

Payment in Blood

These thoughts arose from a comment made by a social worker remarking the high number of repeat abortions among women who had been victims of incest during their childhood. Undoubtedly, these women are hoping to heal their trauma by taking a pregnancy to term. However, such hopes are dashed and subsequent pregnancies follow on quickly, all ending in a termination. Colleagues working in maternity shelters noticed in these cases that

(a) talk about contraceptives was totally ineffective, and

(b) the relationship between the life experience of these women, with all the perversions it may entail, and the gynecological and obstetric events they have passed through was, in their eyes, obvious!

This is what I want to summarize in my title: what is the value of a woman's blood? What does she pay for with her blood?

I shall develop this idea in three parts:

- o First (1) the self-punishing aspect of abortion,
- o Second (2) the sacrificial aspect,
- o Third (3) the creative character of action.

I know that trying to examine an idea in depth is to risk misunderstanding, even misappropriation. But I also know that risk is inherent to the life of an activist, particularly in the case of a feminist. With that rhetorical caveat, I can now take up my first point.

Part 1: The self-punishing aspect of abortion

The familiar "I don't deserve it" serves as the founding expression for the behavioral pattern that follows from it. If there is a guilty person, if this guilty person has not been judged and punished, then this guilty person is me. Finding herself in the victim's place induces in effect the thought, "she deserves what happens to her." This attitude is the sign

of a far more widespread problem that must be considered in its entirety. Any woman, even those who have not been traumatized, have an aspiration in becoming pregnant: that of leaving their position of daughter to take that of mother. In this act, there is a certain effrontery, a symbolic violence done to her mother. Of course, it could also be the mother's responsibility for not having known how to authorize or for not authorizing the process of transmission between generations. In this case, the daughter has to pay twice:

a) on the one hand, because she does not feel authorized, all the more so inasmuch as, deep down, she wants to take the mother's place.

b) on the other hand, because in fact this submission revolts her and her anger doubles her sense of guilt.

In my practice, it seems to me that, most often, it's not so much the mother's fault but rather the daughter's weakness. And, if we focus on her weakness, it seems to me that its cause is a flaw in the cultural milieu, which can be observed in two different forms:

- either the culture is unrefined; or
- there is a loss of cultural bearings.

The diminution or loss of ritual practices, resulting from their maladaptation to the modern world, could be one cause. Two types of rituals, particularly representative of women's reproductive life, strike me as important here:

- those concerning the first appearance of menstruation, which announce that pregnancy is now possible;
- those concerning marriage which, at a given age and before a community defined either by the couple or by the two families, recognize a potential maternity and paternity.

Contemporary society must take up the challenge posed by the acceleration of history, which is causing traditions to decline and, consequently, symbolic rites to recede.

In principle, education's role is to coordinate the biological moments when pregnancy is possible and those when a child is desired. In this respect, abortion can compensate in a

primitive manner for a lack of maturity and therefore be a necessary violence that has a beneficial effect. But if abortion is a violent action that a woman does to herself, then it belongs to the category of sacrificial violence.

Part 2: The sacrificial aspect

We must distinguish between punishment (which consists of repairing a wrong committed) and sacrifice, which requires a different kind of exchange. In the latter case, it is the logic of human sacrifice that prevails. A woman may sacrifice her pregnancy in order to pay back the debt owed by that part of herself that remains in the shadow, the part that she cannot admit and therefore cannot affirm. This notion of sacrifice is, of course, not specific to abortion. As a midwife, countless times I have observed that the relationship between the mother and her oldest child provides the opportunity to solve problems, thereby smoothing the experience of having a second child. These difficulties affect the pregnancy, the childbirth, and breast-feeding, with the attendant disturbance of sleep. It entails the sacrificial payment of a debt contracted through the free gift of the ability to give birth. That gift is considered undeserved and using it is to do violence to the established family and/or community order.

It would appear that many women feel unworthy of the freely given ability to have children. This denotes a lack of self-confidence, a sort of inability to assume their own abilities. Isn't this difficulty in accepting a free gift really a fear of gratuity, that is, the fear of freedom?

It's difficult for humans to accept a free gift, yet a child is the free gift par excellence. It seems to me that the notion of liberty is at the heart of all procreative processes, whatever their outcomes. I should also point out the importance of all phenomena during pregnancy that go to make up identities and personalities. Our very character expresses the possibility

of freedom in our relation to others. Isn't arrogance, for example, the exterior sign of an internal shyness? As such, it expresses a defect in interpersonal relations.

Part 3: The creative character of action

At the point of decision, there is a commitment that reveals to the subject the truth about him/herself. You cannot really know what you are until you act. That is the way desire realizes itself. For this reason, in my view, accepting as well as refusing a pregnancy constitute two equivalent exercises of liberty. In the desire to abort, there is an aspiration for deliverance from manifold guilt, and consequently a fully responsible exercise of freedom. According to Hegel, freedom is fulfilled in commitment on condition that the commitment is made freely. Hence, pregnancy termination and childbirth, in more ways than one, are a "delivery". You cannot decide once and for all, but only once at a time. It seems to me that the decision to abort is taken as long as the power of a woman's past is stronger than her faith in the future. At the same time, in the violence of its inscription in the present moment, an abortion is a pivotal moment in a woman's life when she can move from the past into the future. Through the commitment it implies, the act of having an abortion can work as the necessary payment for a "life debt" as Monique Bydlowski phrases it in the title of her book. In that moment, a woman may find liberation possible - why not even speak of accomplishment? Education takes precedence over contraception. How many times in my career as midwife have I seen women, three months after an abortion, subsequently become pregnant and successfully give birth? In my view, preventing abortions involves reinforcing family equilibrium more than treating the immediate causes. What is at stake is a woman's history, not simply the technology of contraception.

In sum, I would say that all these reasons lead me to conclude that a decision to abort belongs to the individual woman alone who feels she needs a termination. This is the exercise of a sort of tragic freedom that can then make way for other possibilities. It is only when a

person frees herself internally that she can exercise that freedom in her relationship with others and thus expand her own freedom.

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