

Dreaming a New Dream for adoption professionals

By Laurieann Thorpe

Thank you for having me. I have a couple of disclaimers.

First, I hope you don't mind if I go a little different direction from the description in the conference pamphlet. I felt like you needed a different presentation than what the couples will hear tomorrow.

Second, I am a spiritual person. I can't subtract that from who I am and I couldn't subtract it from this presentation. Know it's coming and, I don't know, plug your ears if it makes you uncomfortable.

I hope you will listen with your heart, thinking of couples you've counseled, couples who know grief... and I hope you'll share so we can help each other understand the universality of grief and how to help those in it. Before we even get started, I'd like to know your expectations. My presentation may not meet your expectations but I'd like to be sensitive to what they are.

I want this to be an atmosphere of safety, respect and learning. As I talk, I welcome any of your questions or comments. In fact, I'm counting on them because I don't really *want* to hear myself talk about infertility for an hour and a half. I think we'll all have a more enjoyable time learning from each other... or we'll let out early. So... expectations?

Let me start by telling you who I'm not. I am not a social worker. I have no initials behind my name. I am uncredentialed. I am unschooled and inexperienced in the world of social work. I have not been in an office and looked into the eyes of a couple or given them the news of infertility or the reality and hope of adoption. I am

simply half of a couple who sat on the other side of a desk – who ignored the reality and clung to the hope. I am a woman who is honest about pain.

What I'm hoping to give you today is the perspective from the other side of the desk. You decide how to let it help you. I think there is power in my story. But it is a big thing that has been asked of me. Please be kind as I rip the bleeding heart out of my chest for you. This is raw and hard for me.

In my story, you'll hear echoes of stories you've already heard from other couples. But I can't tell you what their journey is. When I tell my story to them, I see the echoes in their eyes so I know there is commonality in our experiences.

I'm going to take you through my journey in the lyrics of songs. After each section, I'd like to have your input and discussion. We'll start with a hymn and the words, "In the quiet heart is hidden sorrow that the eye can't see." Then we'll move to a Broadway musical with the words, "I dreamed a dream in time gone by." And then move to a contemporary song and the words "Even Superman has kryptonite."

Let's begin.

In the quiet heart...

I have been married 12 1/2 years now. At the beginning of those twelve years, Dave and I had great hopes of homes and cars filled with people who looked like us. My 6 foot 9 husband dreamed of a basketball team of five boys, graciously telling me we could have any girls I wanted – after the five boys were born. Late at night, we named the children and talked of who they would be. We ended all pretense of contraception after six months. It was only six months. That is when our journey of disappointment began. But I only know that now. At the time, we ascribed our non-

pregnant status to a God who knew we needed to wait – to a God who knew we weren't quite as ready as we could be and gave us some merciful time.

I was AS sure of my ability to bear a child as anything. My husband told me before we were married that he would never adopt a child... and I didn't even flinch. Because I knew I could bear a child. My mom had seven. Dave's mom had five. I didn't need further evidence. My dad said if any of his girls messed around, he'd know about it because for sure we'd get pregnant. Apparently my mom could conceive from a look. So I *knew*.

I would be a mother. From that moment of six months, all decisions led to mothering – all paths were designed to take me there. I didn't have delusions of grandeur. I didn't think I'd be the BEST mother. I would be like my mom. I would be at home. I would sacrifice my gifts for my children. I would teach them. I would mold them. I would probably hurt them but, like with my mom, the hurt would be unintentional and hopefully only leave small, teaching scars.

Once, in a job interview, when asked about my career aspirations, I said, "My hope is to have a job I dislike enough that when my children come, the decision to stay home will not be hard to make." Seriously? How did I get that job?

I can't pinpoint for you the moment our eagerness turned to tentativity, then fear, then desperation. It may have been when I decided to consult the first doctor or after a battery of tests or the piling up of years. But I can exactly pinpoint the moment eagerness turned to devastation. That was the day, sitting in the cubicle of a job I disliked (just enough) that the phone rang. Looking back now, I see that phone call for the gift it was. It was a gift of finality. Unlike other couples, we didn't have to wonder if

we should just try one more treatment or one more doctor or one more procedure. We would simply and permanently never have biological children.

I don't like to think about that time – or about that sorrow. I don't like how sad it makes me feel even now. But the couples you see wear that sorrow. You get them when they are in the thick of it. So, I'll go there and hope you can understand. In my quiet heart was hidden sorrow that the eye couldn't see. My heart was quiet because who could I share this with? Who could possibly understand? What words could I use to paint a picture of who I was thoroughly enough that any other soul could come close to hearing me? The only one who could understand was buried too far beneath his own pain – a pain I wanted to protect him from – not make worse! So I was quiet.

I was alone.

Sherilyn Stinson (my former social worker) said, "Couples experiencing infertility often feel that they don't fit in with friends and family who reside in the 'fertile world.' Some may even feel isolated within their own marriage when partners pull within their own hurt and fail to work through it together." Though my husband and I did work through it together, I felt cut off and isolated from friends and family. Every couple I've ever talked to has felt the same way. Infertility makes a couple different in an uncomfortable way.

That phone call at work caused devastation and then came all the daggers that would rip and rend: The dagger of people's innocent questions; the dagger of sister and sister-in-law pregnancies; family parties where the only topic open for discussion was breastfeeding; Mother's Day daggers; and ultimately, the question of how God could change from merciful to punishing – and punishing... of what?

My heart was broken.

I have permission from a friend to tell you about an experience she had that fully illustrates broken-heartedness. As I tell it, I want you to think about times you've been broken-hearted or times you've known of a similar pain and then we'll talk about it.

A dear friend of mine recently watched over her year-old son after he came out of heart surgery. His little heart was broken and it wasn't the first time the surgeon had tried to heal it. As Tanner lay in the ICU, he went into cardiac arrest. His surgeon came running and tore open the recently stapled little chest. My friend watched as the surgeon worked and worked – unwilling to let the little heart die. She watched as the surgeon held Tanner's heart and then as his shoulders sagged and his tears ran into Tanner's open chest. She said she knew that day what a broken heart looks like.

I know too. But my story ends differently than Tanner's. My heart – open to grief – closed around hope. As deep as the hurt cut, it couldn't be a hope of children. Instead, it was a hope for hope.

Tell me about your broken hearts. Tell me about your couples.

I dreamed a dream in time gone by...

I dreamt of my perfect day. I wrote about it. It would be a day nine months into a pregnancy, a day filled with things I loved. It went like this, "Dave watches the basketball game and I read my book for bookgroup. A few contractions. More contractions, Dave turns off the game – in the middle, not during a commercial – and we go to the hospital. After 1 maybe 2 hours of labor, I have a beautiful baby boy who we decide to name Joey, after my dad and because we love that name. Dave and I have an hour alone with the baby before family starts to show up. We feel what it's like to be

close to heaven when we hold hands and look at him. Family comes and they adore our boy who has Dave's eyes and dimples and my spunk. My brother takes pictures and my dad cries."

What did I have without this dream?

Something. I had something. In my sorrow, in my struggle, I gave God my old dream. I wrote and it was the beginning of my letting go.

I wrote about hoping for and receiving a miracle but the miracle I received was Understanding, I wrote, "I have come to understand God's love for me as His daughter. I understand that what he asks is nothing but everything. Most importantly, I understand that I am willing to give Him that."

"I will still fight the Mother's Day flower and the sorrow that the eye can't see. I will ask and knock and wait. And I will still weary the Lord with my prayers. But I will not doubt my worth as His daughter. I will not doubt His will. I do not know the good gift he has in store for me. I only know there is one."

I still had hope for a good gift.

Another thing I did as I was coming out of the pain is this list.

Things I have learned from not being pregnant:

That people always say insensitive things but so have I.

That you have to let people have their miracles.

That you have to lose hope to find the giver of it.

That you *have* to live and you *will* live anyway.

That harder things happen to better people.

That harder things, even than this, will happen to you.

Let's talk about my list. I want to take you through a couple of my lessons.

Some insensitive things I've heard.

Example of Amy and insensitive things I say.

Example of mom and relating to feelings of infertility.

Miracles – explain

Harder things happen to better people. In an article titled, "Infertility Etiquette," Vita Alligood writes, "Different people react to different life experiences in different ways. To someone who has trained his whole life for the Olympics, the "worst" thing might be experiencing an injury the week before the event. To someone who has walked away from her career to become a stay-at-home wife for 40 years, watching her husband leave her for a younger woman might be the "worst" thing. And, to a woman whose sole goal in life has been to love and nurture a child, infertility may indeed be the "worst" thing that could happen."

"People wouldn't dream of telling someone whose parent just died, 'It could be worse: both of your parents could be dead.' Such a comment would be considered cruel rather than comforting. In the same vein, don't tell your friend that she could be going through worse things than infertility."

I don't think we should have a pain contest. I hurt more. No, / hurt more. I think all pain is legitimate. At the time I wrote my list, I needed to stop looking inside myself at my pain and reach out to others in theirs.

Harder things even than this will happen to you. I wasn't really sure about this when I wrote it – but I know it now. Harder things have happened.

Any comments on my list?

Back to my story...

I still longed for the perfect picture but realized I'd have to get there a different way. So we fought through Dave's misgivings and put our hopes and hearts into adoption.

Remember my perfect day? Through adoption, I discovered the joy of many perfect days. The first perfect day came in a letter that said, "I hope you are ready and willing to accept this child in your lives and will give him all the things I would not be able to as a single mother. Please remember that it wasn't just me who chose you. It was also this little boy and God. They knew it was your time." The second perfect day came in the shape of the hands of our little Joey. The eyes and the spunk – they both belong to his birth mom. But he – in himself – is the wholeness of that dream. There have been other perfect days too, adoption day, mother's day and more. I'm glad I was ready for those perfect days, with a renewed sense of hope and a new dream.

Tell me about your perfect days. Tell me about your couples' perfect days; the real ones, the re-defined ones. Tell me about their new dreams. You need to know them.

Even Superman has kryptonite...

It's my new favorite song and it goes, "Even Superman has kryptonite and though he tries with all his might even Superman falls to his knees begging please, please, please... begging please, please, please, please."

Infertility is my kryptonite. I have discovered how even now a thought, a baby announcement, the sight of an empty crib can bring me to my knees. Adoption did not cure my infertility. What it did cure was childlessness and that is an amazing gift.

But you see, like superman, I have learned to live in my world and wear my label. Infertility brings me to my knees the way nothing else could and so I am grateful for it. On my knees is a good place to be.

What are your labels? What is your kryptonite?

I am in a good, hopeful place with my infertility right now. But tomorrow I could be depressed. I could be angry. I could be mourning maternity clothes (again). I like to check my infertility pulse sometimes, just to see where I am. A few months ago, I was asked to talk to a group of couples about this subject and I had absolutely convinced myself that I was pregnant. When I discovered, concretely, that I was not pregnant I was all over again spiraling through the grief. It's insidious. You think you're cured because you're not sad for a while but it's always a wound. You never know what will tear back the bandage and uncover it.

That's my journey, now let's talk about your role...

What's the thing that brings you to your knees, that haunts you, that tracks you? For my friend it is the broken heart that stole her son and then cracked her own heart way open.

Do you know what it is for you? If you know what your kryptonite is, your couples will know you. They will trust you because they'll see the reflection of knowing in your eyes. They will feel safe with you.

Let me tell you about one half of one adoptive couple perspective on social workers. Birth parents are hard to come by – their workers treat them well and their wants and needs are known. Adoptive couple workers protect the unborn child. They scrutinize the environment the child may be placed in. They ask intrusive questions –

for the safety and sake of the child. They facilitate background checks. We understand. We want someone to protect those babies. But how can the person who is looking for reasons to disqualify us from our dreams be a person to trust? Infertile adoptive couples are going to hide their flaws from you. We want you to think we're perfect. What? Of course, we've dealt with our grief. Nothing to worry about here – we're completely healthy and trouble-free.

But if you know pain, if you know broken-heartedness; if you can show compassion in the face of pain and broken-heartedness; if you can see that infertility doesn't disqualify good parents, then you can be trusted. Then you can be *our* advocate too.

Here's how I want to be treated:

Respect me as someone who has done a hard thing.

Believe in my new dream and give me credit for re-defining it.

See the sorrow for what it is.

Know when you come into my home that the very moment I wish I didn't have to prove myself to you is the very moment I want you to be thinking I am perfect.

Listen please.

I want you to fight for me.

I want you to know when to say, she's been through enough. I will not ask it of her.

I want you to help me find my own solutions I can be comfortable with.

Know that infertility is defining; it is the lens from which I will view everything from now on.

Our future is in your hands. CARE about that.

Let's look at the stages of grief. This is old news to you but let's review it anyway.

Shock

Denial

Anger

Grief

Acceptance

You already know that people don't go through the stages chronologically or one at a time. I like to think of it as a spiral – illustrate. Couples go through, around and back up and down depending on the day, the minute. And different people experience it in different ways. Even within one couple, you'll find different reactions. My husband, for instance, goes from anger to acceptance and then back again. Respect and allow for different reactions.

Couples can and will work through the grief of infertility. You can help them find new hope and lead them in a new dream.

When they trust you...

In my faith, there is what is supposed to be a comforting doctrine, that if you are good and desire children in this life but don't get them, then you'll have them in the next. I heard it so many times and I believed it but I took it so far that I started to believe that the only source of happiness I had to look forward to would come after death. Cheery eh? But that is a myth.

Once a couple trusts you, help them to see the joy in their lives. Help them to see that if they are overcome with sadness, they will miss the beauty, goodness and joy

that is available to them now – sometimes in direct relation to and even because of the pain they've felt.

Take a couple by the hand and lead them to joy.

Read *Murmel, Murmel, Murmel* by Robert Munsch