

The gift of infertility: From despair to celebration

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

Infertility—a gift!? Poison and a curse—that’s how this unexplained infertility of ours felt to me for what seemed like an eternity. Nine years of trying to have a child of our own was like having to drink bitter waters from a poisoned well month after month. Nothing could break the sinister hold of barrenness on our lives, not strict adherence to whatever expert advice we could get, not prayer, not the latest infertility techniques, not fasting, nothing. One hundred months’ worth of hopes, all dashed against the stubborn realities of bodies that just wouldn’t produce offspring. At times, like Abraham, we hoped against hope, and yet the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17) wouldn’t help our bodies give us an Isaac of our own.

Christian community wasn’t much help, either. Every time we would go to worship, the laughter and boisterousness of the little ones milling around in the community room would remind me of unfulfilled dreams. The season of Advent was the worst. “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given,” I would hear read or sung in hundreds of different variations. But from me a child was withheld. The miracle of Mary’s conception, the rejoicing of the heavens at her newborn child, the exultation of Elizabeth all became signs of God’s painful absence, not God’s advent. “And the government shall be upon his shoulders . . .” If God’s Son indeed was in charge, it seemed that he didn’t care to move even his royal finger in our favor. At Christmas, I felt like the only child in a large family to whom the parents had forgotten to give gifts. Others’ joy increased my sadness. “And his name shall be called, ‘wonderful, the mighty God . . .’” No, not wonderful; at best puzzling. No, not a mighty God; at best a sympathetic but disappointing divine observer.

Then came the absolutely unforgettable moment when a nurse rolled two-day-old Nathanael into the room of Lisa, his birthmother, in a maternity ward in Chino, California. She took him into her arms, held him lovingly for a moment, and then gave him to us to be our own. Michelle, Aaron’s birthmother, let Judy, my wife,

witness the miracle of the birth of Aaron, whom she then gave to us as our son. Nathanael was four when he cradled tiny Aaron in his arms. As I watched them, my joy as a father was complete.

It was only as I was reading the essays from the book *Hope Deferred*, released by Pilgrim Press, that I realized the significance of that joy. During those nine years of infertility I wasn't waiting for a child who stubbornly refused to come. That's what I thought at the time. I was waiting for the two boys I now have, Nathanael and Aaron. I love them, and I want them in their unsubstitutable particularity, not children in general of which they happened to be exemplars.

Then it dawned on me: Fertility would have robbed me of my boys. From my present vantage point, that would have been a disaster—the disaster of not having what I so passionately love. Infertility was the condition for the possibility of these two indescribable gifts. And understanding that changed my attitude toward infertility. Since it gave me what I now can't imagine living without, poison was transmuted into a gift, God's strange gift. The pain of it remains, of course. But the poison is gone. Nine years of desperate trying were like one long painful childbirth, the purpose of which was to give us Nathanael and Aaron. True, had we had biological children of our own, I would have loved and wanted them, and I would have been spared the pain. But that's what *would have* happened. It didn't. I have Nathanael and Aaron. It's them that I love. It's them that I want. And it's they who redeem the arduous path that led to having them.

Infertility as a painful but welcome gift—that's my experience with reproductive loss. Others have had different experiences. I am a man, and a woman's experience might have been different; Judy's certainly was and continues to be. Others may have eventually had a child who was biologically their own. They may have decided that they shouldn't have children and proceeded to live happily as a couple. They may have adopted children yet still continued to long for flesh from their flesh and bone from their bone. They may still mourn the pain of infertility or stillbirth as an irretrievable loss that no child who came later could redeem. I don't want to suggest that my experience is in any way exemplary. It's simply an experience that shows one possible way of redeeming a terrible loss.

The five authors of the five extraordinary essays that constitute the book *Hope Deferred* come at the problem of reproductive loss from slightly different angles. Though none describes an experience quite like my own, I've been moved by each of them. I was moved partly because I know the authors, and I know some of their

pain. I was one of the 15 participants at the consultation on teaching at the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion at which the idea for the book was born. At the time, Judy and I were at a low point in our struggle with infertility. But mainly I've been moved by these fine essays because they are so close to life, its pains and joys, its dashed hopes and fulfilled dreams. This is theology at its best, in the midst of life, employing the rich resources of the Christian faith to grapple insightfully and passionately with the raw stuff of our fragile natality.