

Missed Children

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Every now and then, my wife and I feel like one of our children is missing. All of us will be sitting in one room, for example, and unless I pause to do a quick headcount I don't feel convinced we're all there. And this doesn't just happen when my wife is pregnant, and the feeling of missing someone could be accounted for by the gestating baby. Even recently, with all of us – including the newborn – present in our home-educating room, I felt like someone was missing. Which is weird. You'd think that by now with 6 children one would feel surrounded, outnumbered, overwhelmed. Someone missing? Surely instead I should be feeling that there are more people than I

last remember! My wife and I have discussed this phenomenon, as indeed it is something we both independently experience, and while we don't attribute too much thought to the matter, we have considered whether or not this sense of missing someone could be a result of the miscarriages my wife has endured.

My wife has now been pregnant 9 times. Medical staff remind us of this statistic when they go through my wife's pregnancy notes. You don't need to be very good at maths to work out that 3 of these pregnancies did not result in the birth of a baby; one of the pregnancies was ectopic while two of the pregnancies ended in a miscarriage. Thankfully, all three disappointments occurred in the reasonably early stages of pregnancy. Were the miscarriages to occur much later, I'm sure we both would have felt less stoic than we had done. Nevertheless, I would be dishonest if I were to say that we weren't affected emotionally by the experiences, more so for my wife especially. Since the events occurred in her body she may have felt responsible for the failed pregnancies. There are many misconceptions about what might cause a miscarriage. While there are certainly factors that increase the risk of one, sometimes there is no clear reason. It just happens.

I have never blamed my wife for the failed pregnancies as I have never felt she had any blame to share. All that mattered was that she had gone through an unexpected disappointment and I needed to be there for her, supporting and encouraging her through the time of brief yet real grief. My own grief was minimal, not requiring any emotional support. But the interesting thing about miscarriages is that they can be very private experiences. If they occur before the pregnancy has been widely announced (we always wait until after the 12-week scan to publicly announce any pregnancy just in case there's a problem) then nobody will have known that we were pregnant anyway. Between us, however, my wife and I have been able to digest the experiences and move on, sometimes by resolving to conceive again at the next available opportunity.

I can't begin to imagine how much more difficult it would be to handle a miscarriage much later in pregnancy, especially when the foetus is resembling a miniature baby. With my wife's miscarriages, there was heavy bleeding accompanied by clotting but no noticeable embryo. One can rationalise this experience by guessing that these pregnancies were not viable and that this was simply nature's way of terminating what would have been unable to continue developing anyway. But when the pregnancy seems to be developing smoothly for up to and beyond 20 weeks, the sense of loss must be more profound. Whenever I have sensitively brought up the subject with various elder sisters in my community, every mother appears to have at least one experience of loss, and some mothers had pregnancies which were quite far along. Perhaps it's sensible to mourn the loss and move on, but I wonder if there are some women, or men for that matter, who never really had the opportunity to grieve properly. Is there a stigma about discussing miscarriage openly? Are women afraid that it might reflect poorly on themselves? I'd hope that men and women accept that there is no shame in experiencing a miscarriage and if it might be helpful to talk about the experience with someone outside the immediate family for the sake of offering the experience to God and reaching closure.

My wife follows some blogs written by mothers who list not only the number of physical children they have but also the number of 'children in heaven' who never were born. These women believe that the spirit of a miscarried foetus go on into the spirit world and remain there; some of these women anticipate meeting their unmet children in the spirit world when they pass over.

This leads me to a challenging pastoral question: at what stage of development does the spirit of a baby come into existence. This is one of the most pressing questions in medical ethics, and while it is virtually impossible to arrive at a satisfyingly definitive answer, the implications of one's answer to this question are far-reaching. What one believes about abortion, for example, would be informed by one's opinion on this matter, although I'd rather address this topic in a separate post. But more practically, does one need to be concerned with the spirit of a foetus that was never born? Does an unborn child have a spirit? If it does have a spirit, what kind of spirit does it have before it is born?



I don't want to pretend to know the answers to these questions. But I would like to offer some reflections informed by my Unificationist perspective. While there is a spirit base that exists with the embryo in the womb, the spirit self only exists once the newborn baby takes its first breath of life. (Consider Genesis 2:7 when God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of the first man, Adam.) As such, a foetus or embryo that does not complete its gestation and is not born does not have a spirit self. There is no need to hold a *seong hwa* ceremony (burial) as there is no spirit to send into the

spirit world. Nevertheless, the spirit base remains, and according to one perspective, these spirit bases can be considered as formless eggs of energy that can be recycled back into the universe. At Cheong Pyeong, a retreat centre in Korea dedicated in large part to dealing with spirits, there is a service called 'cleansing the womb' which, if one offers the prescribed devotion, allows these spirit bases to be liberated. My wife and I have offered devotion for the three failed pregnancies we've experienced and so our hope and belief is that, spiritually speaking, there are no remnants from our losses.

Regardless of the spiritual reality – which I currently can't see anyway – there does remain some emotional remnant, perhaps. And maybe this is what my wife and I occasionally experience. The reason we feel that someone is missing is because we expect someone else to be present who isn't. And that is not a bad thing, if it's true.

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