

Mourning the Loss of an Unborn Child

Daniel Benveniste

One of the most traumatic and yet least talked about psychological crises is the loss of an unborn child. It is a subject wrapped in secrecy. Some women who have lost a child to miscarriage or stillbirth may feel a deep sense of sadness and need some time to mourn their loss. But beyond this expectable reaction, it is not uncommon that women who have lost a child to miscarriage or stillbirth are flooded with feelings that don't make much sense to them – feelings of guilt, failure, shame, doubt, confusion and crushing sorrow. When a woman tries to speak about it with friends or family she is likely to meet with the common response, “Well, just have another. Just try again.” This sort of response, which overlooks the complex feelings associated with such a loss, naturally hurls the woman into an empty dark loneliness. There she mourns for a someone that no one else ever met, a someone that no one else ever saw and consequently cannot relate to very well, much less share in the woman's mourning.

The Multiple Meanings of Being Pregnant

When a woman becomes pregnant, her body goes through changes and her mind does as well. She turns inward psychologically and is more absorbed in her personal thoughts, memories, deep feelings and desires. Her sense of herself as a woman transforms. If it is her first child, she is passing from being a daughter to being a mother and, regardless of her age, she may suddenly feel that she is passing once again from girlhood to womanhood. Her body will change and she may welcome this change whole-heartedly or half-heartedly. She may feel a shift in her priorities and suddenly want to devote herself to nesting activities – fixing up her home, preparing for the baby's place in the home and in her heart, and making herself comfortable. She may feel happy to be involved in this chapter of her life yet looking forward to returning to work. Or she may feel that the pregnancy is a fulfillment of her destiny and the real beginning of her womanhood. Whether or not the pregnancy was planned or wanted also has implications.

A pregnant woman's relationship with her own mother will be re-activated when she becomes pregnant. She may miss her mother or wish her mother would leave her alone. She may yearn for the kind of mother she always wanted and mourn the fact that her mother can never be that for her. If she has a positive relationship with her mother, she may worry that she won't be good enough herself, or may do something 'wrong'. She may feel she is on trial with her own mother watching to pass judgment on her (the daughter's) mothering ability. Another possibility is that if her relationship with her mother is a good one, her pregnancy may mark a very positive turning point in their relationship – a coming of age. If she has chosen a different path in life from that of her mother, she will suddenly feel that in some way she is becoming more like her mother by virtue of becoming a mother. If her relationship with her own mother is conflicted or tense, she may feel a sense of revenge for past hurts as if to say, “Okay, Mom, now watch this. I am going to show you the way a mother should be with her child. The way you should have been with me but weren't. I'm going to do right, what you did wrong.”

Being pregnant may have all sorts of meanings related to the woman's parents' attitudes toward her husband. A grandchild from a son-in-law that is not very welcome in the family leaves the pregnant mother feeling rebellious and/or hurt. The pregnant woman promising to give a grandchild to her mother and father may, for a time, feel more involved with her parents than with her husband.

The pregnancy may take on all sorts of meanings for the marital couple. Even if the couple is married, a first child will often have the effect of either solidifying the bond between them or significantly challenging the relationship. It may resolve some conflicts or raise others to consciousness. The woman may suddenly become more interested in sex or less interested. She may settle into her relationship with the child's father or feel it more urgent to address the critical differences that have never been resolved between them.

In relation to the woman's siblings, new alliances may be formed, especially with sisters that already have children of their own. But just as common are the arousal of sibling rivalry, competition and even feelings of betrayal. The same is true of friends and it is not uncommon that pregnant women announce their happiness to others only to be met with jealousy, envy and rejection. Misery loves company but many find it difficult to enjoy the happiness of others.

When a professional woman stops work to have a child, she feels left behind professionally and often is left behind. She tries to keep up for a time but the demands of the pregnancy can become overriding. She misses the action and the dynamism of the day-to-day events in her field and has it replaced by what appear, initially, to be mundane conversations about weight gain, food, nausea, breathing exercises, out of control mood changes, maternity clothes, the best kinds of diapers to buy, different forms of childbirth procedures, etc. She may feel sorrowfully left behind after having been in the fast track, or she may feel relieved to have dropped out of the rat race.

The pregnancy of a child that is not a first-born will activate many of the same issues described already but may elaborate them differently. A pregnancy with a first child has tremendous impact on the marital couple but a pregnancy of a child in the second, third, or fourth place, and so on, within the family will have repercussions not only for the marital couple but for the other children, as well. Sibling rivalry gets activated, alliances are established, big brothers and big sisters take their places, children close in age become friends or enemies and children of the same gender form certain kinds of bonds.

From all this we can see that a pregnancy has many personal and interpersonal meanings that can get activated. But, perhaps above all, a pregnancy becomes a symbol of hope into which the mother and father project their dreams. "This baby will be like me and do what I did." "This baby will do all that I couldn't do." "This baby will give me what my spouse cannot." "This baby will save the world." "This baby will love me like no one else."

Thus, even before a baby is born and becomes a little someone he/she is imbued with hope and meaning that prepare the family and community for his/her arrival.

The Multiple Meanings of Losing an Unborn Child

So what happens to all those hopes and meanings when there is a miscarriage or a stillbirth? Well, quite simply, they come crashing down and often leave the mother feeling more than devastated. Throughout this article the reader will note that I use phrases like “the woman *may* feel” or “women *often* experience”. The reason for this tentative style is that we don’t paint life by the numbers. We all have different reactions to upsetting experiences and this article is nothing more than a map of common reactions intended to help people orient to this sort of loss when it occurs in their life. It doesn’t mean that everyone is devastated by such a loss or that if they aren’t, they should be. The goal of this article is to help break the silence about this common yet rarely spoken about trauma in everyday life.

A miscarriage or stillbirth destroys the scaffolding of hope and meaning that was being assembled throughout the pregnancy. When there is a loss of an unborn child a woman sometimes feels she has failed some sort of test of womanhood. She may feel she has let her husband down or cheated her parents out of their grandchild. In her overwhelming sorrow and grief she suddenly finds herself worrying about what to do with a box of diapers she was given. Her life may be stripped of meaning. She may sink into depression, find it difficult to eat or sleep, want to avoid being with other people and be tearful with no sense of what she is crying about. She may become anxious, have nightmares or find it difficult to concentrate. Feeling overwhelmed by the loss, the idea of immediately getting pregnant again is strange and feels intrusive even though many people in her world will suggest just that. Would-be-fathers are often touched deeply by such a loss but generally not to the same depth as the mother. Would-be-fathers, feeling their own distress and powerless to soothe their wives, often suggest getting pregnant again right away. In general, it is better to take whatever time is necessary to mourn the loss before getting pregnant again.

Mourning the loss of an unborn child is often difficult, as it is difficult for others to relate to what the woman has lost. They never saw the baby that was lost. Friends and family don’t want to talk about it because it makes them feel uncomfortable or because they feel the woman doesn’t want to talk about it. When they do talk about it, they often tell the woman, “Get over it, forget it, have another baby, don’t worry, you’ll see the baby in heaven someday.” Others offer homespun advice and talk about their own miscarriage or stillbirth experiences. Few descend into the deafening mournful silence and just sit there side-by-side with the woman and listen.

A woman who has been put off by friends and family may become intolerant of her own reactions and criticize herself for behaving irrationally. But the irrational aspect of a trauma should never surprise us. Traumas are not events, they are experiences of overwhelming events and they touch us all in different ways and have different meanings. When women in mourning, after the loss of an unborn child, enter therapy they often report that they know it was a tragic loss and understand that they are sad about it but can’t quite figure out why they are so extraordinarily sad about it. As they begin to talk about their experience they worry that they are being foolish or silly or boring the therapist. But the therapist understands that the patient is speaking about exactly what

must be addressed and that the patient's concerns are that she might get the same reaction and same rejection she has received from other people previously.

When a woman feels comfortable enough to talk about what is on her mind, she is often surprised to discover that the loss of this baby suddenly and for no apparent reason has her thinking about a boy she loved years before she met her husband, conflicts with her mother, anger toward her father, bitter rage at the way she was treated in the hospital, an abortion she had years before and so on. The profound emotions well up and seemingly disconnected thoughts and memories emerge. Not surprisingly, the thoughts and memories are linked to pivotal experiences of being a woman – positive and negative experiences of sex, previous births, relationship to mother and sisters, feelings about her marriage and so on. Women who have had abortions in the past may revisit those experiences not so much to regret their decision but just to recognize that that too may have been experienced as a loss. Abortion is a special kind of loss of an unborn child as it involves the will of the woman. In mentioning it here I offer no political agenda. The point is simply that she may make a rational decision to terminate the pregnancy, stand by that decision before, during and after the abortion and yet still have strong feelings about it which may reemerge later, particularly in the event of a miscarriage or stillbirth.

Experiences years before of rape or molestation may have left the woman feeling damaged or dirty. After the loss of an unborn child these memories may come back to haunt her and provide false justification for the miscarriage. This is often the case with memories of promiscuousness, forbidden love, abortions, aggressive behavior, or conflicts with parents. The irrational emotional logic links charged events like these with the loss of an unborn child and draws false conclusions from them such as: "I'm damaged goods." "I don't know how to make a relationship." "I'm not a real woman." "I don't deserve any better." "It's my fault." "I am dangerous."

Soon it becomes apparent that the loss of the unborn child is linked to the hopes and meanings of a lifetime. The meanings are connected to each other like the pieces of a lattice in which each seemingly disconnected memory is actually linked to three or four other memories. Together they form a sense of self within the world. The traumatic experience of the loss of an unborn child breaks apart the lattice, shakes that sense of self and world and calls upon the woman, through the symptoms that arise, to revisit previous losses, old hurts and conflicts. In revisiting those old hurts and conflicts, the mourning process gets under way. False conclusions are undone, new meaning is made out of old confusions, and gaps between experiences are linked together in a new order. As the process of mourning the loss progresses, the woman begins to stitch her life back together again in order that she may love and work, and hope and dream once more.

Resources:

Book:

Unspeakable Losses: Understanding the Experience of Pregnancy Loss, Miscarriage and Abortion. By Kim Kluger-Bell. New York, W.W. Norton & Co. 1998.

Organizations:

AMEND (Aiding a Mother Experiencing Neonatal Death)
National Headquarters
4324 Berrywick Terrace
St. Louis, MO. 63128
314-487-7582

SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society)
28 Portland Place
London, England W1N 4 DE
0171-436-5881
<http://members.aol.com/babyloss/sands.html>

**The author now lives and works in Bellevue, Washington.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:**

E-MAIL – daniel.benveniste@gmail.com