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ALL ROADS LEAD TO FAMILY

By Rachel H S Ginocchio

Illustration by Michael A. Lombardo

Recently, some good friends told my husband Chris and me that after three months of trying, they *finally* got pregnant. We laughed. We couldn't help it. Three months was their notion of *finally*? They had sex one night, in their bed, and—bammo—actually conceived?

In response to our unseemly astonishment, our friends offered an “Uhm, yeah?” as if asking us to clarify our confusion. But, we weren't confused. We were fascinated—and more than a bit envious—that they'd made a baby without medical intervention, without paperwork, and without spending a dime. Was that even possible? They had to be joking.

My husband and I have two children. Our son arrived thanks to in vitro fertilization (IVF), and our daughter, thanks to adoption. Both paths entailed wading through many confusing options and complicated decisions, all the while grieving losses. Both paths were windy and bumpy, with grand elations, scary lows, and long flats in between. Both paths also helped us achieve the same goal: to build our family. However, we discovered the one difference that we could not have predicted—a difference in how our world viewed these two options.

When we told friends and family we were preparing for IVF, rarely did anyone embrace us with a big bear hug and shout, “That is FANTASTIC!” Instead, the reactions were usually apprehensive. *Really? Is it okay to do that to your body? Isn't it expensive? Why don't you guys just adopt?* We forged ahead, and

were rewarded with the most amazing boy in creation.

Now, flip ahead five years. We reentered the family-building process, and this time, when we eventually decided to adopt, our announcement was met with warmth and acceptance. “That is FANTASTIC! What a wonderful thing to do.”

We traveled both paths for the same purpose: to create our family. So why, we wondered, did a dark cloud enshroud the trip through reproductive technology, while glowing light illuminated the adoption journey?

It took us a while to decide on adoption for our second child. Since IVF worked in giving us our first child, it seemed obvious to us to try it again. Bolstered by our success, and perhaps a sense of obligation, we again shared our decision with family and friends, albeit a limited number, but even so, our choice was again largely met with apprehension. Though most people didn't know what we were talking about, let alone what they were talking about, that didn't stop them from sharing their opinions. As the number of times we did IVF increased, the quality of supportive comments diminished and the quantity of non-supportive comments

grew: eyebrows lifted (aren't you going to give yourself cancer?), horror stories shared (didn't some other woman doing this give birth to octuplets?), and judgment poured (can't you guys just relax?). We found that it took just as much energy to deal with our own emotions surrounding the IVF process as it did to deal with others' negative responses. Finally, people stopped commenting to our faces altogether, and Chris and I could focus on our own mixed-up, confused emotions and the task at hand.

I was in and out of medical offices, to and from the pharmacy, on and off the phone with various billing departments, and balancing acupuncture, yoga, and counseling. I injected myself with hormones, took numerous pills, waited for test results, and hoped. The medication is working (yeah!), but a cyst is forming (shit!), but the cyst is not too big and we can proceed (yeah!), and lots of eggs are developing (yeah!), but they are developing unevenly (shit!), but there is enough to harvest (yeah!), but not a ton (shit!), but your lining looks good (yeah!), but the sperm is not great quality (shit!), and although a few eggs fertilized, not a lot of them did (is

that a yeah!? or a shit!?). Eight embryos look good at day two (yeah!) but only three embryos look good at day five (shit!), but that is enough to transfer (yeah!), but your doctor is on vacation when we need to do the transfer (shit!), but the covering physician is highly skilled (yeah!) and everything went well (yeah!) and the transfer was successful (yeah!).

Each time we went through this, we waited two long, agonizing weeks for results. Every minute of every day, we obsessed over whether the eggs had implanted and if the embryos had started to grow. We discussed how we would handle twins, or what we would do with triplets.

With each negative pregnancy test, we grieved, and after a mourning period, picked ourselves up and started again. And although IVF was physically, emotionally, and financially consuming, we didn't deserve empathy and compassion, did we? Nobody was forcing us to go with IVF again. External commentary played in my head, over and over again, until my internal dialogue was just as heavy. We obviously didn't know when enough was enough, and weren't we making ourselves crazy? And, why didn't we just adopt?

Just adopt?

People have no idea how difficult it is to adopt a baby, not to mention heart-breaking, stressful, and expensive. Yet all we heard from friends and family were optimistic stories, including the supposed "fact" that countries like China were practically *giving away* babies. When we finally hit the wall at the end of the IVF route for the second child, and began our adoption journey, we entered into an experience just as stressful. After months of paperwork, fingerprinting, police checks, employment verification, proof of insurance, home visits, and letters of recommendation, we received a letter from the Department of Homeland Security, signed

by George W. Bush, that deemed us fit to parent an orphaned child. (What about our biological child, we wondered?)

We thought we were home free, but the hardest part was yet to come. After all our paperwork for Vietnam was completed (yeah!), our adoption agency closed its program (shit!). We transferred our files to a new agency (yeah!), which required more paperwork (shit!), and, that's right, more money (shit!). And then we waited (shit!) and waited (shit!), and sent, that's right, more money (shit!). Finally, we were matched with a beautiful 6-month-old girl. We fell in love with her instantly (double yeah!). We signed an adoption agree-

Every minute of every day, we obsessed over whether the eggs had implanted and if the embryos had started to grow.

ment (yeah!), and shortly afterwards, the Vietnamese government sent us documentation telling us to come get her (yeah!).

Finally!

But no.

Now we had to wait for the U.S. government to give us the okay to bring our daughter to the United States (shit!). While we waited, we received photos and videos (yeah!), and sent her a care package (yeah!). Meanwhile, diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Vietnam started to dissolve, and some months later, the entire U.S.-Vietnamese adoption program closed down (shit!). After copious phone calls, and letters, and emails with the U.S. government (what the...?), we received permission to get our daughter (yeah!). The

entire process took us 18 months (shit!) before she was safely in our arms (double yeah!).

Similar to fertility work, the road toward adoption was rife with huge emotional swings. However, unlike our experience with fertility work, our emotional ups and downs with adoption garnered support and compassion from everyone around us—even strangers. People made all sorts of assumptions about our altruistic reasons for choosing adoption, and judged our adoption quest noble, good, and deserving of kindness and empathy. And it wasn't as if I was less of a wreck during the adoption process than I was while shooting myself up with endless hormones. I was a wreck through it *all*.

I still ponder the reasons why we received dubious responses for using IVF, yet praise for adopting. Did the negative responses have something to do with people's assumptions about our reasons for trying to have biological offspring? To go through all *that*, we must have wanted a kid who looked and acted just like us, and who embodied characteristics—intelligence, athleticism, humor, creativity—that we deemed important. Weren't we most likely to have such a child if that child was our genetic offspring? We must have thought we were pretty darn great and wanted our kids to be pretty darn great, too. Perhaps some folks made what seemed like a logical connection between pursuing IVF and being self-absorbed, self-centered, and self-seeking—attributes that don't generally receive praise. In fact, when someone is reaching for something based on selfish, self-absorbed, self-centered reasons, and their quest fails, we tend to feel that they learned their lesson the hard way, now didn't they, and they kind of got what they deserved.

I'm still insulted by the notion that some believed the *main* reason I pursued IVF was because I thought so

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ADOPTION



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highly of myself. There were much larger forces at work. Yes, we decided on IVF in part because I wanted to be pregnant, to give birth, and to breast-feed. Another reason was expediency. When we were ready for a family, we were ready, and with IVF we imagined ourselves pregnant within six months. Surely this was faster than going through the adoption process. The first time around, our son arrived after two rounds of IVF—not so bad, really. For baby number two, we counted on a similar outcome, heartened by our fertility doctor's assessment: "It worked for your first kid, so I don't see why it won't work for your second kid." Each round held the promise of a pregnancy within about three months. It wasn't until later we realized we'd spent two and a half years trying to create baby number two. In retrospect, our overly optimistic fertility doctor should have said, "IVF

barely worked for you the first time, so it is not likely to work again." Perhaps this kind of honesty would have helped us move on faster.

But the most important reason, the real reason, I chased IVF for so long was that I didn't think I could adopt. And I didn't think I could adopt because I didn't think I had the motherly strength to watch my adopted child deal later on with the loss of a birth family and biological identity. From what I'd gathered, many adoptees feel a hole in their heart and soul—created the moment they were separated from their birth mother. For some adoptees, this hole is huge and unfillable, and flavors how they perceive the world. Other adoptees, over time, are able to acknowledge and grieve their loss and it does not dictate the way they move through life. Regardless of the eventual outcome, I didn't think I would be able to witness my child wrestle with

something so potentially big, painful, and life-shaping.

My main interest in IVF, then, was not that I was so in love with my biological self, but that I didn't know how to parent a child who had lost her or his biological self. Thankfully, and at long last, I decided I was acting the coward. What, I couldn't muster the fortitude to support a child who, sometime in the future, might be dealing with loss and grief? That seemed pathetic. For better or worse, children who are available for adoption need loving families, and we could surely provide that.

Now, as my husband and I watch our daughter learn and grow and thrive, we can't predict to what extent she will contend with the pain and grief of her "otherness." My husband and I made a commitment to acknowledge, learn about, and address her issues as they arise. We are grateful for the opportunity.

In the end, we didn't travel the adoption route to lessen global over-population or make the world a better place. We chose adoption for the same reason we tried IVF: we wanted a child. As it turned out, both IVF and adoption succeeded. So why, when it came to how others responded to our decisions, was one path alight with sunshine while the other lurked beneath dark clouds? Why do we pit adoption and IVF against each other instead of accepting them as equally viable paths toward the most rewarding of goals?

I'll probably ponder these questions for years. For now, what I do know is that different roads brought us each of our children, but both roads together brought us our family. ■

Author's Note: In reading this essay to my children, now aged 10 and 5, I realized that it was the first time that I had shared with them the emotionally painful aspects of pursuing IVF and adoption. When I finished recounting my tale, they looked at me, as if to say, "Why did you bother with all that?" They didn't quite get that without all of that, I wouldn't have them. All I said in return was, "Believe-you-me, it was worth it!"



"What are the other nonconformists wearing this year?"