

Fertile Dreams

Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern

[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)

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First Reading:

"Is Silence the Best Choice" by Paula Fortini
(Resolve Newsletter, September/October 2003)

My husband and I kept our infertility a secret. No one -- not even our families -- knew about [it] the entire time we were in treatment and well into our adoption plans. In the past year, I have opened up a great deal and can now talk about my infertility -- possibly more than most people. I do not hope to convince people to start shouting from the rooftops that they are infertile. I am hoping that people who think they can handle it alone and are ashamed will take an active role and not become a victim to their infertility or to their silence about it ...

My husband and I chose to keep quiet ... because we thought we were the only ones experiencing this kind of trouble. No one in our families would understand, we reasoned, so why tell them? Looking back, if I had been more open about it, I think I could have eased some of the painful things that people said to us and, perhaps, softened my reactions to them.

But since no one knew I was trying to get pregnant I received many comments about [the need for] grandchildren, [got asked] what were we waiting for, and [got told point blank] that we weren't getting any younger. I was even called selfish. Going to baby showers or any event with a pregnant woman was incredibly painful. I spent many a time in the bathroom of friends' homes crying. My privacy [I now see] added to my victimization. I now think that had I told family and friends what we were going through, some -- but of course, not all -- of the hurtful comments would have been avoided, and it might have made me feel stronger instead of weaker.

Second Reading:

From *Conquering Infertility* by Alice Domar

As newlyweds we think about when we'll start "trying" and we chat endlessly with our girlfriends and sisters about whether it's better to give birth in spring or summer and which we'd rather have first, a girl or a boy. Then, once we do ... set out to make a baby it's nothing but fun. A little champagne, some candles ... [and] we fully expect to be well on our way to a darling little baby. And as we wait ... we smile conspiratorially at women with babies and then march confidently off to the drug store for a pregnancy test, happily anticipating a plus sign.

And then, for some women, nothing happens.

So, you try again -- but with the tiniest sliver of worry. You may pay more attention to the calendar and plan some extra midcycle [lovemaking]. You nix the champagne and pop a few extra vitamins instead. But still ... nothing happens. So you buy ovulation kits and cut out caffeine and ask friends for advice. You may exercise more (or less), and insist your husband wear boxers instead of briefs. You wonder whether you should make an appointment with your OB/GYN, or maybe even a specialist. You fixate over what you could possibly be doing wrong ...

Getting pregnant starts to become an obsession. As you fail to conceive, cycle after cycle after cycle ... You blame yourself, your body, for failing, even though it may well be your husband's body that is the source of the problem ... [You think] *We should have started trying earlier ... I should have taken better care of myself* ... Eventually your relationship with your husband begins to suffer ... [W]hen your husband comes home from work exhausted on day twelve of your cycle, you tell him that you don't care *how* tired he is, he's doing it tonight if it kills him. You're panicked about not being able to conceive, but he's laid back. *Don't worry*, he tells you. *It will happen. Just relax and stop obsessing about it.* But you can't.

Then your friend gets pregnant. She calls, all excited, prattling on and on about the names she's picked out and the darling crib she wants to buy and how excited her parents were to find out they're going to be grandparents. You pretend to be happy for her, but deep down you're insanely jealous, and you can't get off the phone fast enough ... You find yourself avoiding her and everyone else who has children ...

You are stressed out. You may feel depressed, anxious or angry. You might have trouble concentrating at work, and you may even cry every day. You begin to wonder if you'll ever have a baby, and if you'll ever be happy again. [You've entered the world of infertility and the only way out is through it.]

Sermon:

I identify with both the readings this morning -- both the instinct to keep your struggles with infertility private and the spiral of events, suffering and worry that ensue as you face the struggle to conceive. It's a temptation, for those who hear about it, to think of infertility as a medical issue. The truth is that that would be like saying cancer or miscarriage or Alzheimer's is only a medical issue. The reality is that facing infertility for some people (maybe most) is about facing compromises to some of the most salient dreams many of us have for our lives. The medical testing and intervention it entails can involve significant physical suffering, and the whole experience is pervaded by deep uncertainty -- which most psychologists agree is one of the most stressful of all psychological states. Moreover, it raises some of the most troubling religious questions, like how such hopeful prayers can go unanswered. As such, infertility is hardly just a medical issue. If it is a medical issue, it is only that for those lucky enough to be at arm's length from the problem.

This is why I am speaking this morning about my journey through infertility. Suffering, we know, deepens us. Religious communities, where we bear each other up during suffering, are also those places where we share the ways in which suffering deepens us. Ideally, in breaking the silence that our first reading talked about, our wisdom and compassion as a community grows.

One in six couples of childbearing age struggle with infertility, so there is a great deal of silent suffering going on around us. By talking about it, understanding it as best we can, even in this single hour, my hope is that we find and forge even a modicum of greater compassion for those enduring such suffering that will allow us to move among them with hands and hearts that offer more healing and solace. So, let's begin:

There are some men and women among us who never took their own fertility for granted. Those are the few who knew from an early age they had hormonal imbalances or physical injuries that put their fertility in jeopardy. However, most of us, I think, grow up assuming that having children, if we choose to have them, will be easy. Indeed, we spend a good deal of our young adult lives trying hard *not* to conceive. And in communities such as this one, where kids and strollers dominate the landscape, perhaps this notion is subtly reinforced -- the idea that kids are as free as the air we breathe, ours anytime we open our lives to the possibility of them.

So all most folks think must precede a pregnancy is deciding they want to get pregnant and finding a partner, and perhaps making sure they are on sound financial footing. That done, they can begin trying to start a family, sure to succeed. When they don't get pregnant, it comes to most as a surprise.

What happens next is pretty textbook. It's like Alice Domar describes it. The attention to biological details. Eating better, buying ovulation predictor kits, beginning to worry. More disappointment. Anger, fear, hurt. And then there is the part where Alice Domar leaves off. The doctors' visits begin, the tests, the uncertainty. You worry about whose fault it is and how your partner will take it if it is your "fault" and not theirs. The debate about how you will deal with the various outcomes that might present themselves. And meanwhile, all around you friends are getting pregnant. Friends who married long after you two did are having their first and maybe their second child. Relatives who say they "weren't even trying" call you with their good news, and as happy as you are for them, each such call is one more reminder of what eludes you. You get anxious because despite all you do to increase your chances to conceive -- giving up alcohol, caffeine, eating more tofu, leaving out milk, exercising less, taking yoga, doing visualization, testing month after month to determine the right days and times, and on and on the list goes -- you still cannot get pregnant. For those of us used to getting what we want if we try hard enough, imagine putting all your creative and intellectual energies behind something so important to you, only to have it completely elude you month after month. Try that on for a little dose of powerlessness and loss of control.

At about this point, well-meaning folks will tell you not to worry. But of course you'll worry. So would they if they were in your shoes. What are you worrying about? You are

worrying about whether the infertility you face as a couple is the 35 percent that has something to do with your health or the 35 percent that has to do with your husband's or the 20 percent that involves you both or the 10 percent that is pure, maddening mystery. You are busy worrying about all the tests you have to schedule. You are worrying about what you'll do and how you'll fare as a couple depending on what you find out. Will he blame you if your body is at fault? Will you secretly be angry with him if it is his body that is the problem? What will you do if they have no answers for you? Then you worry about what you'll do when you hear the options. Will you need surgery? Will he? Will your only hope be highly invasive medical interventions, or donor sperm or eggs? What will the chances of success be and how many cycles of treatment must you endure to exhaust your reasonable options? How much will it cost? There's a lot to worry about.

Then there is the price you pay for whatever you decide. If you decide to go with medical interventions, your life is dictated by your body's internal clock and the doctors. If a certain test is scheduled on a certain day, you are due at the doctor's office at dawn. It doesn't matter that you planned a weekend in New Orleans or your boss wants you in for an 8 a.m. breakfast meeting with clients. And tell me how you explain this to people while protecting your own privacy. Tell me how you maintain your privacy, let alone your dignity, while saying, for example: "I am sorry, everyone, I won't be preaching at the 9:30 service today because I'm ovulating." Fortunately, I never had to face that particular scenario, but I might have had to!

And awkwardness is not the only price. There is emotional strain. Marriages almost inevitably suffer during infertility. Friendships get neglected, particularly if the friends have kids. Or you avoid having dinner with friends you think *might* be beginning to plan a family because if they tell you they're pregnant, you're afraid you'll break down and cry. So you and your partner protect yourselves from more pain. You isolate.

One of the most important decisions for me that helped me to break out of this struggle was the decision to start talking about infertility. Going through it was a painful reality and it had a very private dimension, but for me, mental health ultimately meant that I not bear it all in silence. Staying sane meant I had to share what I was going through with others -- albeit a very carefully chosen set of individuals and groups. I so needed places where people would be sensitive to what I was facing, where I could name what was really going on for me day in and day out, where I was willing to take something private and make it less private. I needed places where people would hold me, if not literally, then figuratively.

For anyone who opens up about their infertility, there is the reality that doing so sometimes also opens us up to more pain. Why? Because sometimes well-meaning folks say the wrong things. It never helps to hear that a miscarriage was probably "for the best" because only genetically compromised fetuses naturally abort. That may be true, but we'd still lost a child and been thrown back into the struggle to conceive again. It didn't help to hear that "we should just relax," especially from people who had children and had conceived them easily. It made it sound like the whole business was our fault. And although I'm sure stress doesn't help fertility, I wondered if they thought the stress had

preceded the infertility, rather than the truth, which is that it was a consequence of what we were facing. It astounded me that folks would sometimes boast about how they "got pregnant without even trying" as their response to hearing our struggles. I wasn't sure if they thought that this was funny or a lark. I did know that hearing this didn't ease our pain. Plus it always made me wonder what they were doing that didn't constitute "trying" but still resulted in pregnancy. I mean, did they need a basic anatomy lesson?!

The good news is that others responded in ways that were what I had hoped for. Though many had no idea first-hand what we were going through, they responded with care and sensitivity and love. So, in the end, breaking the silence made the whole ordeal far more bearable. I was grateful for all those people who didn't shy away from going deeper into conversation with me when they found out what we were facing. A common mistake is to think infertility is taboo to talk about because it touches on the realm that involves lovemaking. Let me tell you, for people struggling with infertility, the issue ceases to be about lovemaking early on. It becomes about doctor's visits, diagnoses, uncertainty. And there's no less a need for folks to be able to talk about those realities than there is for anyone facing any other disease.

Let me say, too, that I drank up every promise of a prayer and every time anyone said they were going to picture me with a healthy baby. Theological differences aside, it was great solace to me to know that my Baptist grandmother and Catholic aunts were storming the gates of their respective heavens with prayers for our baby, and the atheists were pumping out positive vibes and the practitioners of yoga made me the focus of their daily practice of self-forgetting love. I held every one of those promises like a talisman to keep us safe. If there are two things we can all offer others who suffer from any pain, it is, first, a simple, caring sympathy that doesn't try to solve problems or plaster them over with thin palliative words but enters into the devastation and walks there a while; and, second, the promise to keep the other in our prayerful hopes and thoughts. At least that was the case for me.

The good news about infertility is that most folks come to some resolution. This disease is painful, but it rarely kills those who suffer from it. Either a couple conceives through luck or medical intervention, or they choose to build their family through adoption or foster care, or they decide to be child-free as a couple. Yet, between when the infertility is diagnosed and the resolution is found, there is pain. It's here where we can be sympathetic and supportive friends.

The couple that endures rounds of in vitro fertilization will spend years and hundreds of thousands of dollars and use up literally garbage cans full of syringes in order to realize their dream of a child. Couples who adopt have to first let go of the dream of a biological child and then go through the grueling process of home study and waiting before their child arrives. Those who decide to be child-free have to admit that this wasn't their first choice, change their life vision to one without their own nuclear family, and embrace it before their peace of mind is restored. Each path has its own struggle. Our call is to be as supportive as possible to people as they walk along whichever path they are on through this.

What do we do? We ask: Are you seeing doctors yet? How is that going? What are the next steps? Are you telling your family you are struggling with this? How are they responding? And always we ask: What can I do to support you? Then we listen. We tell them how sorry we are that they have to endure this. How much we care about them. And before we go, we remind them that we are keeping them and their fertile dreams in our prayers and thoughts and making their dreams our own. We remind them that they are not alone.

May our pain be lessened by each other's courage to enter into the struggles of life with us, and may beauty and wisdom and new life, in whatever form it takes, always be the offspring of our pains.

Amen.