

INSPIRING LIFE OF AN ABORTION SURVIVOR

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Melissa Ohden, *You Carried Me: A Daughter's Memoir* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2017)

Melissa Ohden's story begins with an attempt to kill her in her mother's womb. That is what brought her to Washington in September 2015 to testify before the Judiciary Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives. She spoke along with Gianna Jessen, also an abortion survivor—whose story had, years earlier, been a source of strength to the teenage Melissa as she struggled to deal with the knowledge that she had been the target of an abortion.

Together, they used that Congressional forum to tell America, first-hand, about abortion's victims. "We are your friend, your coworker, your neighbor," Melissa said, "and you would likely never guess just by looking at us that we survived what we did."

When we think about people like Melissa and Gianna, we tend to bookend their stories. They survived an abortion. Now they are living happy, productive lives. The end. It's a powerful pro-life story, in and of itself.

Yet to know of how Melissa's life started—as the intended victim of an abortion—and where she is today—a wife, mother, author, and powerful advocate for women, men and children victimized by abortion—is to know only the barest outline of her inspiring story of tenacity, courage and survival.

In *You Carried Me*, she invites us into her lifelong journey of questioning and self-discovery—from her extreme vulnerability upon learning, as an adolescent, that her live birth resulted

from a failed abortion; through the depths of teenage depression and self-destructive behavior that followed; to a sustained and determined search to find her origins, to determine God's purpose for her life, and ultimately to reconnect with the mother who tried to abort her—and who, she would learn, was as much a victim of that decision as she was.

Along the way, we see how the never-ending love of Melissa's adoptive family, and later her husband and her own children, have sustained her; and how, conversely, friends, college peers and teachers, even some clergy, their hearts apparently poisoned by the abortion culture, reacted with discomfort or outright hostility toward Melissa when she told them her story.

To read Melissa's story will be, for those who are actively pro-life, a powerful affirmation of all they have believed and given witness to: the living humanity of the pre-born child; the meaning and purpose that God gives to every human life; the destructive nature of abortion, not only to the child in the womb, but to everyone who is touched by its evil; and the love, care, healing and hope—for mothers and children before and after birth, and also for all those whose lives have been devastated by the tragedy of abortion—that are and must be central to every pro-life ministry.

For abortion supporters, on the other hand, Melissa's story will be—or should be—terribly, terribly disturbing. For her life is testament to the reality of abortion. No one can look at her, or hear her story, and deny that abortion kills; that every abortion—or every *successful* abortion—destroys a living, growing human being. Melissa is here only because in her case, the abortion *failed*. She was living in the womb and she *continued* to live after the abortion. She—as well as Gianna and other abortion survivors—is a living, breathing refutation of the abortion culture's wholly discredited claim that there is no meaningful life before birth.

Moreover, her life disproves the pernicious lie upon which our abortion culture is based: that a child conceived under difficult circumstances is necessarily “unwanted,” and would be better off dead. Melissa, we see, was very much wanted and loved: by the family that adopted her shortly after her birth; by her husband and children later in life; and also, as she would learn, by her birth mother, who never wanted, and deeply regretted, the abortion that was forced upon her.

Melissa’s story, however, is not just about the extraordinary love she has received; it is also about the love she has given.

In Frank Capra’s classic movie, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” the angel Clarence observes that “Each man’s life touches so many other lives. When he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?” We see in Melissa’s story how her own life, of course, was so dependent on the love of others. But we also see how she deeply touched so many lives—and what holes there would be in those lives if, as first intended, she had not lived.

The outpouring of love for Melissa began with the nurse who first heard her weak cry after she had been aborted, and the nurses who got her to ICU—despite, as she would learn years later, the demand of her own maternal grandmother that she just be left to die. Then there were all the nurses and staff who continued to care for her over the ensuing weeks as she fought for her life.

What would have happened to her if they weren’t there? Or if they had taken the attitude adopted by Barack Obama? As Melissa points out, as an Illinois State Senator the future president voted against legislation to protect children born alive after an abortion. One wonders what he would say to Melissa Ohden if he met her today. Would he have the courage of his convictions, and tell her that if it were up to him she wouldn’t be here?

Then there were, of course, Melissa's adoptive parents, Ron and Linda Cross. They risked so much to take her into their family, not knowing what traumatic long-term consequences might have resulted from the saline poison that had wracked her little body for four agonizing days before the abortion was completed. (Miraculously, there were no such lasting complications in Melissa's case, beyond the serious medical problems associated with premature birth that the Crosses had to navigate with Melissa.) But—inspired, she writes, by the strength and tenacity of a friend who had been rendered quadriplegic by an accident, they hoped to find the same qualities in Melissa; and did, even as their love helped to draw those qualities out.

It is easy to understand what the Crosses meant to Melissa—giving her a loving home, working and sacrificing over the years to raise her and give her opportunities, being there for her as she dealt with the awful truth—that they had to tell her—about the attempt to abort her, and then being fully supportive of her efforts to trace her origins and find her birth families.

Equally compelling, however, is what Melissa has meant to them—how this “unwanted” baby, intended to be discarded, became such an integral, loving part of their lives and their family. What a hole there would have been in *their* lives had Melissa been killed before they could have found and adopted her.

There are so many others whose lives Melissa has touched, and who have touched hers: from friends, siblings and extended family members; to all the people she ministered to during her career in social work, in the fields of mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence and child welfare; and all those to whom she now helps bring hope and healing through her various pro-life ministries. And of course, where would the lives of her own husband and children be without her—or hers without them?

Most compelling is the incredible story of Melissa's connection to members of her birth families. From the searing pain of learning that her birth father had died without ever responding to the letter she had written him, came the wonderful, loving relationship that her paternal birth grandfather formed with Melissa.

Then, contacted by her birth-mother's cousin, she read the words she had longed for: "The abortion was against your mother's wishes."

"I felt a private joy for myself," she writes: "I had been wanted, and loved, after all." This was confirmed when finally they met, and her birth mother shared with Melissa the joy she felt when she first learned, years later, that her baby had lived.

At the same time, having, through her pro-life work, "met so many women who had endured what had happened to her," Melissa wept for her mother. "My heart ached for this young girl, afraid and alone, forced against her will—by the people who should have protected her—to end the life of her child." Forgiveness, already in her heart, now flowed forth.

And so Melissa and her birth mother filled each other's lives as no one else could. Melissa gave her mother the forgiveness and love that made her whole again; she in turn enabled that forgiveness in Melissa, and filled the great void in her child's life with the knowledge that her birth mother does, and always has, loved and wanted her.

Moreover, Melissa learned that telling her story publicly, far from being painful for her birth mother, was vital for her healing. "I need you to keep speaking," her mother wrote. "You are the first person to ever fight for me." Melissa, the intended victim, was now the healer.

As is so often the case with those victimized in one way or another by the abortion industry, Melissa's story also

involves a journey of faith—one that would ultimately lead her into the loving embrace of the Catholic Church.

A Christian who attended various churches over the years, she traces the beginnings of her journey to the Catholic faith back to an encounter with a pro-life group outside a Planned Parenthood clinic in 2005.

Blissfully unaware at the time that Planned Parenthood did abortions, she had gone there to obtain birth control pills. Approached by a pro-life man who informed her that they did abortions, she told him that she knew all about abortion, she was an abortion survivor.

“You should be here, not there!” he replied—words that challenged her, and ultimately helped draw her into publicly sharing her story. He also gave her a rosary, and “ever since,” she writes, “I had been led, slowly but inexorably, to the Catholic Church.”

Years later, “encouraged by the faith and witness of so many Catholics I had met through my years of speaking out,” she started attending Mass. “I knew right away it was where I belonged; it felt like coming home.” She began taking formal instruction, and was received into the Church at Easter time in 2014.

Thinking again of Frank Capra’s words, it is easy to see the holes that would exist in so many lives today had Melissa Ohden not lived. But what about those millions of babies who did not live? How many “awful holes,” in how many lives, exist today because the Melissa Ohdens who would have filled them were killed by abortion?

To the unspeakable atrocity of more than 40 million innocent children killed, add those countless millions of empty, wounded lives. That gives some idea of the true depth of America’s abortion carnage. And that is what Melissa Ohden’s life story should inspire us to confront.

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