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Birth of Discernment

Julia Hathaway

“Peace does not dwell in outward things, but within the soul. We may preserve it in the midst of the bitterest pain, if our will remains firm and submissive. Peace in this life springs from acquiescence even in disagreeable things, not in an exemption from suffering.”

—François Fénelon¹

Do you need me to come to the appointment?” my husband asked as we got ready for the day.

“No. I think I’ll be fine.” I paused and thought again. “But if the same thing happens as last time, I’ll be mad at you for *not* coming.”

Two hours later, a tear rolling silently down my cheek, I was not angry at my husband. The pain superseded the anger. I stared at the ultrasound monitor. The doctor didn’t need to tell me what I saw—my second blighted ovum in six months. An empty sac. No sign of a fetus. Just a dark, liquid-filled blob on the screen. To a mother’s trained eye, the emptiness was visible. To a mother’s trained heart, the emptiness was heavy.

This loss would end differently than the first. Rather than waking up postsurgery, confused and surrounded by beeping machines and nurses, I was completely alone. With my husband away on a business trip and my two-year-old cooperatively taking a nap, I birthed the sac. Whereas with my first loss, loved ones surrounded me with gifts, meals, flowers, and empathetic words, this time I lay in bed and mourned in loneliness.

1. François Fénelon, *Fénelon’s Finest*, vol. 1, French Enlightenment Series (Jasper, Fla.: Revelation Insight, 2009), 62.

Tears of sorrow flowed, but also a deep appreciation for my Savior—whose resurrection I planned to celebrate in just a couple of days—filled my heart. As I endured my own Gethsemane, I felt a nearness to the One who had also suffered alone.

Grief, however, wouldn't fully hit me until two years later. This time, there was a sign of life. This time, I was angry. This time, I questioned the existence of God and my ability to sense his presence. The bleeding told me what I already knew, and the doctor tenderly confirmed it over the phone. I had miscarried again.

Grief. How does one describe that feeling? I know it is different for everyone. For me, it's a winter's day in Rexburg, Idaho! Cold and never-ending. The sun is shining bright and beautiful; I can see it, but I can't feel it. I know if I just go stand in that sunshine I will feel warmth, but it's much too easy shivering in cold, dark bitterness. My chest hurts. Tears flow freely. Moving forward is heavy, but it must be done because I still have six children who need me to be *their* mother. *That* is grief.

In order to understand my complete emptiness, I reflect back several years before this third miscarriage. Sitting on our living room couch, uncomfortably expecting my sixth child and pondering the unknown gender, I thought, *If this is a girl, I might be done having children*. As I stood, another thought, another voice, entered my mind: *You will have a boy with blue eyes, and then you'll have a little girl*. The words pierced through my heart.

"Yeah, right," I scoffed. *And yet . . . ?* I doubted but wanted to believe. Tucking the words away, I carried on with my day. The pregnancy continued as any other, until a few months later when he came.

It was dark, and I was shivering. I checked the clock: 1:00 a.m. glared at me. *I must have the chills*. Assuming it was just a bug or something, I decided to not alert my sleeping husband. Then the pains started strong and close, one after another, after another. They were too close to time. Suddenly I began to shake uncontrollably. Fear took over. *Something isn't right!*

"J," I whispered, still hesitant to wake him, still hoping I was only imagining the worst. "J," I spoke a little louder and pushed on him. "J, the baby's coming."

Upon hearing my words, my husband scrambled out of bed, startled and dazed (it was the wee hours of the morning after all). I awkwardly slid out of bed and tried to walk. Instantly, a flood of liquid poured down my legs. *My water has never broken on its own before*. Experience told me that if my water really had broken the baby's arrival could be minutes away. I struggled to keep the panic at bay and kept my fears to

myself, not wanting to worry my husband, who frantically managed his own part in the preparations. The babysitter arrived, and with bags in hand, we headed to the hospital.

I attempted to keep from trembling as the nurses did their usual triage check-up, but my body refused to cooperate. *Hurry up. Something is wrong with me!* Yes, I was in labor. No, my water hadn't broken. It dawned on me that it must have been another type of liquid spilled all over the floor at home. I'd have to remind J to clean it up when all of this was over.

As the nurses prepared me for delivery, I continued to convulse. Practically unaware of what was happening around me, the first miracle of the morning occurred. I attended a women's clinic where the doctors shared rotations, so you never knew which doctor would be on call during delivery. As I lay there, worrying and praying, Dr. Sizemore, the one doctor in whom I had full trust, walked into the room. Instantly, peace enveloped me. *Everything is going to be okay.*

In an instant, but with the calmest bedside manner, the doctor was at my side. "She's too hot. What's her temperature?"

A nurse checked. "One hundred two."

Immediately, Dr. Sizemore started giving orders. I needed medicine. Delirious with fever, all I could do was pray, pleading for my baby to be okay. All too quickly—yet not quickly enough—a few strong pushes and it was over. My baby was born. No sound. As the doctor stitched me up, my focus stayed on the nurses helping my baby take his first breath. They called in reinforcement from the NICU, a request I had made earlier but had been denied. *You should have listened to a mother's instinct!*

Aloud I pled, "Come on, Baby. Breathe!" The doctor eyed me, his gaze intense as if watching to keep my worry from becoming hysteria. Deep inside I trusted my boy would be okay, but hope gave way to anxiety. I could not take my eyes off the commotion across the room.

Finally, a cry pierced the air, a cherished sound. I leaned back on my pillow, a sigh escaping my lips. My baby was going to live!

Suddenly, a new fear gripped me. *Was I?* Bloodwork. So much bloodwork. Tests began for everything from lymphoma to HIV. I still have a small bruise on the arm they used as a pin cushion. The results: Strep A in the bloodstream, I had gone septic. Then more bloodwork to determine the cause of my weakened immune system. Antibiotics, testing, and observation for the baby and me were required. My newborn was whisked away from me, taken to the NICU while I remained in my own room, hoping for some answers.

Noisy machines, nurse interruptions, and voices out in the hallway made nights in the hospital practically unbearable. I vividly remember one night in particular. Overcome with exhaustion, I cried out, asking for reprieve, “Heavenly Father, please let me sleep.”

A voice entered my mind. *You’re asking for the wrong thing.*

I decided to engage the voice and responded, “What should I be asking?”

You need to pray that you can endure with less sleep.

Miraculously, despite more sleepless nights and multiple roadblocks, I did endure. After seven long and arduous days, my baby and I were allowed to go home—me attached to an IV, my little boy strong.

We named him David Ezra. Ezra means “helper.” To this day, David’s blue eyes remind me that he saved my life the day he was born.

Because of such a tumultuous experience, my husband shied away from the idea of having any more children. I, on the other hand, clung to the impression I’d received months before. I had my little boy with blue eyes. That could only mean one thing. As time passed, however, doubts crept in. *Had that really happened? Maybe I had just imagined the whole thing, attaching emotion to the story in my mind to make it real.* I searched my journals, hunting for proof. Nothing. Not even a hint of the words I swear I’d heard that day. But I couldn’t give up. We had to try.

Giving my body time to heal, physically and emotionally, we waited some time before attempting another pregnancy. That’s when the miscarriages began. One. Two. Three in succession. My heart broke, piece by piece, with each disappointment. With each devastating loss, doubts challenged what I knew in my heart to be true. Was there really a little girl in heaven waiting to join our family? And if it wasn’t real, what did that mean about my ability to receive inspiration from God? I was at a loss—for words and hope. Thus began the painful journey of distancing myself from God.

The months and years following my third miscarriage left me full of questions, doubt, depression, anger, and pain. Clouded confusion became my constant state of mind. My husband, never fully understanding (or believing?) the impression I’d received, struggled to know how to comfort me, and so he left me to wander. Until the day he received his own answer.

With great conviction, J revealed, “I had an experience today. I now know you had that impression, and I’m willing to try again, if that’s what you want.”

Trepidatious, to say the least, I listened as tears stung my eyes. Finally, my husband believed! Yet, where was *my* belief? The pain was too raw.

I could not handle another heartache. I wrestled within myself, not knowing how to respond. I still desperately wanted another baby. I also didn't want to discredit my husband's feelings. So I agreed to try again. We prayed, and cried, and fastened to each other in hopes that our prayers would be answered.

Five months after petitioning the heavens, an ultrasound technician welcomed us into the room. Apprehension gripped my insides. I hated this room, so dark and foreboding, tainted by the memories that haunted me. I took a deep breath and stepped inside.

We'd gotten past the first hurdle; the baby was thriving! This appointment would be the next telling sign: boy or girl? *Was my impression real?* My body tense with anticipation, I lay down on the paper-covered examination table. I flinched as the technician squeezed cold jelly onto my protruding stomach. She pressed the wand down on my belly and spread the goop around. Instantly, the beautiful image of our baby appeared on the screen. My heart swelled with gratitude as we examined the beating heart, the hands, the feet!

"Do you want to know the gender?"

"Yes!" J took my hand.

Without hesitation, the technician confidently announced, "It's a boy!"

"It's a boy!" I exclaimed, eyes wide. It wasn't a question. Relief surprised me. I couldn't believe it, but I did. Years of pent-up tension evaporated, and I laughed. "J, it's a boy!"

"What does this mean?" My husband asked as we drove out of the hospital parking lot. We both knew the depth of that question.

"I'm never doing this again!" It was all I could think to say. I didn't want to dwell on the meaning. I only knew another pregnancy was definitely not an option. In all honesty, I couldn't wait to share the news with our kids! Having been thoroughly convinced (by their mother) that we were having a girl, giddiness overtook me as I imagined their reaction to the blue balloons being delivered to their classrooms. For that one special moment, I pushed away the questions swirling around in my mind, saving them for another day. I wanted to soak in the joy and excitement for as long as I could.

It didn't take long for those questions to resurface. The next morning, I cried. I cried not because I didn't want another little boy but because the ending of this journey would not bring a little girl. I cried because I wanted answers and knew they would probably never come. I cried for the loss of the little girl I had dreamed about for six years. I cried because suddenly all I had wondered, worried, and wrestled with didn't matter.

It was also in these tears that I knew God was making something of me I didn't fully understand and wanted desperately to accept.

Suffocating in my grief and needing to get out, I bundled up to shovel the freshly fallen snow on our driveway. The tears didn't stop, but clarity came as I worked in the cold, crisp air. My ability to discern was not in the coming to pass of every impression; it came in my ability to act, despite the result. I looked up at the overcast sky. Darkness lifted. Light peeked through the clouds.

Two years later a tiny voice declares, "Mommy, I wake up!" This is the greeting I receive nearly every morning from my brown-eyed little boy. His whole being radiates a light that warms our hearts. It turns out I made a deal with my oldest son that if we had a boy, he could name the baby (that's how confident I was we were having a girl!). Donovan means "dark warrior," appropriate for the fight he had in coming to mortality. At least, I thought it was a name to signify his journey; but sitting in yet another frigid Rexburg winter, I can't help but wonder if the name symbolizes my own. After all, birth through a dark canal almost always ends in light.

This essay by Julia Hathaway received second place in the 2021 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest, sponsored by BYU Studies.