



Mother's Day May 13th, 2018



A Mother's Day Letter to Women Aching to be Mothers and the People Who Love Them

Birth mothers are ubiquitous - we've all had one at some point, even if only as a conduit to bring us into the world while we get permanently settled with a family who can truly hold us. Birth mothers are the source of everything; both glorified and vilified they hold the mystery of every human's beginnings - from conception to birth and all of the majesty and neglect in between. We take for granted the use of the word mother in everyday vernacular, whether referring to our own mothers or the act of mothering. We make assumptions about having mothers like we make assumptions about becoming mothers, and to those who have difficulty getting pregnant we say "you can always adopt" as though a baby or a child is the only necessary step to becoming a mother. I know, I know, for all of you who aren't ready to have children, don't want children, or already have a few who are driving you batty, adoption is the obvious solution, right? Wrong! Adoption is wonderful, benevolent, necessary, glorious, infinitely loving, scary, and honorable. It is one of the grand measures of a culture's compassion and humanity when it takes great care with its orphaned children. Adoption is a gift and one that is chosen with special thoughtfulness. Adoption is a journey different from birthing, not less than or in preference to, but because of. Because you have grieved your losses, healed your wounds, reconfigured your heart, and opened your arms. Adoption is not infertility's second best, adoption is a child's best chance, and that chance only happens when a potential parent has let go of one passage and is excited to pursue another. So for all of you out there who think you might have the answer please stop telling those struggling with infertility that they can adopt, they know that they can adopt, that is not where their pain sits.

Almost every mammal maintains its species by giving birth to live young, and biologically humans are hardwired to do this. Of course we have changed the need to

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reproduce and the reasons to reproduce over the centuries but we have not changed that this is the only way in which we will survive and wherever we live in the world we live in social units. We bond with each other and we build communities. We fall in love and we have families. Gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual or transgender we ache for a sense of belonging and a place to call home. Of course some people don't want children and those are not the people I am speaking to today. I am reaching out to the millions who are

struggling to conceive, who might have been on this journey for a long time and feel betrayed by the myth that having children is a biological birthright which, with the right person and sometimes with the right intervention, will happen. It might be selfish to want children but this makes us ALL selfish Please don't single out those who cannot get pregnant as self-centered, after all there is not a single person on the planet who has made the decision to be born for themselves somebody else always makes that selfish decision for us.

So now I have that out of the way let me share with you what I know about the pain of infertility. Infertility steals your frame of reference and begs you to question your faith. If you have been mothered well it might make you say, "I want the chance to do the same." If you have been mothered badly you might ache for the opportunity to 'do better' and all the while you might be wondering what have I done to end up in this place? This is the wrong question to ask because if there is an answer it implies that you could have prevented infertility and that is not, in the vast majority of cases, true. Infertility is not a punishment it is punishing. Infertility doesn't hand out its sentence to the most deserving or the least equipped, it happens to people across every demographic, every sexual orientation, and every gender identity. The only way in which infertility discriminates is in its access to treatment.

The desire to have children is buried so deep, it is in the marrow of the soul and begins to infiltrate the mind and body, as though coming from nowhere, hopefully when the time is right. When the desire to have children meets the opportunity to try for them with the right person and in the right circumstances that is where the march toward mothering begins. It starts with hope and sometimes fear, and not a small amount of disbelief that you have entered the stage of your life where you are ready to love another human being, usually much more than yourself. (I believe it is the urge to have children that amongst other things, attempts to preserve altruism in our species but that's a whole other story). Infertility derails human development every bit as much as a blow to the head. It changes neural pathways, distorts thinking, and disrupts the rhythm of the heart. Infertility nimbly exposes you to the world by revealing you as motherless, and on Mother's Day there is

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simply no place to hide, because we all have, or have had, mothers (good bad and indifferent). Wanting children, trying for children, and having children touches the same profound arc in our human journey that death does. Life and death are the bookends that define where we begin and where we will end. This is true for everyone whether you don't want children or you already have them. How we fill the story in between is infinitely variable.

Mother's Day is a celebration of life and for those people still trying to conceive it can be an unforgiving reminder that while their status as non-mother is exposed the depth of their pain is invisible. So, if you have someone in your life that is on this journey and you are their mother, please remind yourself that you have something, as their mother, that they don't yet have and ask yourself what would it mean for you to lose it? Sitting in that loss is where understanding begins. If you are the one on this journey seek support from those who love you well where you are. You won't always be in this place and you don't have to let go of what you want, even if you must find new ways to get there. You don't need to work harder than you already are. (People struggling to conceive work harder than anyone can imagine). Being lazy isn't why you don't have a baby and being human is why you want one. Look at all of the other humans around us busy having babies. Today is only one day out of three hundred and sixty five and your day will come.

Liz O'Donnell, PhD 2018 ©