build their identity and purpose in life: "I am here because God wanted me." Since God, unlike parents, is unchangeable, the message of being wanted by God, for His plan, is a more secure foundation upon which to build one's self-esteem.

## **A Generation of Abortion Survivors**

One in three of this generation have been aborted. This fact has aggravated the sense of inequality between generations. Author Donna Gaines, a social worker who examined suburban youths in a community following a successful group suicide, has observed that "The baby bust is the last generation conceived *before* abortion became legal. In effect, Scott and his peers grew up understanding that one generation now had the legitimate right to annihilate another, up-front."

While all members of Generation 13 are aware that they have slipped by the winnowing fan of abortion, the emotional impact is even greater for those who have lost a sibling to abortion. Dr. Ney, Dr. Edward Sheridan at Georgetown, and others have observed that this effect can be felt even when the surviving children have not specifically been told about the abortion. In essence, on some level these siblings of aborted children feel themselves to be the "abortion survivors." Some exhibit the same symptomology as those

who lose a born sibling to cancer or accidental death, commonly called "survivors syndrome."

A few members of Generation 13 have even lost a twin through an incomplete abortion procedure. Others have themselves survived an unsuccessful abortion attempt on their own lives. Far many more children were "unplanned" and scheduled for abortion but then survived because the mother changed her mind.

## **Bonding or Breaking?**

I believe this latter group is especially significant. There is an uncountable multitude of children whose mothers, at least for a while, contemplated aborting them. This contemplation of an abortion can impede proper in-utero bonding between mother and child, at least in the early stages of pregnancy, and possibly throughout the pregnancy.

This is a topic covered in the fast-growing field of pre- and peri-natal psychology. In a growing body of literature, these researchers are showing that inadequate bonding in-utero, or traumatic birth experiences, can have lasting impact on the emotional development of children. Thomas Verny, M.D., in his book *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child*, cites a case handled by an obstetrician in Scandinavia. After delivering a normal, full-term child he observed that it failed to nurse at the mother's breast. Puzzled by this unusual behavior, he experimented by taking the baby to another nursing mother who agreed to put the child to breast. Amazingly, the child responded by vigorously nursing. Upon returning to the child's mother, he asked if anything traumatic had happened during the pregnancy. She told him that she had not wanted to carry the pregnancy and had, in fact, planned to abort it. However, the protests of her husband caused her to carry the baby to term. Verny concluded that the child experienced maternal rejection in-utero.

There is also psychiatric literature that suggests that those who survive an attempted abortion grow up to be periodically suicidal. This may be related to inadequate in-uterine bonding, meaning that the mother/child bond that normally occurs during pregnancy did not properly develop. This can occur if the woman resists bonding because she is contemplating abortion or awaiting the results of prenatal testing for fetal defects. Furthermore, many writers in the field of pre- and peri-natal psychology believe that trauma--in the form of rejection or exposure to inter-parental physical or verbal abuse, or traumatic birth experiences--can have permanent negative effects.

In addition, we do not know what effect maternal anxiety or alarm may have on a developing infant. Most certainly, the hormonal chemistry of anxiety or alarm is quite different from the chemistry of calm and happiness. Since the blood chemistry of the mother passes through the placental tissue, we must ask what impact this might have on the unborn child. There is substantial evidence to support the conclusion that hyper-arousal in-utero may increase the tendency for a child to become hyper-sensitive to stress, over-fearful, angry and withdrawn. Such children may act out, in the form of social aggression against others, or to turn inward and become suicidal.

This issue of proper mother-child bonding is further complicated by the fact that women with a history of abortion frequently report that the birth of a subsequent child is often the trigger event that releases repressed guilt or anxiety about the previous abortion. These aroused feelings of distress about the prior abortion *can* impede bonding with the newborn child who is subconsciously "connected" with the stress. The woman may withdraw. Many report that they became afraid of loving the child "too much, because God will punish me by taking this child away from me." The same fear that God will punish them for their abortions by hurting subsequent children has, other women report, turned them into hovering overprotective mothers who have stifled their children. All of these scenarios suggest that abortion may be distorting the relationship between the mothers and children of this abortion generation.

## **Life as a Menace**

On some level, the children of Generation 13 are aware that they are the survivors of a pre-birth holocaust. Themes of survival, death, the destruction and revenge of innocents are common in their literature. It is also reflected in their music. Dr. John Sonne, a psychiatrist, writes of the abortion themes present in contemporary music and album covers, for example that of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana. The abortion images are clear and graphic.

Howe and Strauss also talk about the impact of the "evil child" movies on our society. They have identified at least 20 evil child movies for this generation, including "Rosemary's Baby," "The Omen," and "The Exorcist." Recently someone pointed out to me that this trend first surfaced in the 1950s with the movie "The Bad Seed." Through these movies, children have been portrayed as unpredictable, evil and indeed, dangerous. Children have been demonized.

This fact has not been lost on Generation 13, which describes itself as lost, empty, and no good. This "children are a menace" concept is also a major theme in the Zero Population Growth movement and in many areas of environmentalism. Population control advocates have sought to place a burden of guilt upon parents who consider having children. School children are routinely taught that the birth of every new child will result in more pollution of our earth. This is a powerful message. It is also distributed at every level of the media. Just one aspect of this major propaganda effort is the periodic appearance of newspaper articles claiming that it takes a million dollars or whatever the latest figure is, to raise one child.

Another message, commonly taught in schools, is that children are a great burden. Fourth graders are given hard-boiled eggs that they must keep under constant supervision for a week. High school freshmen are given paper sacks of flour. The official explanation is that the children are simply learning about responsibility, what the constant care of a child or pet requires. But there is a more insidious lesson being taught. When the egg cracks or the flour leaks, as will inevitably happen, the children feel embarrassed and inadequate. They conclude that this responsibility of constant care is too much for them.

They are asked to shoulder the ridiculous burden of "caring" for inanimate objects that, lacking the ability to inspire love or joy, invite mockery and scorn. This "experience" of parenthood is designed to leave them with only one impression--a negative one.

These are just a few of the many ways that population controllers, often using government education grants, teach children that babies (1) pollute the earth, (2) cost a lot, and (3) are a great burden. In short, if not an outright threat to peace, prosperity, and happiness, children are barely worth the trouble. This anti-child mentality has not only shaped this generation's attitudes toward future childbearing, it has also reflected back upon their own sense of being.

## **The Unattached Generation**

Two other factors that Howe and Strauss target as formative factors in Generation 13 are increased divorce rates and a radical shift in the numbers of mothers in the work force. To more fully understand all the ramifications, I would submit that these must be coupled with the additional factor of increased societal mobility.

We must understand that in the last generation, it has become increasingly rare to live near one's extended family. In pursuit of careers, children move far from their parents and siblings. In addition, it is common for families to move several times within the years of child-rearing, meaning an uprooting of the children from daycare, friends, neighborhood and schools. It is my contention that in the past, although divorces happened and mothers worked, families were not highly-mobile and other attachment figures played a major role in the life of children and adolescents.

For example, in the 1940s and 1950s, when a divorce happened, the family often lived in the same community as grandparents, aunts and uncles. These people, along with neighbors, stepped in to fill the gaps in the family system. The children were already bonded to these people and so a more intensified relationship naturally followed. If a mother needed to work, the caretakers were often family members, grandmothers, aunts or cousins or perhaps a neighbor. These people were very much part of the child's life and he or she was attached to them. They remained consistent influences throughout the child's growing-up years. Attachment figures who remain part of the child's life give the child a sense of being cared for; they also provide alternate role models for the developing child. This, in turn, creates a sense of security and stability for the child, even in the midst of upheaval or loss in the nuclear family.

I propose that one of the most serious outcomes of mothers being in the workplace in this generation is the lack of consistent caretakers for infants, small children and adolescents. Most infants in the U.S. are placed in a full-time daycare within one year and commonly within two to three months after birth. The child is often placed with a care provider in I one-on-one setting. Once the child reaches toddlerhood, if the family has not moved or changed providers sooner, parents must often find another provider because their current caretaker doesn't care for toddlers. Now the child may go into more of a group setting,

but perhaps with fairly-consistent care providers. When the child reaches three or four, he or she is moved again, into a pre-school setting with daycare for the remainder of the day.

We need to remember that babies and small children come equipped with the ability to bond easily to many people. They attach to those who care for them. Yet, children are moved from provider to provider with little awareness that these children will grieve the loss of each attachment figure. It is known that one factor in the development of an attachment disorder is the repeated change of the primary care giver. This can disrupt the formation of any stable attachments.

Like it or not, the reality of the matter is that the primary care giver is the person who cares for the child's immediate needs during his or her waking hours. In most cases today, that is not the biological mother or father. John Bowlby, the premier expert on attachment and loss in children, points out that when children grieve, instead of being angry and searching for the lost love object, they simply withdraw and detach.

It is my observation that generally people respond as though babies and small children are insensate creatures incapable of feeling. I see that parents change daycare providers without a thought to their child's reaction to the loss of an attachment figure. In this situation, I believe we have a large number of children who develop habitually detached personalities in order to protect themselves from further hurt. This detachment will carry over into adolescence and adulthood, making trust and intimacy difficult to obtain.

Furthermore, the absence from the home by a caretaking parent as the children grow older creates the phenomena of the latchkey child. A study of 4,932 youngsters in San Diego and Los Angeles said that students who were unsupervised 11 hours or more per week were at twice the risk for alcohol or chemical abuse as those who were not. Several studies of adolescent sexual behavior show that unsupervised teens take advantage of the opportunity. In an extensive study done by Robert Coles and Geoffrey Stokes, 54% of the teens had their first sexual intercourse at home or at their partner's home. In a Seventeen magazine study, 78% of sexually active teens have sex in the home of their parents or partners' parents. The old adage "Little children, little trouble; big children, big trouble" certainly seems to hold true.

## **Sons of the Broken Home**

With the dawn of the "sexual revolution," divorce rates soared. The impact of divorce on the formation of Generation 13 children cannot be measured, but it is certainly profound.

Let us examine the dynamics of divorce from a child's-eye view for a moment. The child perceives that somehow he or she is responsible for the disintegration of the family unit. The child feels guilty—a feeling that is aggravated by the "children are a burden" message. In addition, divorce feels like abandonment to children. And the parent most often leaving the home is the father. We need to recognize that the absence of a father in

children's lives is a loss of life-shaping proportion. Sadly, some fathers withdraw and keep little if any contact with the child.

David Blankenhorn in the book *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* says "when a father leaves, his fatherhood leaves with him to wither away. The child is unfathered. When the father dies, the mother typically sustains his fatherhood by keeping his memory alive. When a father leaves, the mother typically diminishes his fatherhood by either forgetting him or keeping her resentments alive." He continues: "Death kills men but sustains fatherhood. Abandonment sustains men but kills fatherhood. Death is more personally final, but departure is more culturally lethal."

Fatherlessness has a powerful impact on sons. Blankenhorn points out that "fatherlessness is a primary generator of violence in young men." He says that sons of traditionally masculine fathers generally do not commit crimes but that fatherless boys do. The absence of a father squelches and confuses the process of male identification in the son. The boy struggles to separate from the mother, and may develop "protest masculinity," the "unrestricted (unmanhandled) aggression and swagger of boys who must prove their manhood all by themselves, without the help of their fathers." A 1990 study commissioned by the Progressive Family Institute "points out that the relationship between crime and one parent families is so strong that controlling for family configuration erases the relationship between race and crime and between low income and crime."

David Korem, in his book *Suburban Gangs*, says that the common denominator of a gang member--urban and suburban, American and European--is the absence of one parent or the complete dysfunction of one parent in the parental diad. In addition, he points out another central issue for these young people is what he calls the "Missing Protector Factor." He means by this that young people express that there is no one they can call who will respond immediately if they need help. This was also found to be true with two-parent families where both parents work and are not available to the child under normal circumstances.

Boys deprived of their fathers lack a male model of relationship, and I believe this predisposes young men, when faced with a crisis experience such as a pregnancy, to do what they perceived their own fathers did when the going got tough--they abandon! Guy Corneau, in his book *Absent Fathers-Lost Sons: The Search for Masculine Identity*, discusses the terrible fear of intimacy experienced by men who had experienced the absence of their father while growing up.

## **Daughters of Divorce**

Girls are also seriously affected in a divorce. If the mother leaves, girls are missing a role model for womanhood and parenting. If the father leaves, the emotional consequences are equally dire. Blankenhorn quotes the research of Garfinkel and McLanahan, examining the intergenerational consequences of homes without fathers: "Daughters of single

parents are 53% more likely to marry as teenagers, 111% more likely to have children as teenagers, 164% more likely to have a premarital birth, and 92% more likely to dissolve their own marriages." Judith Wallerstein. in her California Children of Divorce Study, found that "many of the young women who had done well during their early adolescent years experienced a 'sleeper' effect as they moved into late adolescence and became frightened of failure. Almost all confronted issues of love, commitment and marriage with anxiety--sometimes with very great concern about betrayal, abandonment, and not being loved. In response to all this, many of the young women, and some of the young men, appeared counterphobically to have thrown themselves into short-lived sexual relationships." Interestingly, daughters whose fathers had died tend toward shyness and inhibition in contrast to daughters of divorce who tend to be the more socially and sexually precocious. When they do marry, female children of divorce are more likely to choose "inadequate husbands" and to have their own marital problems. And so the cycle of brokenness continues.

Divorce also exposes daughters to an increased risk of suffering sexual abuse as unrelated partners of her mother enter the household--and with them come unrelated step-siblings. Blankenhorn cites research findings from the firm Westat which found that "of all cases of child abuse in which the perpetrator is known, fully one-quarter are cohabitating 'parent substitutes,' usually boyfriends--a rate dramatically higher than rates found among fathers, day-care providers, babysitters and other care givers." It is also observed that many girls in homes where the father is absent are also poorly protected from other "sexually opportunistic males in the surrounding community."

Once a young girl has been sexually abused, she is subsequently more likely to become involved in adolescent sex. This is because her sexual boundaries have been violated. In her prior abusive relationship, the abuser insisted that sex equals love and attention. Thereafter, when a young suitor proposes these activities she has no boundaries to invoke. She is also more likely to pair with partners who will abandon her in crisis. She is also more likely to get pregnant. These pregnancies are often deliberately sought for many reasons: she hopes to escape an unhappy home life; she hopes to secure a commitment of marriage from her boyfriend; she hopes to prove her maturity and autonomy to her parents; she simply wants to satisfy the desire to have a child whom she can love better than she has ever been loved. But once she is pregnant, the pressures to abortion can be overwhelming. Because of an underlying low self-esteem, lack of support from her family, and pressure from the boyfriend in whom she has invested her love, she is more likely to give in and abort. In doing so, she is sacrificing her dream of a better life because, on a practical level, abortion "makes sense"--for everyone else.

In such cases, it is clear that abortion does not solve the problems of these young women, nor does it help them to achieve their goals in life: Instead, it often sets these girls up for a pattern of repeat pregnancies and repeat abortions. In her research with inner-city adolescent girls, Nancy Heller Horowitz discovered that young women are likely to deal with feelings of loss over an abortion, or other significant losses, by becoming pregnant again. Those who work in the field of abortion's aftermath, as well as those working in crisis pregnancy settings, are keenly aware of this repeat pregnancy phenomena. Some

crisis pregnancy centers find that as many as 50 to 60 percent of the young women seeking help have had a previous abortion. A study by the Elliot Institute found that approximately 30 percent of women with a prior abortion report deliberately attempting to conceive a "replacement pregnancy," with 45 percent of these becoming pregnant again within a year of having had the abortion.

## **Conclusion**

I have only touched the surface of the wounds that afflict the heart and psyche of Generation 13. However, I hope that this cursory examination will raise awareness of the multitude of loss issues that affect this generation of young adults.

We need to recognize that this generation is often seeking love and intimacy through sexual relationships. Many of this generation have not had the opportunity to observe a successful marriage relationship, and so they have nothing upon which to model their own marriage relationships. Therefore, fearing intimacy and commitment, terrified of being abandoned themselves, they avoid committed relationships.

In addition, many of our young adults do not know how to parent because they have failed to see other adults parent. In the age of one and two child families, they do not recall how their sibling was parented. Removed from their extended family by distance, they have not had the opportunity to care for cousins or to see others do so. As adolescents in their neighborhoods, they are often denied casual contact with infants and small children who are in daycare. Studies with primates indicate that if parenting is not observed during the growing up years, the young who are becoming adults will fail miserably in their attempt to parent.

These factors all contribute to the tragedy of abortion. When the broken, needy, and unattached of this generation become pregnant in uncommitted relationships, they quickly realize that there are no family resources to fall back on. As abortion survivors themselves, they know only too well how the news of their "unwanted" child will be greeted by what remains of their nuclear family. Faced with the prospect of parenting, and acutely fearful of their own inadequacy, they panic and abort.

This generation of young adults carries such profound wounds. We, as care givers, need to recognize these wounds in those we deal with. We need to do all we can to promote the rebirth of committed marriages and families--where our infants are welcomed, our youth are protected, our adolescents are nurtured and challenged, and all are free and safe to love unconditionally. Every time we are successful, we need to recognize that we are building a healthier world, a world where abortion will no longer be accepted or sought after.

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