

Naming the Child

Hope-filled Reflections
on Miscarriage,
Stillbirth, and Infant Death

Jenny Schroedel



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*Naming the Child: Hope-filled Reflections on Miscarriage,
Stillbirth, and Infant Death*

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Introduction

Last summer, when I was round with my second child, perpetually devouring ice cubes as Natalie somersaulted in my womb, a friend came to visit. I knew from mutual friends that she'd recently had a miscarriage, but she hadn't yet told me herself. And I was afraid—in the way that everyone seems to be—of what I would say and how I would say it. I hoped that I could somehow be present to her, that my expanding belly would not create a chasm between us.

As I drove to the airport, I wondered how she might bring it up, or if I should, and if I did, how I would. Despite my healthy pregnancy, the shadow of grief hung over that year—we'd lost three friends in eight months, all under the age of thirty. In our tiny parish, five women conceived and announced their pregnancies, but only three brought the babies to term. Death was all around us, and yet I found myself tongue-tied when Jenny climbed into the car beside me.

After telling me a little bit about her flight, she mentioned the miscarriage, and then she said something I'll never forget. She said, "After my miscarriage, I realized that I needed to tell my story in the same way that other women need to tell the stories of their labors."

This book grows from three needs: the need to tell, the need to hear, and the need to understand. The desire

to write it grew organically from my own life. Although I have not experienced a miscarriage or the death of my own infant, my oldest brother, Garrison, died shortly after he was born. His death colored my childhood in all sorts of ways I could not articulate or understand.

As an adult, many of my friends have experienced miscarriage, stillbirth, or the death of an infant within the first months of life. Their stories often surprise me because they are not just heartbreaking. They are also love stories in the purest sense—stories of agony and hope, anguish and expectation. As I heard more and more over the last several years, I longed to weave them together into something cohesive so that bereaved parents would feel less alone.

These parents helped me to better understand that raw spot in my own family history, a place that was still awaiting redemption. My brother Garrison was born in the early 1970s with a severe case of spina bifida. After he was born, my parents were told by their doctors to leave him in the hospital to die. Overwhelmed with shock and grief, they did as they were told.

While Garrison was still alive in the hospital, the pastor kept asking how he could help. “Could I buy groceries for you?” he asked. “Any errands I could run?” Again and again, they told him these things weren’t necessary. But one day he showed up on their doorstep with an offer they could not refuse.

“May I baptize your son?” he asked. So Pastor Carroll went alone to the hospital, sprinkling the swaddled and

dying Garrison with the waters of life. Over the years, I've tried to recreate this scene in my mind. I know so little about what really happened, but I like to imagine that Garrison looked up at Pastor Carroll with bright and waiting eyes, that he recognized this love for what it was and took it with him when he left.

I don't think my parents' story is unusual for their time—Garrison was born at a time when many felt that it was better for parents not to bond with their dying infants. It was considered just too painful. Dying or dead infants were often whisked away by hospital staff in an effort to “protect” the parents from the full implications of what had happened. But this type of protection always backfires. Instead of having an outlet for their grief, parents bear it in silence. Their bodies, which have spent a lifetime gearing up for the tasks of bearing children and raising them, do not easily forget.

As I spoke to more and more parents, I was glad to hear that most who experienced stillbirth or gave birth to a terminal baby were given the opportunity to hold and bond with their child. Many experienced compassionate care from hospital staff. Still, experiences vary, and this is especially the case with miscarriages. Many wished there had been more support through religious rituals or counseling. And with every story I heard, I became more aware of the variables—you just don't know exactly what might happen to you or how you might respond. The death of an infant requires

parents to make a series of difficult decisions when they are least equipped to make them, which is another reason I wrote this book. I want parents facing end-of-life decisions about their infants to know that they have choices, and that their instincts are a valuable tool as they navigate this uncharted terrain.

Each chapter has two sections—one devoted to story and reflection and the other to practical information about what you or someone you love can do after the death of an infant or in preparation for it.

The Forbidden Room

One night while I was working on this book, I had a strange dream. I dreamed that I had a room in my house I had never found before. Nobody had told me where it was or that it existed, and I just kind of stumbled inside.

The room was full of all sorts of memorabilia I'd never seen, including Garrison's death certificate, his footprints and fingerprints, and a manila envelope with photos. There was a man outside of the room who urged me not to go in. When I picked up the envelope he shook his head violently. "Do not look at those," he said.

But I couldn't resist, not after a lifetime of wondering. So I opened the photos and finally saw what he looked like, the brother I have wondered about all my life. He didn't look at all well, but he was undeniably recognizable as my own brother. The dream only

reinforced a reality that I encountered time and time again while I worked on this book: death remains a taboo subject, and there is none more taboo than that of an infant.

Infant death is a forbidden room. We don't want to speak about it or engage with it or be open to the questions it stirs up. When I told people that I was writing this book, they would take a step back. "Why," they would ask, "would you want to write about that?" But their initial resistance would almost always give way to an admission such as, "That happened to my sister," or, "That happened to my mother," or, "That happened to me."

Despite broader cultural resistance, bereaved parents invited me into their own forbidden rooms. They've learned over the years to keep the door open, at least a crack, because it is only by entering that room that they are able to remain connected to the children that they never stop loving, never stop dreaming of and aching for.

So I invite you to enter this room with us. Once inside, you'll find that it is not as frightening as you might have imagined. It's a human place, full of stories and laughter and tears. And every story has a stroke of unexpected grace: each contains an unmistakable connection to life.

Ultimately, these stories are not just about death, but about life—about how we live and love our children and care for them as they die, and beyond. These are

also stories of transformation. As Igor Kostin, the first photographer at the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 said, “It’s hard to live among normal people now. A person who has been through hell has a different attitude. He breathes the air and feels the sunshine differently.”

Many of these parents—who will never breathe the air or feel the sunshine in the way they once did—spoke of the surreal experience of climbing into their cars in the hospital parking lot and driving away from their dead or dying infants. For those who had to leave a baby behind, I hope this book will also create a way to bring your child home—if not from the hospital, at least into hearts and families and friendships. We make room in the home of our hearts by sharing the stories of our children, by practicing random acts of kindness in their honor, and by saying their names again and again, even as we open our arms to let them go.



Naming the Child

Nobody knew you

“Sorry about the miscarriage dear, but you couldn’t have been very far along.”

... existed.

Nobody knew you

“It’s not as though you lost an actual person.”

... were real.

Nobody knew you

“Well it probably wasn’t a viable fetus. It’s all for the best.”

... were perfect.

Nobody knew you

“You can always have another!”

... were unique.

Nobody knew you

“You already have a beautiful child. Be happy!”

... were loved for yourself.

Nobody knew you

... but us

And we will always remember

... You.

—“*Nobody Knew You*” by JAN COSBY

*I*n the streets of Japan, you probably won’t hear Japanese equivalents for terms like *fetus* or *product of a pregnancy* to describe the unborn. Instead you’ll hear a gentler term, *mizuko*, which literally means “a child of the waters.” This term is also used for

miscarried babies, aborted babies, stillborns, or those who died shortly after birth, to express the Japanese belief that human life emerges slowly, progressively, in the warm waters of the womb. Babies who never have the opportunity to breathe our air return to the liquid state from which they came. The *mizuko* are not of this world—they barely entered it, after all—but they retain a cherished place in families and communities.

There are shrines in temples and homes for the *mizuko*, called Jizo shrines, with statues of babies. Mothers sew red caps and aprons for the statues, tucking notes with messages like, “Forgive me,” or, “I will never forget you,” into the aprons. They adorn the statues with colorful pinwheels, returning again and again with other siblings and the father to leave toys and other gifts for their water baby.

These shrines are not the bleak, tearful places you might imagine—some are even located in parks dedicated to the *mizuko*, with swings and slides for siblings to play on while their parents visit the shrine. Imagine peels of laughter as the older kids run about, while the parents bow before their shrine, lighting a candle or stick of incense.

There is something so refreshingly everyday about the Jizo shrines—so fitting for the ever-present nature of the parents’ grief. The oldest Jizo shrines can be spotted on roadsides and street corners. Here, women take turns washing the shrine, adorning it with flowers, and leaving food. These shrines call communities to a

continual remembrance. As people go about their daily business, they can't help but see the shrines, and all that they represent.

After talking to many women who experienced miscarriages, I'm struck by the contrast between the American and Japanese experience. In Japan, this grief is not hidden out of sight. It is not borne exclusively by the mother, but also by siblings, by extended family, by entire communities. And in Japan, the grief and love have a tangible outlet—there is something to do: a hat and apron to sew, letters to write, a pinwheel to purchase, a place for the other kids to play. Like housekeeping, the work goes on. The shrine must be cleaned, there are flowers to pick and arrange, and new clothes to sew as the seasons shift.

Naming the Child

In contrast to the Japanese, those in the Western world don't have much to say about babies who die in the womb, especially when the death is early. People wrongly assume that if there is no body to bury, there will be no grief. Most do not understand how quickly parents can become attached to their babies in utero. Miscarriages do not just mark the end of a few weeks or months of pregnancy. Pregnancy is not just about the present and future—it is also about the past. For some, the tiniest zygote represents a lifetime of longing for a specific and irreplaceable child.

In most hospitals, tiny, unnamed fetuses are discarded as “medical waste.” Mothers are rarely offered counseling or religious services. They are expected to get back on their feet as quickly as possible. There is barely time to heal physically, let alone emotionally. There is no sanctioned time of grief, no accepted etiquette as to how one might help or support those most directly affected.

Like the Japanese who have found a way to connect with their unborn babies, others need a way to make the death of the unborn concrete—and a way to continue to remain connected to their offspring as the years wear on. Some women won’t want to knit caps or create shrines for their babies, but there is something that can be done—something intuitively human and spiritually permanent.

You can begin by naming your baby.

Reach toward a name that acknowledges the unique and precious person that was taking shape in the quiet darkness of the womb, a name that bears the hope and anguish you associate with this child.

There are no rules for naming—it doesn’t really matter if you knew the sex, or if you held or saw him or her. It is enough if you loved the child—even if you didn’t consciously love him or her at the time, but realized later—sometimes even years later—that you ache for him or her.

From a Judeo-Christian perspective, naming is a holy act. In the very beginning of the world, God names the

darkness and light, the sky and the sea. Isaiah 49:1 even suggests that God names the unborn: “The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name.”

Perhaps naming is so natural and necessary because it is the first task mentioned in Genesis. Long before Adam was warned about the Tree or punished for his disobedience, he was asked to call out names for all the animals. Whatever he said, stuck. And even before the first human being was created, God named the night and day, the darkness and the light.

In naming, we have a chance to be like God, to speak the name that will open the door to the reality of what has happened and who our baby is. Perhaps naming the baby is the most transcendent act available to us. Long after mementos from the pregnancy or birth are put away, long after the insanity and intensity that marks the first year of grief, the baby still has a name, and we can still speak it.

Connecting with Your Baby

To speak the baby’s name is to move the child from the abstract into the concrete. No woman has ever borne a generic child. Every being that begins to form is unique and precious. This truth is something that most parents know instinctively, but others are not always so quick to catch on. When you publicly speak the name of your baby, you’re no longer talking about “pregnancy loss” or “infant loss” but about an unrepeatable human being

that had already begun to have a relationship with his or her parents and siblings, even in the womb.

Sometimes we don't have a chance to see or hold our babies, but it is unfair to say that these children are unknown. Many pregnant women begin to "know" their babies long before quickening, in all sorts of subtle and not so subtle ways. When I think back on my two pregnancies, I remember a sense—almost overwhelming, at times—of the particular, unique child I was bearing. While I could not articulate anything about my children's looks or temperaments, I had an intuitive sense of what it was like to "be with" each child, a sense that was confirmed later as I watched them grow into life.

In her book *Expecting Adam*, Martha Beck describes a similar phenomenon during her pregnancy: "I had the same feeling about my son, already, that I had about anyone else I deeply loved. I knew him. I felt him, the way you feel a loved one's presence when you are together, even when no words are spoken. . . . I had an almost tangible sense of my son's personality, his unique and indestructible identity. The idea of losing him was simply unthinkable."

Perhaps the encounter that begins in pregnancy is not unlike the encounter we might have with a person when they are near death, even when they can no longer speak or move or see. Some people say that those with Alzheimer's are "no longer there," but my own experience with my husband's grandmother testifies

to something else. Even after Sally lost the ability to articulate herself and navigate the concrete details of life, she was still Sally, perhaps more Sally than she had been in her healthiest state. Something about her utter helplessness and dependency near the end brought her essence to the surface—it was right there, available to anyone who could open the eyes of his or her heart.

Discerning the Name

Cultures around the world and most major religions have naming rituals that mark a critical threshold for a newborn baby. In my own tradition as an Eastern Orthodox Christian, a child is named on the eighth day, because that day completes the cycle of the world's first week.

Naming is customarily done after birth, but when a death occurs in the womb, the resulting grief and chaos can undo what might have been an orderly process: conception, pregnancy, birth, naming. Against this chaotic backdrop, naming the child is all the more important, and can bring some solace and help to parents who wish to forge an eternal bond with the child they did not get to know.

Parents discern a name in many different ways. Sometimes it comes to them in a dream. Before I begin to tell my friend Juliana's story, I need to say something: she hates the term "miscarriage." She feels that it minimizes the grief associated with the tiniest of babies, and that it suggests that the woman did

something wrong: had she “carried” the baby better, he or she would still be alive. I use this term in this and other stories for lack of a better word, simply because it will be recognizable to all.

Just near the end of the first trimester of her pregnancy and just before her miscarriage, Juliana had a dream that revealed her son’s name. Juliana had just seen him for the first time, through an ultrasound. In the ultrasound, he was perfect, with tiny arms and legs. Then, just before he left her body, she had a dream that cast him into the future: “A day or two before he died, I dreamed of a chubby blond toddler who was running away from me. I kept chasing him and finally caught him. When I asked what his name was, he said, ‘My name is Philip.’”

Juliana’s miscarriage began with bleeding and cramping, and then Juliana went to the bathroom and delivered him into her hand. As her husband, Stephanos, held him, she announced, “His name is Philip.”

For Juliana, the process of naming was not so much about “coming up with the right name,” but more about finding the way to the name that already belonged to her son. She believes that God first names the child and then it is the spiritual work of the parents to find their way to the name.

Many who experience miscarriage feel that naming the baby doesn’t just help them personally, but it also helps others to understand that while the baby may have been tiny, the ache is often enormous. For Juliana,

naming her son marked a threshold. “It was helpful for us in the grieving process to have named Philip, rather than just talking about ‘the son we lost,’” Juliana explained. “It helped us to carry his soul with us and to keep his memory in a concrete way. Now I can say, ‘My son, Philip.’”

My friend Dennise Kraus, after one ectopic pregnancy and one miscarriage, said something similar: “Naming an unborn child is a powerful thing. It is a way to acknowledge to the world what God already knows. A way to say, ‘life is precious—this life is precious.’”

For Dennise, the names of her children just kept coming back to her, rising up inside until she could not resist them. And after she named her babies Rachel and Gabriel, people related differently to her experience. Dennise is the wife of an Orthodox priest. Each year when her church commemorates the day that the angel Gabriel came to Mary to tell her she would bear a child, hearing the name “Gabriel” sends shivers up Dennise’s spine.

Something to Do

Many of the mothers I spoke with found out mid-pregnancy that something was wrong with the baby. With this devastating knowledge, the act of naming the baby sometimes became the one hopeful, constructive act available to them.

Rachelle Mee-Chapman selected a name for her son when she discovered, in the fifth month of her pregnancy,