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THE BIRTH OF GRACE

By Sarah Bain, Spokane, Washington

I began my third pregnancy with the kind of renewed hope and apprehension that every mother feels. Except that this third pregnancy ended not with the birth of a live baby, like my other two, but with the birth of a stillborn child, a beautiful daughter and sister. It was the end of mine and my husband's parenting lives as we knew it, but the start of a whole other kind of parenting that neither my husband nor I thought we were capable of.

Grace's life ended too soon, but her life is worth telling and worth sharing because of the thirty-three weeks I got to hold her inside of me; because she is my third child; because she is still my daughter; and because I am the richer as a wife, as a mother and as a person.

We do not spend enough time talking about death in this country. It is still a subject filled with fear. We have certainly made strides over the past few decades when it comes to dealing with grief, but there is more work to be done. Thirty-two years ago, when my own father died, talking about death was so taboo that I have very few stories about him to tell. I was five years old at the time, and his death sealed his life in a capsule that remains closed. In my family if we spoke of the fond memories, we would unleash the painful ones as well, and the painful emotions are the ones that my family was so good at avoiding over the years. We viewed these emotions as worrisome and filled with fear, and our fear took precedence over our need to share and process our feelings.

And so in the thirty-two years that my father has been dead, my family of origin and I have never processed his death together. It wasn't until I was an adult that I was given the opportunity in therapy to really grieve and explore what was lost. I am still learning how to grieve for my father.

And though we know so much more now about how children should grieve, we still know less about how parents and children should grieve for stillborn babies. It is something we need to explore and mourn publicly because I'm certain that all of us knows someone whose baby has died, whose baby didn't make it full-term, whose baby wasn't born living. If you would have asked my three years ago if I know anyone who had a stillborn baby, I might have said, "no." Yet, when Grace was born, I was amazed and relieved at the stories that came pouring out. I was not the only one. I was not alone in my grief. That knowledge was the beginning of my healing process.

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When it comes to infant death, especially stillbirth, we are often told to keep the grief within ourselves. The doctors and nurses huddle in corners not knowing how to help and in our case, when the ultrasound showed all of us that Grace's heart was no longer beating, someone hung a bouquet of silk flowers outside of my room that would be the mark, I would later discover, to tell the hospital staff that the baby was dead. The staff entered quietly, took my blood, pled and prodded and urged me to accept the induction as quickly as possible so labor could begin. Fear was the primary emotion that hung in the room.

Both my husband and I were in a state of shock and disbelief and were unable to think clearly for ourselves. The fear in the room, the fear among the nurses and the doctor present was clearly affecting all of our choices so that none of us really felt informed—really understood that we had choices. We mostly did as we were told while the reality of the situation slowly made its way through my body.

Looking back, Grace's birth happened exactly as it was meant to, offering me a full twenty-four hours of labor, a day of grief before she arrived, a day of planning, a day to cry with my husband and children, a day for my mother to fly 1,200 miles to be present for her twelfth grandchild's birth—the only birth she's witnessed, a day for my best friend to drive across the state to offer us her help, a day for our pastor to remain with us, to offer us guidance and counseling when we didn't know what we should do. One last day for Grace to be inside of me, to lie still and float in the only place she ever lived.

I couldn't choose the kind of birth I wanted. I couldn't give Grace the kind of welcoming I was dreaming of. Instead, Grace gave me the kind of birth she needed, a birth surrounded by a host of women, her brother and sister, her mother and father. This is after all a birthing story, a story of a baby who was born into the world the same way other babies are born, only this baby was not breathing, this baby had her eyes closed, this baby arrived silently into a room of weeping members of her family.

I want people to know that my baby, my daughter, Grace Susie, was stillborn on June 1, 2003—that Grace was a living, breathing human being inside me for 33 weeks. That I have three children, two are living and one sweet girl who is not. I have a desire to validate Grace's life, to make sure that people know she existed and to us she still matters. Grace is one of our children.

Stillbirth is a subject that does not come up very often, and when it does there is discomfort and silence. But stillbirth is real and it happens and we need to find the language to talk about it—a safe place to share our feelings and emotions among each other, despite the fact that some of us might be pregnant, because of the fact that many of us have healthy, thriving children. We can't be afraid of one another.

I miss Grace deeply and forever. Yes, it is still difficult for me to be around pregnant women, around nursing moms, around girls that are the age Grace would be today. Yes, it is difficult, but it is not impossible.

It is because of Grace and because of all the stillborn infants in the world that birth truly is a miracle. That the babies we hold and love and nurture truly are miraculous.

Tonight I lay in bed with my son, Carver, who is eight years old, to tell him his birth story. I haven't repeated it since Grace's birth and death—as if speaking the joy of his birth would somehow diminish our experience with Grace. I have found that it enhances it. Speaking and writing about grief is healing and natural.

Carver's eyes are beginning to close and his yawns are growing larger and more frequent. He smiles as I tell him how the doctor held him high in the air, how his father whispered, "It's a boy." And how the tears of joy fell from all of our faces as I held him close, brought him to my breast, and began the amazing journey of becoming his mother. He yawns one last time as he falls asleep, and I remain next to him on his bed.

I trace his features and notice that his nose is the same shape as Grace's nose was. They are inextricably linked to one another. Grace's death does not mean she has disappeared. She is with us. She is here with her brother and sister, part of our family. Grace is present in our lives, which are all the richer because of her, because of Grace.



Sarah Bain is a writer, freelance editor, and MISS facilitator. She is the proud mother of Carver and Sophia who walk this earth with her and Grace Susie, born still on 6-1-03, who soars above.

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