

## Our infertility journey

Joan and Phil

**J**oan: As a child, I assumed my life would unfold in certain ways. I would go to college and prepare for a career; then I would get married, and I would have children. I succeeded with the first two, but it wasn't enough. I wanted it all. I wanted the fairy tale.

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*Phil: When we were dating and thinking about getting married, we talked about how many children we would have. Joan wanted twelve, as in the book Cheaper by the dozen. I said I didn't want any. I didn't think she really wanted twelve, although sometimes I wonder. I could have been happy without children, yet I knew they would be an important part of my life when we were ready. We joked about whether a compromise between no children and twelve was six or two.*

*We got married and agreed that we weren't in a hurry to start a family, so we focused on school and careers for about five years. Then we decided we were ready. Many of our friends had children or were pregnant. It would be easy. The years of spending money on contraception were over.*

*We were excited to take the first step toward being parents. It was no great surprise when Joan didn't get pregnant during the first several months. As a child I had surgery to repair an undescended testicle, and her menstrual cycle had never been regular. After six months we began to get concerned, but we knew many women don't get pregnant after trying for half a year.*

*We had become close to another couple from church. None of us had family nearby, so we became family for each other. We spent*

every Sunday evening with them, went on camping trips together, played games, and tried to solve the world's problems. They had a beautiful baby girl. As the months of trying to get pregnant crawled by, the man, a medical professional, made a clay model of a sperm and jokingly brought it to us as a good luck charm. We stuck it on our bedpost.

And then came the month my period was late! We bought a home pregnancy test and carefully read and followed the directions. We waited for it to turn blue. We read the directions two more times and sat on the bathroom floor, staring at it. We viewed it against the comparison stick again and decided it was slowly turning bluer, that we needed to wait just a few minutes longer. We watched that stupid test for twenty minutes before we admitted that I wasn't pregnant.

*Joan made an appointment with her gynecologist. We were now officially infertile, a diagnosis that is not made unless people have been unable to conceive after trying for at least a year. The physician explained that forty percent of infertility is male-related, forty percent is female, and twenty percent is a combination. He said the least invasive place to start was to check for male infertility through a sperm sample. I remember my discomfort with taking the carefully collected sample to the lab at the hospital; I muttered what it was before making a hasty retreat. Two weeks later, when I got home one day Joan gently met me with the news that my sample showed no sperm. The doctor wanted to test another sample. Sure enough, no sperm. We didn't even tell our closest friends.*

A consultation with a urologist resulted in outpatient surgery for a testicular biopsy and a vasogram. When Phil was in the recovery room, our dear friend was passing through, saw Phil, and became aware of his situation. He talked briefly to Phil, then came and found me in the waiting room. He was reaching out to us, and I was embarrassed not only about our problem but also about not confiding in our friends—and I pushed his caring away.

*During the procedure the urologist thought he discovered a blockage in my vas deferens. He was confident he had cleared it. He asked me to wait two weeks and then submit another sperm sample. I optimistically*

*collected the third sample and with only minimal embarrassment turned it in at the lab. The results came back a week later: no viable sperm. We got rid of the sperm model on our bedpost.*

The next consultation with the urologist was sober. Phil's only viable option was medication, an expensive drug that would give him at most a ten percent chance of sperm production. Did we

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want to spend a lot of money on an outside chance that this approach would result in pregnancy? If it wasn't successful, we'd have lost more valuable time. Was it morally appropriate to spend money on this medication when many people have more pressing needs?

Where was God in all this? We were angry. Depressed. Trying to live our lives and do our jobs. What were our options? We still wanted children, didn't we? Were we not supposed to have children? Were we unfit to be parents? Could we go on with our lives without the children we had dreamed about? The minister

at our wedding had asked God to bless our marriage. If we couldn't have our own biological child, was God withholding a blessing?

We decided against the medication and were referred to an infertility clinic. We lived in a metropolitan area and were fortunate to have two clinics a short drive away. At our first consultation, the infertility specialist said we had two options: adoption or donor insemination.

*Donor insemination. Now we had new questions to answer. How comfortable were we with using another man's sperm to make Joan pregnant? The clinic would try to match the donor's eye and hair color, height, and weight to mine, but we would know nothing else about the donor besides what his sperm count was at the time of donation. Donor insemination was the only way Joan could experience pregnancy, the only way she could be a biological parent. What would other people think? Would they disapprove? Did we care whether they approved? Would people take their disapproval out on our child?*

Again, we didn't readily share this dilemma with others. Were we afraid of being judged, afraid people would look at me as inferior or defective? Did we feel inferior to people who could have children? Did we want to save them from feeling bad that they could? Maybe we were angry that she got pregnant every time he looked at her, or because people make jokes about sperm donations, or because sometimes people aren't comfortable with the idea of donor insemination.

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We decided to go with insemination. We filled out the paperwork, I endured the full-body physical and more blood work, and we answered a written psychological assessment. We also had to provide evidence of our financial means and medical insurance.

*I wrestled with questions related to my infertility, the fact that I would never biologically parent a child. I knew all the answers in my head, knew that infertility had nothing to do with my masculinity, was not related to my abilities as a lover, and was not a punishment from God. Yet emotionally I struggled. Was I less of a lover because I would never get my wife pregnant? Would Joan still want to be with me sexually if I was incapable of fathering a child? I had believed that carrying my family's genes to the next generation was part of what I would contribute to the world. What good was I if I didn't make a lasting contribution by fathering children? Intellectually I knew this question was ridiculous, but on a gut level I wasn't so sure.*

For me, infertility became pervasive and consuming. It affected my body and my self-esteem. It interfered with my job. I started a daily regimen of oral medications to regulate various hormones. Again we made assumptions: now that we were working with an infertility specialist, I would be pregnant in a few months. Wrong. Medication, blood draws, ultrasounds, two days of hormone injections, and two days of inseminations. I learned through an insurance form that I had polycystic ovarian syndrome. After six months I still wasn't pregnant.

Medications changed. I had a hysterosalpingogram. Phil needed to give me daily injections. I spent summer months

wearing long sleeves to hide the bruises on my arms from the many blood draws. And there were bruises on my hips from the injections.

Every month was a roller coaster ride. Surely this month it would work. Each insemination was followed by two weeks of waiting, then the blood test, and then the call from the doctor's office to tell me I wasn't pregnant. Frustration and anger set in. Everyone was pregnant but me. Seeing teenage mothers and people mistreating their children made me furious. I stopped going to baby showers and we didn't go to church on Mother's Day or Father's Day. We would make great parents. We had the financial means and the love to care for children. It wasn't fair.

Life went on, and still nothing. Again, my medication was changed. Finally, with a drug of last resort, I administered shots in my stomach each morning for two weeks before starting the other medications; the injections continued until the inseminations. Our infertility specialist recommended that if this didn't work, it was probably time to think of quitting. We knew he was right. We had invested a lot of emotional energy, time, and money. But we were coming to the end. I was devastated.

*The emotions I faced during this time were new and more intense than I was used to feeling. I remember walking from the parking lot to the grocery store one day, seeing a young couple walking toward me holding their baby. I was immediately hit not just with sadness but with anger. These two couldn't have been more than eighteen or nineteen, and they had a baby. Joan and I loved each other and had so much to offer, and we had spent so much time, emotion, and money for nothing. It wasn't fair. I was almost even with the couple when I realized they were carrying a sack of potatoes!*

Another insemination, another two weeks of feeble hope, another pregnancy blood test. And the inevitable phone call with the results. The nurse, whom I knew well by this time, said the doctor wanted to talk to me. He got on the phone and said he would recommend we quit trying to get pregnant. With tears in my eyes, I was in the process of concurring when he interrupted and said, "Because you are pregnant! And, in fact, the blood work looks like it's more than one! What do you think of having twins?"

*Pregnant. It was unreal. Unbelievable! We'd begun the process of looking at other options, had just become licensed foster parents, and were considering adoption options, and now we needed to do a major adjustment. Pregnant, and with two! Then an ultrasound three months into the pregnancy showed one of the babies had died. "A common occurrence," the doctor told us, "but most people don't know it because they don't have ultrasounds this early." But we did know, and we were deeply saddened by the loss. After that we were afraid to enjoy the pregnancy fully, to get our hopes too high. We tried to remain somewhat unattached. What if something happened to this baby too?*

My father died when I was a teenager. Unconsciously, I put up an emotional wall to protect myself. I was not going to let myself ever truly love again. But when I held our newborn son for the first time and looked him over, I was filled with immense wonder and joy. The next day, as I was with him, he choked and couldn't get air, and the nurse tried urgently to suction out his mouth and throat. When he began turning blue, she dumped him in the bassinet and ran with him out of my room and down the hall. I thought we had lost him. I was alone for twenty minutes, unable to get out of bed, and frantic. Phil's parents happened to call and stayed on the phone with me until the nurse brought our baby back. They had used a stronger suction device on him and then given him oxygen, and he was fine. And as he grew and I took care of him, that solid wall I built so long ago slowly crumbled. I now love fully again. Yes, I'm still afraid of loss, but I live in the moment.

*We went back to the infertility specialist several years later, hoping to have a second child. Knowing what had worked before, we thought this time would be easier. But after almost a year and a half of unsuccessful treatment, we set a time limit on trying. One month short of our deadline, we decided it was not to be. We had spent a lot more emotional energy and money on trying to get pregnant and were content with our family as it was. It was nice to have a sense of closure, to no longer dread the inevitable call from the doctor's office that reported "not this month." We agreed. But Joan wanted to try just one more cycle: if we didn't try the last one, she'd always wonder "What if..."*

*That was eight years ago. Our oldest son is now twelve and the twins are seven. We have told the children, in age-appropriate ways, about their biological beginnings. They will know and will need to know this information in various ways throughout their lives. When their physicians ask them for their family history, they will have to say they don't know about their biological father's side of the family. When they study genetics in biology class, they won't be able to document one side of their heritage.*

At this point, it doesn't appear to be an issue for any of the children. If it becomes an issue, something they struggle with, we'll be there to help them if they want us to. And if they don't want to discuss it with us, if they just need to be angry with us, that is their right as well, and we'll support them, although it will hurt like crazy.

*I don't think about infertility every day as I did for years. It no longer consumes me. In fact, it's not much of an issue. Occasionally a television show or a song will remind me. Sometimes I am reminded when I look at the children. The sadness has become old and familiar, something I'm aware of, only now I can smile about my insecurities rather than obsessing about them. I feel blessed to have three wonderful children, and I focus on how to be the best parent and husband I can be. Now I struggle with how difficult parenting can be, aware of my shortcomings as a father, striving to be more patient and less negative. I love being married to Joan, I love being the kids' dad, and I am truly a lucky man who has so many opportunities to pass on the joy of life to these three wonderful children.*

I wish we could have been more open with other people, telling them of the choices we were given, and relying on their care and friendship. Our struggle with infertility was a big burden to carry alone; we could have used the help of the church and of our friends. Our families and the friends we have told have been supportive, and their support has been helpful. The members of our church still don't know, but their not knowing doesn't weigh on us as it once did. I wish it had felt safe to discuss these issues, to sense openness to talk about our infertility difficulties. We were hungry to do so.

## **About the authors**

Joan and Phil (not their real names) thank you for reading their story. They have lingering doubts about how safe it would be, especially for their children, to offer their story publicly using their own names. They wonder if you think it is wrong to use donor insemination. Do you question their judgment in spending thousands of dollars to have children when many children need adoptive homes? Joan and Phil wish pastors wisdom and sensitivity in dealing with congregation members who are struggling with beginning-of-life issues.