



Making Meaning Out of Infertility

By Sarah Rivers Deal, Ph.D., LPC-S

The experience of infertility changes you. Most people who've been directly affected won't argue with that, but is it possible that the change you experience can be for the better? I believe so. When things don't work out as we've planned, I propose two main options/responses we can adopt:

1. Keep on your current path, believing that this is the way it "should" be.
2. Assess the damages and options, and move forward on a different path.

The first option may bear fruit eventually, but it also has the possibility of putting you in a victim, stagnant role for your life circumstance. You have an idea of how your life ought to be and come hell or high water, you continue down this road despite the emotional, physical and financial casualties. The second option takes some humility — the assessment that you've tried really hard at something — and — failed. That being said, you didn't fail, but the efforts you put in ultimately did. In the infertility world, effort doesn't necessarily equate to outcome, and that can be particularly frustrating for those high achievement-oriented folks. The second option also invites you to make meaning out of your grief experience, to say "goodbye" to what should have been in order to create an opportunity for what could be. It requires vulnerability and a lack of expertise when it comes to your own life — an openness to the unknown.

I am an infertility counselor, but I am also a woman who suffered from infertility and experienced five years of the most rigorous, up-to-date medical treatments available, plus sprinkles of alternative medicine such as reproductive acupuncture and Maya abdominal massage. Age is something we can't fight no matter how good we look in the mirror. Although 40 may be the new 30, our eggs know our real age. At 36 years of age, I met that long awaited compatible partner who inspired me to pursue motherhood. We had all our ducks in a row — a home, a savings and retirement account, stable careers, and a plan for parenthood.

To my dismay, I was informed after one year of trying to conceive that I had "diminished



ovarian reserve," plus the health of my depleting eggs were in question. My husband's fertility report card also was in need of improvement. Confidence and sense of sensuality in the toilet, we decided to proceed with an egg donor, still feeling somewhat in control. Long story short, after the use of two different egg donors and six in vitro fertilization cycles, we were left with a small memorial garden in our yard to commemorate the initially successful two pregnancies and a mountain of financial and spiritual debt.

I raged at the universe for about a year, questioning my basic assumptions of fairness, justice and karma. Every invitation to a baby shower and birth announcement felt like a personal assault. Pregnant women and baby stores sent me into a funk that lasted for days — both were to be avoided if at all possible. The only pregnancy news I celebrated were from women or couples from my tribe — the infertile.

I don't give up easily, and was ready to tread forward using our last two blastocysts (frozen embryos) in yet more in vitro fertilization cycles. It was my husband who objected, and I began to listen... slowly. We had become this process, it was ruling our lives. It was all we talked about, grieved about. We were the living embodiment of above stated Option 1. It was time to move on, choose a different path. To symbolize this, we took a trip to the mountains. On our last day at the cabin, we tearfully wrote letters to the child who should have been, the one I would get to carry in my womb, nurse and continue our bloodline. We hiked to the top of a nearby mountain, read our letters aloud, said our goodbyes and walked down — feeling relieved, connected and lighter.

Enter Option 2. I took the invitation to choose a different, uncertain path, the less traveled road. Within three months of reading those letters on the mountaintop, we had completed the plethora of paperwork and background checks in order to pursue a domestic, open adoption with a private agency in town. Although we were more hopeful than we'd been in a long time, it still felt like a slap in the face to jump through so many hoops while most people embarked on the parenting journey without having to demonstrate any qualifications. We were told that the average wait time to be selected by a birth family was 18 months at our agency, so we were completely surprised to be chosen within a few months.

Flash forward to today I am the mother of a rambunctious, healthy, spirited 8-month-old little girl. I watched her head emerge in the birthing room and cut the umbilical cord. I was the second person to hold her. My daughter has two mothers and two fathers, and that's OK with me. My husband and I get the privilege of parenthood on a daily basis, and it's a gift.

I had a client a while back in my private practice who continually chose Option 1, unwilling to consider other options. She once said to me regarding adoption — "I don't want to raise someone else's child!" While I understood her perspective, I also believe we don't own our children, no one does. They are children of the universe. I get to influence and shape that universe, and that's more than enough. And I can report that the love I/we feel toward our daughter is powerful, transformative, as it would be with any parent. I propose that my struggle to get here allows me to appreciate every moment with our daughter even more. I would do it all over again — the awful fertility treatments, the years lost, the debts accumulated — just to get to her.

Sarah Rivers Deal, Ph.D., LPC-S, is a licensed professional counselor with a small private practice specializing in a variety of conditions, including infertility. She is also a gratefully infertile woman. Previously tenured faculty at Northeastern State University in Oklahoma, Deal currently teaches part-time at St. Edwards University in the Master of Arts in Counseling Program. She lives in Austin, Texas with her husband, daughter, four dogs and one cat.