

Infertility and Aftershocks

by Patricia Irwin Johnston

To set a tone for discussing the aftershocks of infertility, let me share a passage from the novel *Baby*, a story about the impact made on an entire family by an infant's death. It's written by the popular author of young adult fiction, Patricia MacLachlan, who put these words (about a classroom teacher) into the mouth of her pre-adolescent narrator:

Mrs. Minifred said once that life is made up of circles. "Life is not a straight line," she said. "And sometimes we circle back to a past time. But we are not the same. We are changed forever."

I didn't understand what she meant then. I remember steam whistling in the radiator under the window in the school library, and the way Ms. Minifred's hair brushed the side of her face when she leaned forward. But I liked the sound of her words, and I remember saving them for later.

A couple of years ago, I found myself stunned by an article on menopause after infertility in a national newsletter. The article made me sad for its author (who was experiencing menopause as a resurgence of grief about infertility) and sad for her young adult children, who had been adopted, but who, it was apparent from the tone of her article, had never been "enough." I felt alarm for the newsletter's target audience, who, still caught up in the anxiety of ongoing treatment or only recently having put treatment behind them, might see this view as "the way it will be" — perhaps even "the way it should be." Would infertility haunt them throughout their lives, their genetically-connected never-born children hovering like ghosts over family life, clouding its potential for joy and connection?

This happens, yes. In fact, in my opinion, unresolved losses may have been responsible for much of the bewilderment experienced by those touched by adoption in years past when adoption and infertility support and education were underdeveloped and generally unavailable. But I don't believe that this is the way it should be, nor do I believe it has to be this way.

It's like this: adoption makes us parents, but it doesn't make us fertile. Much as we might wish differently, adoption, despite giving us parenthood, cannot change the facts of those several other losses associated with infertility — the loss of control over many intimate and practical aspects of our lives; the loss of genetic connection and immortality; the loss

of the opportunity to create a new person who is the genetic and symbolic blend of love we share with our life's partner; and the loss of emotional and physical expectations we have about being pregnant. Adoption can't give us these things that infertility took from us.

It's a natural process for the psyche to try over and over to heal the wounds of loss. Significant loss profoundly changes who we are and how we see ourselves. Sometimes those changes make us stronger, more tolerant people, better equipped to handle future losses. On the other hand, loss not squarely faced but deliberately buried, ignored, bypassed, and left unresolved can come back to haunt us and our partners and, perhaps most especially, our children.

Are most of us who choose to parent by adoption likely to be reminded of our infertility in uncomfortable or confusing ways? Absolutely yes! More likely than not, you'll experience one or more emotional triggers like those that follow and feel twinges—some sharper than others: finding yourself at a newcomer's event or at a playground or a swim-and-gym class or birthday party with a group of mothers you don't know particularly well, who begin to share pregnancy/ labor/birth/ postpartum war stories to fill up the space in the conversation; refusing to allow yourself to resent certain aspects of being a parent (after all, you asked for this and were given the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval by an agency!); being ready for another child and feeling at the mercy of others all over again in family planning; hearing a frustrated child whine, "Mom, I wish I grew in your tummy!" or flinching as the angry teenager rails, "My real dad wouldn't be so mean!"; stumbling a bit over how to help your daughter deal with playground taunts (kids are always able to find a peer's most vulnerable spot to jab at); addressing the dreaded family-tree project for the first time; watching a child with an artistic or athletic talent you can't even relate to blossom to stardom and wondering where that came from; or feeling sad that an interest or talent you shared with your own parent is completely lost on your child who marches to his own drummer; figuring out whether a preadolescent kid's behaviors or feelings are "adoption stuff" or not; receiving an unexpected letter or phone call from a birth parent in what had previously been a confidential adoption....

And There are quite a few symptoms that may reflect parents' difficulty in feeling a clear sense of entitlement: observing your child's movement to sexual maturity; when taking your son to

college or moving him into his own apartment, feeling a stab of worry about whether the connection is tight enough to ensure that he will indeed come home; watching your daughter or daughter-in-law go through a pregnancy and feeling sadness that you can't relate as a part of that particular "sisterhood"; becoming a grandparent as your child gives birth to a gorgeous baby about whom nobody exclaims that he has "Grandpa's nose"; or perhaps worst of all, hearing your child say those dreaded words, "We're having a little problem getting pregnant, but we've probably just gotten our timing wrong...."

And then there's menopause. Many who have experienced infertility fear that this, more than anything else, will resurrect old pain and loss. Menopause can indeed be very hard for those — like the newsletter article's author — whose chosen path has always felt second-best. But I don't think this is typical or "normal," and it certainly doesn't have to be this way.

In brief (you can read the longer version in Taking Charge of Infertility), let me share with you my own introduction to menopause, which came suddenly, surgically, before there was time for it to happen naturally. Though I didn't feel particularly worried about the pending surgery and its result, I did read several books on menopause to "get ready," including two by "gurus" of feminism in my era. I had expected these to tell me that hysterectomy and menopause were something very manageable — something problematic only to those with a particular "state of mind." Instead I was surprised by how devastating these authors made menopause sound, how angry these presumably confident women seemed to be at the loss it represented for them. This confused me; this thinking fed into the old myth of being "less of a woman" if not fertile. It seemed to me that I had dealt with that particular grief long before and had moved on.

So I started to make phone calls to everyone I knew who had had a hysterectomy or gone through natural menopause — women who had been infertile and women who had not. The anecdotal pattern I saw in these conversations about menopause with women, both infertile and fertile, was that the women who had the easiest time of all were those who had been infertile, had faced it squarely with support and education (working with a good counselor or an organized group like RESOLVE or IAAC or something less formal such as a group of well-informed friends) at a time close to the crisis. These women were, on the whole, much more positive about themselves, about their recovery from surgery, about the intactness of their femininity and sexuality, than were the largest group of women — those who had never experienced infertility at all!

In my conversations, women most likely to have experienced strong grief after hysterectomy or as part of natural menopause seemed to be those who being forced for the first time ever to acknowledge that they would not be giving birth. These included both those, not previously infertile, who had given birth before, as well as those who had previously attempted to avoid the pain of infertility and were now grieving the final loss of their fertility... like the author of the newsletter article.

"Resolution" of infertility has always been an ambiguous and controversial term. How it is measured and how it is accomplished are difficult to quantify. People like me believe that resolution is a process that demands hard work but that ultimately results in acceptance of self and circumstances no matter what the medical outcome or alternative choice. We believe that infertility need not be a life-consuming "condition," that life itself need not be impaired by a fertility impairment. We believe that as we move on past the child-bearing years, the question of whether we have borne or parented children need not become the measure either of our success or of our pleasure in life. No "coulda, woulda, shoulda" for us.

And so for people like me, RESOLVE founder Barbara Eck Menning's well-known quote that infertility resides always in the heart like an old friend that "will always be a part of me" has great meaning but seems easily misunderstood as well. This quote doesn't push us hard enough to do the difficult but necessary work of dealing with loss proactively. When we don't do this work, we become victims of or drifters in infertility, and it is victims or drifters who can be knocked off our feet by the emotional aftershocks of infertility.

But perhaps more important, parents who haven't dealt with their own infertility and adoption-related losses will find it difficult to help their children learn to deal with their adoption losses. Evidently, it had not occurred to the author of the newsletter article that her children might read and react to it. If you've read Adopting after Infertility or Launching a Baby's Adoption, remember the family heirloom sleigh bell story....

- There are possible HEALTH AND MEDICAL aftershocks to infertility that are a separate issue. Dr. Bud Keye and I wrote an article for AFA on this a couple of years ago. I would be happy to send reprints on request.

Pat Johnston and her husband, Dave, an adopted person himself, are the parents, after infertility, of grown and growing children who will turn 22, 16 and 13 in 1997. She's the author of several books; the newest is this winter's Launching a Baby's Adoption: Practical Strategies for Parents and Professionals.