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Finding Hope Amidst the Pain of Pregnancy Loss

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Synopsis

Pregnancy does not come easily to all women. This story shares my personal struggles with early miscarriage and second trimester losses and the struggle to balance grief in a professional setting.

Keywords: *pregnancy loss, motherhood*

Being a woman in mathematics comes with unique challenges. In a male-dominated field, I have often felt I needed to work harder to prove I am good enough. This includes keeping up with coursework, never missing a meeting, and never complaining. I have always thought personal struggles should be kept personal.

I also always wanted to be a mother. However, discovering my first pregnancy at 22, two months after getting married, two months into my doctorate, was less than ideal. In the early stages, I had not thought about telling people. I knew you were “supposed” to wait until that magical three-month moment when you let people know. In fact, I dreaded telling the primarily male math department at my university. So we told our parents and my mom sent pregnancy books that distracted me from my studies. Unfortunately, that magical three-month moment would never come. Nine weeks into the pregnancy, we lost our first baby. On the night of my birthday, I went into the University Hospital where I was admitted until the next day when we would learn we had lost our child.

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I distinctly remember it was a Sunday night, and I was supposed to teach the next day. I didn't want to tell people about our lost baby. We weren't at the three-month moment. It wasn't time to share this news with them. And this was not the way I wanted to share that news, especially with a bunch of older male professors. So I just informed people I was sick and would not be able to teach. No one questioned, and no one offered help, and why would they?

A couple weeks later, still deep in mourning the loss of my baby and questioning whether I would ever be able to have children, I spoke with my thesis advisor. I told him of our lost baby, how I was unable to focus on my studies, and apologized for my lack of interest. He told me how sorry he was for our loss, how sad it was to lose that baby, and to take some time to grieve.

I would go on to have a son and a daughter during my doctoral studies, and he knew how meaningful those children were to me. He always invited them along and was supportive to our little family.

Later, during the summer going into my second year in a tenure-track position, my husband and I decided we wanted to add to our family. In August, we discovered we were expecting what we considered to be our last baby. We started thinking about names, childcare, and how our budgets would change adding another child. In a university, schedules are made early. As a new faculty member, I had a dilemma: do I discuss this baby early and make my department chair aware before that three-month mark? Or do I wait in case something happens, having been in the situation previously? In the end, I decided to quietly share the news with a couple of colleagues who work on the schedules with the caveat that it was early and who knew what would happen.

As the semester progressed, so did my pregnancy, past the nine-week mark where I had lost my first baby, past the three-month mark, where pregnancies become "safe", and I began to share the news with my colleagues. Life was fun and exciting as we waited for our little baby. We discussed baby's due date and covering classes. We shared the news with our other children. Every night they asked about their new baby brother or sister. What would they be like? Would they look like me? How big will the baby be? We pulled out diapers and clothes and dolls to show them how big the baby would be.

We would later find out the baby was a boy. He was due April 20, which was excellent timing: just enough time to have maternity leave blend into the summer. We put him on the waiting list for childcare. We had ultrasounds and watched our baby dance around on the sonogram screen. We listened to his heartbeat with the Doppler. A student in my intro stats class came to me to apologize that she had not been participating in class. She was dealing with morning sickness, due just days before me. And we talked about our pregnancies.

Several weeks later, close to the halfway mark of the pregnancy, I began to notice I wasn't getting bigger, and I wasn't feeling any different. I made an emergency appointment as things started to go wrong. I canceled my morning classes. The nurse practitioner did an initial exam. Everything looked good, but she would take us to the sonogram room just to be sure. My husband and I sat quietly together waiting. We nervously laughed about the day's coming events: what would we have for dinner? who was cooking? As we began the sonogram, the sonogram technician was silent. She calmly asked when we last heard the heartbeat. That can't be a good sign. She hasn't told me everything is just fine. She hasn't turned the screen toward me so that I could see my baby. "Does the baby have a heartbeat?" I asked. She ran out of the room, leaving my question hanging in the silence of that dark room. I knew the answer. I didn't need the doctor to come tell me what I already knew: "We don't know why this happened so late for you." They scheduled surgery for two days later.

I returned to work to teach that afternoon. I didn't know what else to do. I taught my class the next morning knowing that I was going to have to cancel on Thursday. I had already canceled Tuesday, and I really didn't want to fall an entire week behind in my schedule. So I went to a colleague to ask him to cover my class since I needed to be in the hospital. We teach the same class, it required no extra work, but his answer was no: he had office hours. I wanted to scream at him, "My baby is dead!" But he did not know my son had died. I could not say those words out loud.

I didn't finish my course material that semester. And I was angry that my colleague had refused to help me. I worried that I left my students unprepared for future courses. Thankfully, I never heard of any students struggling in particular.

I went to a friend and colleague. “You missed our meeting last night,” she teased as I walked back to her office with her. The tears started flowing and I couldn’t stop. I choked out that the baby had died and cried on her shoulder. She felt guilty for teasing me, but she was there for me in that moment in the way I needed. She let me sit and cry with her in her office, then told me I should go home. I knew she was right, but I couldn’t.

Despite the scheduled surgery, I went into labor on my own the evening before surgery. After his birth, my husband and I had time to hold our son and have some time to ourselves. I still required surgery and ended up very sick following the birth. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to take the time-off I needed. Losing a baby before the halfway mark means that you are not entitled to maternity leave. I didn’t request any leave, and I am not sure that I was entitled to it anyway.

Time moved on, but the grief remained with me. I could think of nothing but our lost baby and having our last child. Our children asked if they would have another sibling, if it was their fault the baby had died. We decided we would try again and were assured this was just a genetic anomaly. We had had children before and there was no reason to believe we wouldn’t have healthy children again.

But the positive pregnancy test that would come brought memories of laboring to deliver a tiny silent baby boy. As we began a new semester, we ran into the scheduling problem. At this point, past the three-month mark, we were “safe”. But now I knew I would never be safe. Our daughter grew, and I told a few friends and colleagues quietly as we moved on. I received regular sonograms to monitor the baby. But our son’s memory was in the back of my mind. At 12 weeks, I watched our little girl dance around the screen with great relief. She was perhaps the most active of any of my children, and much more active than our son had been. It was probably just a genetic problem and that’s why he wasn’t as active. Our next appointment coincided with the time our previous baby had died. My mind was everywhere as we drove to the appointment. I pleaded with God to keep this baby safe, but I was physically sick to my stomach just thinking about the sonogram. As I walked back to the exam room, one of the doctors stopped to say hi to me, claiming, “Things will be just fine”. The odds were in my favor. As one of the other doctors put the sonogram wand to my belly, our baby came into view:

her head, legs, and arms. She was perfectly still. And I knew. I didn't need to be told. Our baby was gone. Two days later at labor and delivery, we had a moment to hold our daughter, to look at her perfect hands and feet, to admire the child she may have become. But she would not be given the chance to come home from the hospital, to learn to crawl or walk, and we had to hand her over, still, silent, and perfect. She would never know the pain of loss or the joy of motherhood. She would never meet her siblings, and they would never meet her.

I emailed a colleague, and let her know we had lost our baby. She covered my class that day, driving in on her day off to teach a class she doesn't normally teach. She offered to combine her lower level class and my class the next day as well and figure something out. I returned to work with support from my colleagues, people who felt the loss and were sad with me. They felt the injustice of losing two babies at four months. I poured myself into my teaching, and during those two semesters filled with the biggest loss and the deepest grief, I received the highest teaching evaluations of my career.

As we entered another summer, my husband and I decided we would try one more time for our last baby. The doctors had a plan in place, a way they hoped would allow this baby to make it to term. After the positive pregnancy test, we told no one until after the moments we lost the other two. We thought very little of the baby and tried to pretend nothing was different because we had to guard our dreams. We did not talk about names. We did not plan the baby's nursery. We did not buy baby clothes or diapers. We told very few even into the second half of the pregnancy. My colleagues were excited as we entered the third trimester, and I was cautious. I could not see that this baby would ever come home with us. My vision was restricted by seeing my daughter wrapped in a blanket in my arms in labor and delivery, and I could not see how the outcome of this pregnancy could be any different. My colleagues wanted to throw a shower for this special baby, but I was not ready to celebrate. My closest friend at work realized my hesitation. She asked if we could do the shower after the baby arrived so they could all meet this new little person.

On the morning of my induction, my daughter came into my room and threw up in my bed. Her anxiety echoed my own. I asked at least three times during labor if the baby still had a heartbeat, despite the fact I was hooked up to monitors and could hear it.

After the birth of my son, a joy returned to our home that had been lost in all the grief. My department rejoiced with me and my colleagues stepped up to help lighten my teaching responsibilities. They took on extra courses, threw a party for our new little man, and allowed me to take the time to love and bond with this miracle baby. They knew of the losses of my babies and they wanted to be there for me and with me. Mathematicians are not usually viewed as warm and friendly, but I discovered that anyone who knew of my losses genuinely wanted to be there for me and to help. They carried my pain as their own and shared in the joy of my sweet living, breathing, kicking baby boy.

Mama's Advice

- Sometimes it is good to be private about pregnancy, but sometimes having a community can help.
- I learned through sharing my story that more people than I realized have had similar experiences. These people have helped me feel connected to my babies and not feel so alone.
- While having another baby has brought joy to our family, he has not replaced our lost children. We have several reminders of them throughout our house and our older children often talk about them. Having a way to remember has been helpful for us.