

Fatherless Child

Angela B. Haight

AS I STOOD IN THE receiving line at my daughter's wedding last May, a neighbor drew me aside.

"Have you seen Janet recently?" she asked, referring to her eldest, unmarried daughter.

"No," I said.

"Well, I thought I ought to warn you. We're going to be grandparents."

"How wonderful!" I replied enthusiastically, thinking immediately of Max, her youngest son and the only one of her four children who was married. I knew how ardently she had wished for grandchildren.

"But it isn't Max. It's Janet." My friend hurried on. "She told me on Mother's Day. She said she'd given it lots of thought, and she really wanted to have a child. She reminded me how common single-parent families are these days."

Startled, I managed to mumble a few noncommittal platitudes and returned to the line, my thoughts in turmoil. Shortly afterwards, Janet arrived. Always a sturdy young woman, her straight dress didn't betray six months of pregnancy; but the rosy, blotchy, radiant full moon of impending motherhood shone on her face, and I was grateful I'd been warned.

Janet and her sister, Amy, one year younger, had been literal saviors to us when we first moved into a new home near them. Their mother was the first neighbor who stopped by to greet me. When she

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discovered we had four children, including a two-month-old baby, she volunteered her daughters as babysitters. I called Janet within a week.

Much, much more than a business transaction, this was the beginning of a wonderful relationship for us. The girls were mature, responsible, kind, and charged reasonable prices. They played games, didn't mind fixing dinner, and even washed the dishes they used. The children loved them. At the same time, Janet and Amy were firm enough to control the chaos, keep the house in reasonable order, and remain calm in a crisis. One winter night when the power went out, my husband and I returned home, unaware of what had happened, to find Janet waiting calmly by a candle in the dark, orderly house. On another occasion she acted as midwife for a batch of kittens. With Janet or Amy in charge, we never worried.

It became traditional for the girls to visit us on Christmas Eve. They would arrive about 9 or 9:30, sneaking in quietly so the children wouldn't hear them, often toting a large bag of toys or handmade stuffed animals. Arranging the gifts with stifled giggles, we chatted and devoured Santa's snack.

We would have been desolate when Janet left for a northwestern college, except that Amy took over for her. However, the heady thrill of leaving home proved to be a disappointment for Janet. She was homesick, lonely, and depressed by constant rain. The next year, just as Amy prepared to leave for college, Janet returned to begin nursing courses at a local school. She was still willing to babysit occasionally, so our relationship continued to be close.

Janet earned her R.N. and began working, and our ties gradually loosened as my children grew older, but the annual Christmas Eve visits continued unchanged. The year I had my last child, on Thanksgiving Day, a hospital strike kept Janet from working for several weeks. She came over often to help me survive the holiday season and get back on my feet.

I had always told Janet and Amy that when they got married I wanted to give showers for them, but somehow the years went by with no weddings. Janet progressed well in her work, becoming the charge nurse for the newborn nursery, then graduating to higher administrative posts, and finally working on an MBA to qualify herself for hospital administration. In the meantime, she bought a small house and immersed herself in painting, wallpapering, gardening, and all the routine concerns of a homeowner. For a while she shared her house with a friend who had a young child, and she invested much love and concern in this "foster daughter."

Janet is now thirty-eight. Time is running out. I don't know how her child was conceived, and I won't ask. But her decision, obviously

not easily or lightly made, has challenged my static agenda of predetermined beliefs. It has forced me to consider seriously who is entitled to have a child, and under what circumstances.

Is the lack of a spouse sufficient reason to deny Janet the fulfillment of motherhood? Many women bear children with apparently casual disregard for the implications and potential problems of single parenthood. There has been nothing casual about Janet's choice. Does her decision differ qualitatively from that of a childless married couple who pursues every possible fertility treatment? From a homosexual "couple" who wish to raise children? Or from single people or couples who acquire a family by adoption, sometimes even circumventing legal restrictions through private procedures or going to foreign countries where economic pressures force some parents to consider relinquishing a child for the benefit of an entire family? Logic tells me that if we insist that all matters of family planning should be left in God's hands, and therefore birth control is artificially interfering with his will, then the opposite is also true, and those to whom children do not come easily and naturally also interfere with his will when they pursue every possible avenue to become parents.

Is what Janet has done of a different moral magnitude than using fertility drugs, prenatal surgery, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, organ transplants, or disconnecting the life support of a clinically brain-dead accident victim? These situations involve unnatural intervention, aggressive action to change the status quo, using human knowledge and power to preserve or alter lives. They require difficult ethical choices, risk, and sometimes playing statistical odds in hope of relieving suffering and/or enhancing life.

Does God expect us to accept every situation in which we find ourselves, not acting, but merely being acted upon? Or does he allow us to take life in our own hands and use all the means available to us to mold it into what we want it to be? Some scriptures suggest the latter viewpoint. Lehi told his son Jacob that "the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself" (2 Ne. 2:16). He added that because "they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not be acted upon save it be by the punishment of the law" (2 Ne. 2:26).

Obviously Lehi was not faced with decisions about in vitro fertilization or artificial insemination; we are surrounded by increasingly complex and sophisticated technology that blurs the parameters of good and evil. Civil law has not seen fit to "punish" in most of the medical interventions around us, save abortion and euthanasia. Does moral law? At what point do we overstep eternal bounds and unrighteously impose our will over God's?

I do not know if Janet has had opportunities to marry; I have never heard that she had a boyfriend or a serious relationship. But I do know Janet is a good person. She is stable, moral, responsible, kind, thoughtful, creative, productive. Her desire to experience motherhood is certainly not bizarre or perverse; if she were married, it would be commendable. Hunger for a child is as old as Sarah and Rachel. Her choice requires great courage, for she knows full well she will face criticism, disapproval, and obstacles.

What about the child? Does she have rights in all this? As all of us, she has no control over the circumstances of her birth. Yet, more than most of us, she will bear the consequences of her unusual parentage. Years hence may she come to feel that she is an anomaly, the product of an impersonal, biological procedure? How will she respond to the inevitable question, "Father's name?" Anonymous? To state an old proverb and scramble Shakespeare, "It's a wise child that knows his own father." Paternity has never been totally without question, but anonymous sperm donation lends a particular poignancy to that statement. Will all the security in the world be enough to compensate for a lack of identity enjoyed by nearly every other person born on earth?

The disastrous effects and tremendous costs of single motherhood in our society are well documented: child abuse, neglect, wasted opportunity, subsistence living, dependence, and poverty. I know that Janet will not encounter these problems. She is mature. She will be a good mother. She can provide economically for her child. She will love her child, even through the inevitable awkward and difficult ages. She will not abuse her child physically or psychologically. Presumably there will be no custody arguments, no battles over visitation rights, no confusing and conflicting loyalties. And there will be one set of devoted grandparents.

What effect will this decision have on Amy, Janet's sister, also single at age thirty-seven? The question haunts me in a very personal way, as I contemplate the future for the single women I know. Two of my own daughters are not yet married, and they have many single friends, most of whom would love to have husbands and children. For now many of these women seem content with careers and their busy and productive lives, but as time passes, certain options will inevitably begin to close for them.

If one of my daughters were to make Janet's choice, how would I feel? How would our family and our friends react? How would a bishop deal with a single mother who has not committed fornication or adultery? Would conceiving a child by artificial means affect her status in the Church? Her worthiness in the eyes of others? Is our current perception of the traditional family— father, mother, and children—the

only politically and culturally correct definition of a family within the Church? At one time we accepted the polygamous model as an ideal. Today we venerate the widow who brings up her children alone, especially if they are notably successful in later life. And officially we acknowledge, though somewhat reluctantly, the single-parent family caused by divorce.

"Janet said these are the nineties," her mother said plaintively, "but I told her I'm a fifties mom." I can identify with that. I'm a sixties mom, and as a Church member, I'm used to being told that a straight black line divides right from wrong and it should be perfectly obvious to all of us exactly where that line lies. I've also been fortunate enough to have a loving, supportive husband, a stable marriage, good health, no problems bearing children and only ordinary problems rearing them, a reasonable degree of economic security, and support from kind and loving family, friends, and yes, even babysitters. I've had it comparatively easy so far. So it sobered me to be reminded in such a personal way that many people don't have it easy. The things they desire most keenly are not readily accessible to them for a variety of reasons, often beyond their control. Being single, being childless, being handicapped, suffering chronic illness, watching life ebb out without attaining most-cherished dreams—these frustrations are largely beyond my ken. Perhaps they make the line seem a little less black and a little less straight to some of my brothers and sisters.

God intended man and woman to marry, to procreate, and to establish a home for their children. I believe that's still the best way, but today it's definitely not the only way. Children thrive under very diverse circumstances because they must. In Janet's situation, I wouldn't have made the same decision she has; I don't have the courage, and I'm troubled by some of the implications of her choice. But I do understand it. Although it's not exactly the way I'd imagined it, I think it's time to give Janet that shower.