

Trying

THEA SULLIVAN

Who can ever learn the will of God? Human reason is not adequate for the task, and our philosophies tend to mislead us . . . All we can do is make guesses about things on earth.

— *Wisdom 9:13-16*, The Good News Bible

Recently samples of baby products — diapers, formula, wipes — have begun showing up in my mail. Packets of coupons with smiling infants on them arrive in envelopes that say, “Congratulations!” in big red letters.

The first time the mail carrier rang my bell to deliver one of these packages, I came down two flights of stairs, eager to find out what it was. Maybe a gift? A catalogue order? The woman handed me a bright yellow box, which I soon realized was a sample of Enfamil formula. I stood frozen in the doorway, my mouth open as if to call out in protest. By the time I found my voice, she had disappeared across the street.

Not so long ago I would have pondered the hidden meaning of these packages. I would have wondered if they were a good omen for my husband and me, a sign that our luck would soon change. And being a good sport about the mix-up could only help our chances, demonstrate our cosmic deservedness, our worthiness to have a child. (And what of the bitterness, the rising bile of jealousy and anger? Better to push it down.)

Now I’m more likely to assume that some doctor or fertility lab simply sold our address to the baby-product companies that,

using a cruel calculus, send promotional products to couples who are trying to conceive on the odds that some of them have gotten lucky. Clearly they're not worried about the ones like us, who haven't.

I implored the mail carrier to stop bringing these products, but still I couldn't figure out what to do with the formula that had already been delivered. Even if I didn't see its arrival as a sign, what I chose to do with it seemed fraught with symbolic meaning. Throwing it out seemed a bitter gesture that might cement our fate. Giving it to a pregnant friend, while sensible, felt like capitulation. Finally I tucked the box away in the back of our pantry, so it would be there if we ever needed it — *no*, I corrected myself, *when we do*.

From the start I was sure that Brian and I would conceive easily. I knew plenty of couples who'd had trouble, including my sister and her husband. But for years my intuition had told me: *You won't have trouble getting pregnant*. So waiting until my midthirties didn't worry me. Sure, I had read all the statistics — I just didn't believe they would apply to us. I thought that we would conceive easily because we deserved to. We were both teachers who loved kids, and we'd both spent a long time in therapy, which would only make us better parents. On top of that, our marriage was great — a true friendship, full of respect and honesty. Of course we would have kids.

We weren't oblivious to the passage of time — I was thirty when we married, Brian thirty-five — but we wanted a couple of years alone together. Admittedly Brian was ready for children sooner than I was: I had a manuscript I wanted to finish, a project whose completion seemed crucial to my sense of self. Besides, I didn't want the low cloud cover of an unfulfilled dream darkening my parenting years. Both Brian and I had been raised by very young parents with troubled marriages. It seemed obvious that the more self-aware and fulfilled we were starting out, the better we'd do raising kids. Surely the universe would recognize that.

We started trying a month before my thirty-fourth birthday, giddy to be "playing without a goalie," finally free from birth control. After the first month, I was sure I was pregnant: my breasts felt different, my taste for food changed, and I sometimes got so dizzy I almost passed out. But then my period arrived more or less on schedule, and it did again the next month. That's when I got serious. I bought books, meticulously charted my temperature and cervical fluid, tracked ovulation patterns. We had sex on a schedule, in the missionary position, with me lying knees-up for twenty minutes afterward. Once in a while, for good measure, we threw out the rule book and just had fun, figuring a child might prefer to enter the world as a result of some old-fashioned sexual abandon.

That first spring, a dove built her nest just outside the back door of our apartment in San Francisco and laid a perfect, pale egg in it. Brian brought me out to see it, and we stood there in silence, not needing to speak aloud the meaning it seemed to hold.

For weeks we waited, careful not to disturb the nesting dove. But the egg never hatched. It just lay there, beautiful and inert.

Everybody's got a theory about why couples do or don't conceive. Friends and relatives shared stories about what they believed were the triggering events for them. "It was when my wife started taking prenatal vitamins," or "when we got a dog," or "when we cleared a space in the house for the baby." I had my own speculations: maybe the baby was choosing a particular astrological sign for herself. (I felt certain we'd have a girl.) Maybe she was waiting for me to finish my manuscript, or for Brian to complete his master's degree. I pictured her floating above us somewhere, amused by our worries.

As the months dragged on, a few friends asked if I'd examined any mixed feelings I might have about being a mother. This made me angry: were they blaming me for not getting pregnant? But secretly I wondered the same thing. *Could I be unconsciously blocking conception in some way?*

Like a lot of people I knew, I had gradually adopted the idea that we create our own reality, that our lives are a reflection of our thoughts, beliefs, and intentions. And just as we could create fortunate events in our lives, we could also bring misfortune or illness our way. When bad things happened, it meant we had fallen out of alignment with our divine origins or needed to learn a lesson. A book called *You Can Heal Your Life*, by Louise L. Hay, was the bible of such thinking. It featured a chart listing every imaginable physical malady and its corresponding emotional or mental cause. An ingrown toenail indicated "guilt about the right to move forward"; bleeding gums, "lack of joy in the decision made in life"; deafness, "rejection, stubbornness, loneliness."

I was a Louise L. Hay aficionado around the time my sister and her husband were going through their own infertility nightmare, which included multiple miscarriages. I felt terrible for them, but at the same time I nursed private thoughts about why this might be happening: my sister's own unmet childhood needs and unacknowledged ambivalence toward parenthood. She had never been in therapy nor done much spiritual work and so, I believed, was more susceptible to such dramatic wake-up calls. Other family members whispered about my sister's stress level and possible depression, which "everyone knows hurts fertility."

Looking back, I think we were really protecting ourselves from the reality of my sister's raw suffering. Rather than feel the pain she and her husband were going through and acknowledge that we might one day suffer just as randomly and abjectly, we distanced ourselves with convenient theories. *Thank God*, I said to myself back then, *that I have the tools to work through my own issues before becoming a parent*.

At the six-month mark, on the fertility books' recommendation, Brian gamely agreed to a sperm test. He told me later

he'd had a feeling there'd be a problem. It was a November night, and darkness had fallen early. Brian and I sat quietly at the dining-room table, stunned by the test results: "Eleven million . . . low motility . . . might consider a donor."

Although 11 million sounded like a lot, it turned out to be only a fifth of normal. (Sperm counts have declined so dramatically in the developed world that the "normal" count keeps getting lower.) And "low motility" meant that, of the 11 million, only 10 percent were good swimmers. In follow-up tests, after Brian had quit taking hot baths, the count more than doubled and the motility improved a bit, but both remained well below normal.

The only treatments for low sperm count are artificial insemination — injecting a specially treated sample of Brian's sperm into my uterus — and in vitro fertilization, or IVF, in which eggs would be removed from my body and joined with Brian's sperm in a lab; then the fertilized eggs would be implanted in my uterus. We could not yet imagine undergoing either treatment. And using a sperm donor felt out of the question: we wanted this baby to be both of ours. So we just kept trying ourselves. Out of all those sperm, we figured, we needed only *one*.

We were on vacation in Italy when we hit the one-year mark, an anniversary that, according to the books, signaled the need to see a fertility specialist. I had fantasized that a leisurely, romantic trip would do the trick: we could just relax and let it happen. After three weeks there, when my period arrived yet again, I was crushed. I emerged from the bathroom sobbing inconsolably. There was no denying it anymore: we were in the infertility club, the one I had thought we would never join.

Then, just after we returned home, Brian was running by the rose garden in Golden Gate Park when he heard the words distinctly in his head: *Rosie's coming*. He heard the phrase again and again as he ran. It made no sense to him, until I told him that "Rose" was the name I had been leaning toward for a girl. *Rosie's coming*. Our spirits lifted, and I started to see roses everywhere I looked.

Still, I remembered the dove's egg that never hatched, and I didn't want to take chances. I made an appointment for my own fertility consultation. Though I was convinced that my reproductive system was in good working order, it seemed only fair to get checked out myself.

But before I had a chance to go to my first fertility appointment, my sense of smell went into overdrive, and I found myself unable to eat a maple-pecan muffin because it was too, well, *maple*. The thin pink line on the drugstore test confirmed it: after more than a year of trying, I was finally pregnant.

Here's a partial list of the theories I had about why: (1) I had accepted that we were in the infertility club. (2) I had made the fertility appointment, letting go of my stubborn insistence that there was nothing wrong with me. (3) I had been brought down from my self-righteous spiritual pedestal.

Brian's and my reactions to conceiving were different. He was deliriously happy — for days he couldn't stop smiling — but also acutely nervous that something would go wrong. He arranged a little altar on his dresser for the safety of the baby: a stone placed in a tray of sand, surrounded by Buddhist prayer beads.

Though deeply relieved and pleased, I was suddenly plagued with fears about the downside of parenthood: the sacrifice of time, the threat to my work, the potential for losing some of my hard-won sense of self. I felt profoundly guilty about this. How, after twelve months of longing, could I suddenly feel so afraid of having a child?

My therapist assured me that my fears were normal. Because I had felt subsumed by my mother's emotional needs growing up, she explained, I perceived any mother-child relationship as potentially suffocating. "The difference," she said, "is that you didn't want to take care of your mother. But you will want to take care of your child."

Unlike Brian, whose mother had suffered multiple miscarriages when he was a boy, I had few fears about pregnancy itself. I had always looked forward to being pregnant, despite the inevitable discomforts. I wanted to experience new life unfolding in my body. My best friend and I chatted excitedly about baby showers and maternity clothes. I was confident I would carry the baby to term.

"Wow, Thea, you're playing with fire," my brother said when I told him I was pregnant. Not, *Congratulations*. Not, *I know how much you've wanted this*.

I gripped the phone, my heart a hot stone in my chest. "Are you saying that my baby is going to die," I demanded in a shaky voice, "because I told you about it?" But I knew that was exactly what he was saying. He and his wife, who'd had two easy pregnancies resulting in two gorgeous children, had a superstition that sharing the news during the first trimester increases the risk of miscarriage — akin, I suppose, to baseball fans talking about a no-hitter in progress.

Two weeks later I lay flat on my back in an examination room, Brian at my side, staring at the grainy gray shape of a tiny curled fetus on the ultrasound screen. An agonizing silence filled the room. The doctor could find no heartbeat. I felt as if I were falling from a great height. The hard look on Brian's face told me that he wasn't surprised. Before we left the office, the doctor stretched out his arms and hugged us.

What they don't tell you about miscarriage is that, whether it starts with bleeding or not, you have to take drastic, painful measures to get the fetus out of your body. I knew I didn't want surgery, so, with the support of my doctor, I decided to use herbs to stimulate contractions. For four hours I lay on the bathroom floor, my pelvis exploding with pain. The bright red blood, the tiny fetus passing through me — I needed these things to know it had been real.

(end of excerpt)