

Honoring Missed Motherhood

Loss, Choice and Creativity



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in collaboration with Barbara Comstock

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*If you feel lost, disappointed, hesitant, or weak,
return to yourself, to who you are, here and now
and when you get there, you will discover yourself,
like a lotus flower in full bloom, even in a muddy
pond, beautiful and strong.*

— MASARU EMOTO,
The Secret Life of Water

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PART ONE



KANI'S STORY

Challenges and Choices on My Journey

*The impact of **missed motherhood** has reverberated throughout my life in various and unpredictable ways and from surprisingly different perspectives. It affected my sense of self and my worth, choice of career and friendships, the quality and duration of my relationships, my place in family and society, and my lifestyle.*

Facing Loss

I had no idea that day how radically my life would change. Up until then I had been delighting in the experience that I could have what I wanted—that my life was turning out even better than I had imagined. My dreams were unfolding, seemingly effortlessly, and I was only 26. I was working on my Ph.D., close to realizing my lifelong passion of being a research scientist. I was married to a man whom I adored, who treasured me, who was also a research scientist. Never before had I experienced the level of support, encouragement and unconditional love he brought into my life. I felt blessed beyond my imagination. Life was an amazing, wonderful adventure.

That day, my husband and I sat together and heard the doctor tell us, “I’m sorry, but you can’t ever have children of your own.” The finality of those words was stunning, earthshaking, unbelievable. We couldn’t really take it in. It was so absolute. It wasn’t a total surprise. We had been working on solving the problem. Now we had the conclusion.

Children had always been central to each of our visions of the life we had chosen to create together as a couple, as a family. The plan was to start having children once we could afford childcare, so both of us could continue our work while raising them. It had seemed like the time was right. I was in my mid-twenties and toward the end of my courses, and my husband had a tenured position. We started to try. We researched and discussed possible names—if it was a girl, if it was a boy. We talked about how we would raise our children, what our individual values were, how to discipline. And each month my period arrived like clockwork. Not yet, my body was saying. We were okay with it because we were busy and we had time.

Then, during my annual exam, the doctor found what he thought was an ovarian cyst. Simple surgery, he said—in and out of the hospital in three or four days. Two days after the surgery I regained a consciousness that I remember—but only briefly, until the pain-killing morphine returned me to a stupor again and again. It wasn’t until the fifth day that I learned it hadn’t been a simple cyst, but massive invasive endometriosis. The cells that should have been limited to the interior

of my uterus had escaped and coated every organ in my abdomen. Each month, they had proliferated and shed, placing an inordinate strain on my body to keep up, and had created adhesions that filled my entire abdomen with dense, rigid tissue. My fallopian tubes were sealed closed, my ovaries enveloped.

Suddenly, it was clear why there had been no pregnancy. The doctors said it was the most extreme case they'd ever witnessed or heard of, and they wanted to write about my case for the medical journals. During eight hours of surgery, they had scraped all the organs in my abdomen. The good news was that they had opened the fallopian tubes and said that maybe now I could become pregnant. They suggested we try right away.

First there was recovery from the surgery. Then there were the attempts each month. I remember the attention to my cycle, the planned sex, the tests, the monthly messenger announcing once again: "You are not pregnant." But, at least there was an implied "yet" at the end of the message. And although each of those bloody messages indicated a "loss," the loss was accompanied by a hope that next month things would be different.

This time, however, the doctor's words were clear. There was no hope. The decision was final.

Looking back, many decades later, I see the impact of that decree of infertility was perhaps as profound as when a couple *has* a child. It changed everything forever. I could never go back to the way it was before that event. The dynamic of my life was irrevocably altered.

In the 1960s, infertility was not really discussed and was often referred to with pity. It was a flaw, a failure, a shame. We did not even think of sharing our loss with others. We could not conceive of where to go to find help in dealing with the grief. Back then, therapy seemed limited to the mentally ill, severely neurotic or very wealthy, which did not include us. We were practical, pragmatic people, but we did not know how to deal with this irreparable loss.

From my earliest days, I remember always wanting children. Mothering dolls was training for the only future I could imagine. When I was a teen, I took care of my cousin's six-month-old baby and three-year-old little girl when they came to live with us immediately after a deadly car accident. The crash had killed my cousin's husband and she went into a debilitating depression. Caring for her children was even

better than babysitting once a week. It was a prelude, a practicing for my own future life.

As a child I said repeatedly that if I couldn't have children of my own, I would adopt. It puzzles me now why I would say that. I have a vague memory of my father talking about a woman in his office who could not have children of her own and, even as a little girl, I was determined that if that happened to me, I would still have a way to have the family of my dreams.

Here now, following the diagnosis of infertility, was my opportunity to put that childhood pledge into action. Yet suddenly it wasn't that simple. Defeated and depressed that I could not have my own biological children, I also found myself frightened by the challenge of taking on someone else's child. In addition, while my husband desperately wanted children, for some reason not understood by him, they had to be his biologically. He hated his inability to accept adoption as an alternative. He would get angry with himself. We did talk about a surrogate, but never as a serious option. At that time it seemed too outrageous and uncertain.

We talked seemingly endlessly about our limited possibilities for creating a family, but the energy just wasn't there to pursue the available options, which all felt unattractive. The air had been knocked out of us. We had lost our footing and were each sliding down into our own individual pit of darkness. The loss was bigger than we could imagine. It kept growing larger and more encompassing until it encroached on every aspect of our lives.

My husband sunk into his own deep depression that made no sense to him; it overtook his life. He told me he would go to work, put his experiment in motion and stare out the window between readings that needed to be taken. When he returned home at night, he sat and stared as well.

Helpless to stop our own decline, we gallantly attempted to help the other, or at least protect them from any additional suffering. Within ourselves we could find no resolution. We were lost in a trance. There was nowhere to turn for support. We had no solution, no visible options. After a time, we could barely talk to each other about this disaster in our lives and we had no motivation to share our situation with others.

I had lost interest in everything I had been passionate about before. I quit graduate school. I remember my advisor telling me I shouldn't do it, that I was throwing my life away. I was in a daze without any goals.

My husband encouraged me in pursuing any glimmer of interest or curiosity I showed. I tried, but I couldn't find a focus. My passion for life and my joy had dissolved. It was embarrassing to be such a failure. I was in despair and felt that I could never get over this loss. I was derailed, my life turned upside down, my goals erased. In such a brief time, my seemingly perfect life was gone.

Now I was completely alone. I didn't feel I could share my sorrow with anyone else. There was no one who would understand, who would listen and take in what this meant to me and to my life. I didn't want pity. I couldn't stand being told I'd get over it. My mother had been adamantly opposed to my choice of husband, and I dreaded her "I told you so." Life did not seem worth living and I started thinking about death, about ending the pain. I couldn't share this with my husband—he was in his own separate dark hole, suffering and silent. Over many months, I considered various methods of suicide. Luckily I rejected each of them as either unreliable or unacceptable or both. Finally, I came to realize that life on any terms was more attractive to me than death.

Knowing that I chose life, I realized that now I had to find a new path, create a completely different vision for my future. I felt heavily burdened by my husband's pain and depression; he was driven to have his own biological children that I could not have. To me, his situation was even worse than mine because he was trapped by *my* infertility, not his own. I didn't feel that I could live with the pressure of being the cause of his deprivation. So, after many long months of contemplation and desperation, I realized that I could begin to lift the burden of guilt from my shoulders by releasing my husband. I said to him with what I thought was great kindness and generosity, "Please find another wife who can have your children so that you, at least, can have what you want." At first, he was horrified, totally resisting the idea. It took time and a lot of convincing on my part. I was adamant that this was the only way for me as well as for him. Finally, reluctantly, he agreed.

I didn't realize then that I was actually rejecting and abandoning him and sending him away, that my determination to be free of the guilt was actually taking away his freedom to choose. We loved each other deeply. We were intimate friends. I thought we were each sacrificing to make life livable for the other. We would separate and divorce and move on with our individual lives. At times we would joke that, after his future children were grown, we'd reunite and spend our

senior years together. This momentarily lessened the grief we felt at leaving each other.

Once we both agreed to the decision, I felt the oppression lift. I felt we were rising out of the deep, dark holes we had each endured for so long. I felt relieved. Once again it appeared we were each on a path with hope for a better future.

We decided that before we would separate, we would do a few things that we had planned, but had not yet managed, to do. We took a long trip to the Pacific Islands and Asia, to the places we had not made it to during our five-month journey a few years earlier, after I had finished my Masters degree and he had completed his post-doctoral research.

During our trip, it felt as if the sun had come out to bless us and we were once again in the light of day. For six weeks we lived each moment and filled each day with exploration, discovery, delicious food, laughter and joy in being together. We bought things for each other that we just couldn't resist. We listened and loved and reveled in the daily adventures that came our way. We had fun. It was, as they say, an altered reality that we wished would never end.

While traveling, we thought we had put the past behind us. We were readying ourselves to go our separate ways while enjoying the relationship we had. I felt clever, like we had triumphed over adversity. It wasn't until much later that I discovered the pain had been buried within.

There had always been an undercurrent before, during and after the travel that we tried to ignore. Once the doctors had determined there was no hope of pregnancy, they had started me on heavy doses of hormones in an attempt to inhibit my menstrual cycle and prevent the buildup of intra-abdominal tissue. But my periods kept coming like clockwork. They upped the dosages. Seemingly unrelated incidents started happening: I would have heart palpitations at times when nothing was going on. Often, I found it hard to focus. Many times I felt faint and, a few times, I did faint.

At work, I frequently experienced what I now know are out-of-body experiences—watching myself from a perch on the ceiling as I attempted to make sense of the scientific articles I was abstracting and editing. I often felt that I was going to die any minute. These symptoms became an almost daily experience. Yet the doctors said there was nothing wrong, that I was “nervous.” They gave me tranquilizers, which I never took because I knew that was not the problem.

While we were traveling, the symptoms were muted. It turned out

that constantly being with someone I trusted to keep me safe diminished the fear and adrenaline rush, and eating regularly supported a healthier, less-stressed metabolism. Back again at home, the symptoms increased. My husband was often away into the evening doing 18-hour experiments. As soon as I returned from work, I would call him and, between the regular readings he had to take, we would talk all evening to relieve my panic and the fear I felt that I would die that night alone. How ironic that I had now chosen life and felt, almost daily, as if I were going to die.

Finally, by chance, I learned that all my symptoms were from severe hypoglycemia and adrenal exhaustion triggered by the massive hormones that I had been taking. This was great news! Now I knew what was wrong and what needed to be done. I went on a very strict low-carbohydrate, high-protein diet and had injections of adrenal extract to rest my own adrenals. Within a few weeks, I was feeling better. Ready to move on.

Now preparations for separation had to be tackled. I had the further surgery I needed and then, during recovery, taught my husband how to cook a greater variety of dishes. Since he hated to shop, I bought him all the clothes he would need for at least a year. We decided what to do with our “things.” We divided our money. We got everything in order. Finally, just before we separated, we told our parents and friends that we were going to get divorced. I had decided I would move away. We said goodbye and off I went. I felt brave.

Everything had changed. Now, I not only would have no child, I also had no husband, no home and no career. I felt that the slate had been wiped clean. Amazingly, I also felt the lightness and spaciousness of being freed from limitation, a release from the heavy burden of shame and guilt and sadness. I had escaped with my life wide open in front of me.

After many heavy months of contemplating ending my life, I had come out of the darkness to view this loss as an amazing opportunity to look at life again with fresh eyes. There was now the possibility of creating a completely different future for myself that I could perhaps even come to love and enjoy. Unknowingly, I kept the grief, the loss, the pain from myself—it was a secret, buried sorrow.

I had unknowingly become a member of an underground sorority of women who experience what I call *missed motherhood*. I had been through the initiation rites with the surgery, the tests, the tears, all

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those months of not conceiving. But now I was a full-time, permanent member. As I have come to realize, it is a *huge* secret sorority, encompassing a vast number of women in this country and beyond. At that time, I didn't know it. I experienced myself as the exception. I was outside the norm. I didn't belong.