

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH: TILLING THE SOIL

Quantum uncertainty may be like this. An infinitely intelligent being with perfect senses – God, Vast Intellect, or Deep Thought – might actually be able to predict exactly when a given atom of radium will decay, a given electron shift in its orbit. But, with our limited intellects and imperfect senses, we may never be able to find the trick. Indeed, because we're part of the universe, our efforts to predict it may interfere with what it was going to do.

(Ian Stewart 1997:366)

#### 1.1 Constructing stories of infertility

This thesis is embedded in the postfoundational social constructionist narrative research approach. It resides within the discipline and movement of practical theology. The practical theological epistemology and related methodology will be explained and clarified in greater detail in Chapter 3. This chapter sets out the basic themes for the rest of the research narrative. It introduces the reader to the themes of infertility and childlessness, the position of the researcher and co-researchers, the underlying interpretive framework and the relevance of the research narrative. It also presents an outline of the design of the thesis.

The stories of four very different couples were used to construct this thesis narrative. These story tellers/co-researchers shared with the researcher their 'worlds' of feelings, emotions, beliefs and interpretations in the context of infertility and childlessness. Together they all contributed to an integrated research thesis, their stories ultimately converging into a comprehensive narrative. A fifth story of infertility has been woven and written into the conversations of the other four narratives: the story of the researcher. All these people were shocked and saddened by the thought that they might never be able to have children of their own. Their stories converse and interconnect with each other, finding expression in the way infertility and childlessness are perceived, felt and lived. The author's story has been recounted because she was unable to detach herself from the text and succeed in becoming 'a neutral, authoritative and scientific voice' (Ellis &

Bochner 1996:19). Her personal narrative is present, expressive and even influential in the research process, because it was not her intention merely to collect data, but also to hear and tell stories. The researcher and the different co-researchers in this thesis narrative became involved in each other's worlds to a greater or lesser degree as they crossed boundaries and entered into each other's experiences and feelings.

The four couples are not the objects of this study. Within the social constructionist view, the 'self' is constituted in relationship with other persons (Freedman & Combs 1996:268). As subjects they live within a specific interactive context, wherein a variety of codes and meanings exists (Denzin 1991:61). Their identities were multiple: they were informants, interpreters, researchers and constructionists. Their willingness to become co-researchers with the author during the research conversations, by sharing and shaping their experiences and by courageously re-living and remembering their heartbreaks, dreams and realities, is laudable. Remembering did not just mean searching their memories (Fowler 1984:488). It also involved, to a certain extent, 're-membering' their life scripts, when, in the telling and re-telling of their stories, certain changes took place in terms of fresh understanding of their experiences and new, open-ended conclusions about them. This took place, despite the fact that it was not the researcher's intention to shape or influence the co-researchers narratives in any way.

According to Morgan (2000:77), the term 're-membering' found its way into the world of narrative therapy through the work of Michael White. Re-membering is an aspect of the narrative re-authoring process whereby people deliberately choose those whom they want to have a stronger presence as members of their club of life, or those whose presence they would like to exclude from their lives. People can also decide to privilege certain beliefs or discourses above others, resisting the beliefs they held previously. This can be one way of bringing new life to a stale situation. To 're-member' seems to point to the deliberate action of rearranging something, of deconstructing and reconstructing it.

Smit (1996:97) points out that one of the fundamental activities of the Christian faith is to remember. The worshipping community is grounded in remembering the

good news: Christ's life story, suffering, crucifixion and resurrection. In urging us to remember, God is also appealing to us to commemorate, to celebrate His narrative in our lives. In the process we are led to the profound spiritual question, not of what and how we are doing, but of whom we are (1996:96). The act of remembering also calls for confession, meaning literally to acknowledge God's viewpoints concerning our nature, distinctive identity, particular circumstances and personal relationships.

The seed of liberation has been planted in the Christian tradition of remembering and confessing, and those who utilize it can potentially be broken by it, but not crushed. Paradoxically, one can be broken into wholeness, into renewal and transformation, where remembering can both cement part of one's identity and rewrite it in a number of ways.

The narratives of these couples affected by infertility described in the pages of this text represent a viewing of their lives within the context of the time and space in which they were experienced and shared. Although their stories were told at a specific moment in time and with distinct understandings, they are not confined within the thesis. Stories are not contained merely because they are documented and presented on the written page. These narratives, told with integrity and honesty, will be moving and changing for as long as their authors re-experience and re-tell them. The thesis manuscript can therefore not have the last word. The reader is cautioned to respect these stories, because they represent the realities and truth for these couples. However, it is fair to expect that, as long as the owners of these stories continue to find new meaning, new understandings will be generated.

The research title is formulated as follows: *Narratives of couples affected by infertility: daring to be fruitful*. According to Polkinghorne (1988:36) narrative is a form of 'meaning making', and recognises the meaningfulness of individual experiences by noting how they function as parts in a whole. Human actions and events that affect human beings configures into wholes according to the roles these actions and events play in bringing about a conclusion of sorts. These

configurations are narratively expressed in linguistic productions, both oral and written.

The experiences of people who are infertile are not as fully and enthusiastically recorded as the experiences of those who have children. Of course, extensive research has been undertaken in the medical and psychological fields, although, within the general discourses and texts of society, the stories of the childless stand in a fainter light than that of those whose lives speak of bearing and rearing offspring.

The reasons for this are paradoxically both simple and complex. It is natural and 'normal' to be able to produce children, and most people are able to turn into parents, willingly or unwillingly. However, the story of infertility is a story about people on the periphery, those outside of the mainstream. It is, at best, an uncomfortable narrative of one of the surprises life throws at one, and, at worst, an angry, tragic tale of sterility and loss. It is possible to imagine that, in the arid landscape of infertility, 'Death' is not purely stealing away a living child (bad as that might be). 'Death' is snuffing out the potential life of the child of infertile parents, preventing it from drawing even a single breath.

There is an uncomfortable silence around the issue of infertility. It is often tough enough to lend an ear to the laments of those who experience such pain, suffering and indignity when it comes to the scourge of barrenness. It can be even more grueling for those who suffer from infertility and its effects to share their feelings and emotions. This is because fertility is, without doubt, one of the most intimate areas of human existence. It reaches deep into an individual's membership of the human race, as well as their place in the extended family. Infertility questions the core of someone's being at the level of sexuality, the marital/life partner, and the ability to impart life to this Life, to conceive and care for the next generation. It is associated with the loss of identity and a shattered sense of belonging (Njoroge 2006:61). It also cuts off someone's hereditary hope (and birthright?) because they are denied leaving their genetic footprint on this world after death.

In certain societies, infertility is a taboo topic. Childless African women and men often encounter a deafening silence within the Church, which echoes the cruel, hushed stigmatization they face in their communities. In most areas of Africa, motherhood is seen as almost sacred. In the absence of children, shame is heaped on the infertile woman. In fact, so utterly shameful is it that speaking about it cannot be tolerated. The question is, then: Where can the words to adequately and creatively name the childless person be found for a description that transcends the narrow, obvious definition offered by mere biological etiquette. Mercy Oduyoye (in Njoroge 2006:63) pleads for a life-giving theology that could bring the realisation that there are numerous ways in which people can be fruitful in the eyes of God. Alas, that message is underdeveloped from a theological perspective:

There is no aid for the judgments of inferiority and shame, no clarity for the childless couple from an alternative theological view of their forms of fruitfulness, their participation in the glory of God. Only passive resignation is offered in an inadequate eschatological perspective.

The commonly-used description of infertility is: after a year's unprotected sex, no pregnancy has taken place (Uyterlinde 2003:133). It seems that the desire for a child involves a complicated motivation founded on psychological need, biological drives and historical and social tradition (McQuirk & McQuirk 1991:42). The desire for a child, and the experiences of the subsequent outcome of becoming a parent or not, are highly personal and unique. They belong to members who find themselves within the same economic, socio-cultural contexts and even to those with the same family ties.

In the ensuing thesis narrative, the differences and similarities between the four co-researcher couples are considered. In addition, the story of the author as someone living with infertility played a part in the conception and development of this research theme. The interpretations and comments of others, namely the members of the reflecting team, also nurtured the experiences and thoughts surrounding infertility.

## 1.2 Constructing the thesis narrative

Two ideas of Erickson (in Freedman & Combs 1996:11) largely inform the thesis. The first is that there are ‘many possible experiential realities’. In other words, any episode or situation contains a plethora of alternatives. It is clear that, in the context of this thesis, certain perspectives are presented while others have been omitted. At least three agents or groups of agents are involved in this thesis narrative: the researcher and chosen theme, the co-researchers and reflecting group, and the reader. First, there is the perspective of the author/researcher, who chose to assemble the research text in a particular way simply as one amongst a variety of alternative constructs.

For instance, the author has chosen to include references from literature for both inspiration and intervention in the thesis narrative. Literature and the narrative approach, as reflection of the telling, listening and writing of stories, have much in common. Social science, including ethnography, theology and literature are closely linked in their efforts to ‘deepen’ and extend their ‘sense of a human community’ (Ellis & Bochner 1996:18). In referring to literature, the researcher also demonstrates and emphasises the permeability of boundaries between different disciplines in general, and those of practical theology and literature in particular. She also employs various styles and forms of writing in the text. For instance, she translates a verbatim report by one of the co-researchers in the form of a poem, and she uses the layered account (Ronai 1992:123) while conveying her own story of infertility. She uses self-reflection and the reflections of the co-researchers on their narratives, as well as reflections by others ‘outside’ the circle of co-researchers on those narratives, in order to convey and comprehend the lived experiences relevant to the thesis.

Multiple reflections are useful as an attempt to reveal or represent a fuller picture of the ‘truth’ of a certain event, process or experience. Myerhoff and Metzger (1980:99) argue that ‘single reflections’, unlike ‘multiple images’, always distort. ‘True reflections can only come from many images, a selection offered from among which one chooses, discards, makes corrections’. Of course, ‘true reflection’ does not represent an objective truth, but subjective truth, or reality, as it is personally felt and understood. In telling the truth, it would probably be more

fitting to refer to 'preferred' reflection or 'preferred' reality (Freedman & Combs 1996:35) rather than true reflection or true reality.

The author's unique position in terms of her particular life-view and her ideas, experiences, dreams and fears of infertility, and people affected by infertility in particular, were instrumental in the expansion of the text as it came to be written. The experiences contained in the research and described in the text can by no means be generalized, nor are they a thorough or exhaustive reflection of the research theme.

Second, the fact that these four specific groups of co-researchers, not any other groups, took part in the research, and that the specific reflecting group, not a different group, was involved, delivers some of the definite, specific meanings encountered in this thesis narrative. These persons consist of the second group of agents. This reflecting team commented on both the conversations of the four couples and the research text as a whole, and was established as the narratives unfolded. In other words the members of the reflecting team were not picked at the beginning of the research process, but were invited as the co-researchers shared the different narratives. For instance, it seemed relevant to the researchers that an embryologist, amongst others, should reflect on the narrative of Stan and Sena concerning surrogate motherhood, and bio-medical procedures. One could say that the reflecting team 'talked back', making their opinions known within the context of the research. They included a nursing sister, a mission worker, a psychologist, a social worker, an art lover, a linguist, an embryologist, a painter, a mother who wanted more children than she already had, and a lesbian Dutch Reformed minister. The co-researchers and reflecting team consist of the second group of agents.

The third agent involved in the thesis narrative is the reader (or the hearer, when the text is read aloud). Because the reader will not be able to 'receive' the text exactly as it is 'meant' by the author or any of the other participants, a new construction will take shape. This will happen with each different reader, even with the same reader whenever the text is re-read. The meaning of the text will be re-constructed time and again within the specific context according to the reader's

assumptions, understandings, beliefs and experiences. The quality and features of the text are significant, but so also are the reader's.

'The inspirational value of reading', according to Richard Rorty (in Ellis & Bochner 1996:23), lies in allowing another person's experiences to encourage critical reflection on one's own. The reader re-arranges or re-contextualizes her current knowledge of the author's life experiences (1996:22), and in bringing herself to a textual encounter with the story, she may very well change. The direction and intensity of change cannot be predicted. The reader feels, thinks and reflects as a reader, but is, at the same time, more than just a consumer of information. Rather, she is someone who is moved by the feelings and culture of the storyteller, because she has stepped into the author's shoes. In a small way, she meets the world through the eyes of the other person/character.

Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* is a good example of 'allowing another person's experiences to encourage critical reflection of your own', as cited in the above paragraph. Written by a German jurist, the novel addresses the relationship between Michael Berg (the narrator/fictional jurist) and Hanna Schmitz as an analogy of the relationship between the generations of post-war Germany. History and philosophy are reconfigured into a human love affair suffused with guilt and romance. The affair, starting when Michael is fifteen and Hanna (a former SS guard) is thirty-six, can be compared to Germany's 'affair' with the Nazi movement (Lawyeraau 2004). Michael represents Germany's post-war generation, who judge not only the Nazi past (represented by Hanna) but also the active or passive participation of their parents and grandparents in the Holocaust atrocities (Alison 2006:163). The novel's title refers to Michael's vocal reading of his schoolbooks to Hanna. Hanna is, unbeknown to Michael, illiterate, and the reading can be interpreted as an aspect of their lovemaking ritual, with Hanna demanding that he read to her before 'she took [him] into the shower and then to bed (Schlink 1997:40). It is only later, when serving time in jail for her war crimes that Hanna learns to read and write. It becomes clear that her reading disability has determined all her life decisions (Alison 2006:163). *The Reader* also points to the dynamic between Schlink's book and the literal readers/consumers of the book. The author invites the reader to consider the idea that moral responsibility,

collective guilt, individual motivation and love are not uncomplicated black and white issues, but instead have intricate ramifications.

Schlink received critical praise from some quarters for his moving, daring novel. Other critics, though, condemned the work as sickening and depraved. Some of the most scathing attacks came from critics who felt Schlink had duped his readers into accepting Hanna, the perpetrator, too readily, because of his over-sympathetic portrayal. In a sense, she becomes the victim, while the (nameless) Jewish daughter's pain (representing that of the murdered Jews) is glossed over. Hall (2006:449) points out that, although Schlink challenges his readers to confront extremely difficult questions about guilt and moral accountability concerning the Holocaust, he also closes those questions down with his use of certain writing techniques. In locating the novel in the detective genre as well as presenting it as a love story, Schlink renders the readers more likely to 'accept the value judgments the text(s) offer, particularly in relation to their perpetrator depictions, because these make interpretive sense within the popular literary paradigms the text employs and thereby enhance the enjoyment of the reading experience' (Hall 2006:450). Clearly, the way in which a text is written influences the way in which it is read. Whether an author writes social science or fiction, he inscribes the characters' lives. With his 'narrative structures and strategies, he stages the text' (Richardson 1992:131). Even when researcher and the co-researcher together construct the research story, the author still bestows personal meaning and value, which substantially influences the reading of the text (Richardson 1992:13).

If a fourth agent could be named in the thesis narrative, it would be the theme or 'knowledge' of infertility and the various discourses existing around it. This theme presented itself to the researcher as part of her 'lived experience' of infertility. The theme's emotional and cognitive language was fervently embedded in the author's interpretative framework, to such an extent that it broadened its influence to become the object and reason for research investigation.

The second of Erickson's ideas that informed the research text is that a person's experiential realities are constituted through language (Freedman & Combs 1996:12). In this sense, language is unable to accurately represent the reality out

there, but individuals and societies choose specific language to describe their beliefs about the world. Concurrently with describing what we experience or believe about our realities, we construct those realities. The fact that language is an interactive process between people implies the possibility of negotiating different meanings in order to achieve some shared understanding (1996:28). 'Language provides us with a structure that enables us to give form and meaning to our experiences' (Demasure & Müller 2006:414).

### **1.3 Relevance and context**

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that begetting children is integral to the human experience of the natural seasons and cycles of life. Infertility interrupts the basic progression from being a child to begetting a child, and eventually, in old age, becoming as helpless as a child. People who battle to conceive frequently feel overlooked, powerless, angry and hurt (Coetsee 1989:19). These feelings and emotions reside in the intimate personal and family spheres, often finding play, too, in the community context within which the childless individual lives. Their experiences are regularly minimized and inadequately supported within various contexts, such as communities, government, religious institutions and the media.

When childless people attempt to adopt children, they seem obliged to 'prove' that they are able and worthy of being entrusted with someone else's child. They feel prevailed on to persuade the adoption authorities and/or birth mother that they are a better option than those others who are standing in wait for the same baby. For gay people wishing to adopt, there are even more obstacles, like prejudice and often naked abhorrence on the part of others. Those couples brave enough to undergo intensive medical intervention to have a child of their own carry the additional burden of exorbitant costs (which medical aid companies do not normally cover) as well as their own and society's ethical concerns. Infertile black women in South Africa arguably have an even worse deal than that of infertile women from other race groups. They are silenced by their shame at bearing the burden of childlessness, silenced by virtue of their femaleness within the politics of gender power, silenced by the situation of poverty and illiteracy in which they often find themselves, and silenced ultimately by the fact that they will never call out

their children's names summoning them to come and sit at the kitchen table for dinner.

As mentioned earlier, the author's experiences as someone living with infertility encouraged her interest in hearing the stories of others in a similar predicament. Because she herself had, for a long time, been in subjection to the convincing voice of Silence, it was a very daring proposition to approach infertility in such an overtly public manifestation as a written document. Step by step, she overcame the dread, distress and pain of infertility that had been smothered by Silence. Since then, she has not only developed the desire to give voice to her own experiences, but, in particular, to become involved in a process that would, in a meaningful way, story and perhaps even re-story, the experiences of others affected by infertility and childlessness.

Frank (1995:xii) stresses that ill or suffering people are wounded not only in body, but also in voice, in this way corroborating the researcher's experience of allowing muteness in her life. He challenges the dominant cultural conception that the ill or suffering person should be approached as a passive 'victim' of a kind, for instance, a victim of infertility or rape. In empowering the suffering person to sooner turn her illness into story, misfortune is converted into experience, 'the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story, the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability' (1995:xii). In becoming wounded storytellers, they create emotional bonds between themselves and their listeners. As stories are told again and again, the bonds of shared experience strengthen and widen. Those who listen tell others. Storytelling helps the tellers to recover their voice in both mind and spirit, even though the mystery of illness and suffering may remain.

In support of that idea, Epston and White (1992:16) describe how they have assisted those living with loss and grief to 'publicize and circulate' the newly-constructed, alternative solution 'knowledges' emerging from their dealings with loss. Instead of keeping their experiences to themselves in their exclusive and private lives, they are challenged to share them with an identified and recruited audience of significant persons and agencies. In telling their stories to others, they

not only 'free their lives' to become 'reincorporated', but also inspire others to express their own preferred ways of living their life-stories in like manner.

Part of the relevance and value of this study lies in the opportunity that these four couples simultaneously both seized and created, that of speaking out and being heard. The context and uniqueness of their experiences are also significant. The author's curiosity about the deadness and sadness that infertility often perpetuates prompted her to find out how these couples, identified by unfruitfulness and childlessness, recognise and seek out Life through these dominant discourses. The author/ researcher was interested in whether and to what extent the above-mentioned and other socially constructed discourses of infertility affected them, and vice-versa. She was also inquisitive about the possibility of deconstructing and reconstructing aspects of their narratives.

Furthermore, the author hoped that the narratives of these couples would reach the ears and eyes of other infertile persons, but especially the hearts and minds of those who are ignorant of, and sometimes inadvertently insensitive to the struggle of those who have to privately and publicly bear and bare their childlessness.

#### **1.4 Literature review**

The literature review the author carried out concerned the subject fields of theology, philosophy, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, medical science, bioethics and spirituality. Some of the journals consulted were:

*Bibliotheca Sacra, The Christian Ministry, Word and World, Jewish Publication Society, Worship, The Journal of Pastoral Care, Journal of Religion and Health, Modern Theology, Die Kerkbode, Die Hervormer, Pastoral Psychology, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, South African Psychiatry Review, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, Social Work in Health Care, Journal of Social Issues, Women and Health, Journal of Applied Social Psychology, Journal of Health Psychology, Psychology, Social Science and Medicine, Sociological Inquiry, Evolution and Gender, Journal of Family Issues, Health Care Analysis, Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology, Bioethics and Patient Education and Counseling.*

Some of the websites visited include:

<http://www.ethnography.com/>

[http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~genzuek/Ethnographic\\_Research.html](http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~genzuek/Ethnographic_Research.html)

<http://www.qsrinternational.com/what-is-qualitative-research.aspx>

[http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5\\_4/HTML/moen.htm](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_4/HTML/moen.htm)

[http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc/pract\\_res.html](http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc/pract_res.html)

The wide diversity of the experiences and issues of the four (five) couples stretched the range of the thesis. Contradictions and comparisons flowed from their stories. However, the general themes addressed in the literature are:

- The need to redefine and acknowledge the definition of family, including gender issues, sexuality and identities;
- Reflection on homosexuality by the Christian Church;
- An appeal to foster new languages and rituals to describe and support those who suffer from miscarriage and infertility;
- Describing infertility from a narrative, social constructionist viewpoint;
- Gay sexuality and parenthood;
- Black feminist theological viewpoints on women and childlessness;
- The emotional and ethical aspects of assisted reproductive techniques (ART);
- Recognising God's presence or absence in the face of infertility.

In the light of the research title and literature review, the primary research question posed is: What are the different perspectives or experiences of couples affected by infertility? At the end of Chapter 2, further research questions related to that general question will be asked.

### **1.5 Epistemology and methodology**

The epistemological point of departure is postfoundationalist practical theology, which holds great respect for a particular and actual situation as a starting point for

research, but, at the same time, accedes to the influence of tradition and trans-disciplinary concerns on understandings of knowledge (Müller 2004:7). The assumptions and underpinning of postfoundationalist practical theology will be reflected in the research by the presence of the ‘Seven Movements’ described by Müller, based on the work of Van Huyssteen (2004:6). The process adheres to the hermeneutical dimensions of feminist theology, while a qualitative, narrative, social constructionist stance is followed. All these aspects will be considered extensively in Chapter 3.

### **1.6 Outline of the thesis research design**

The nine chapters constructed flowed from the author’s interest in the theme of infertility, and were written with the accompanying contributions of the co-researchers and reflecting team. The co-researchers were in continuous partnership with the researcher and were given opportunities to view and comment on the research report. The knowledge presented in these pages suggests that ‘knowing requires a knower’ who evaluates and interprets, and that any ‘learning’ that takes place in this respect has social and political implications (Steedman 1991:53). It means that we can so influence the kind of world in which we live that we can help to create a particular social world (1991:61).

Furthermore, the way in which this written document was constructed centers on the idea of reflexivity. The research process was experienced and documented as a socially constructed, circular process. According to Steier (1991:2), in this circular process, reflexivity is seen as the ‘guiding relationship allowing for the circularity’. Just as the research process for this thesis bent or looped back on itself, so did the process of reporting and documenting. The author and co-researchers revisited different parts of the document to re-think and re-construct the process. It unfolded in a spiraling progression that allowed for multiple perspectives. The preferred epistemologies and methodologies utilized in this text informed the issues of infertility as pronounced by the meanings of the co-researchers as well as the declarations and influence of broader contexts that were present. The opposite is also true.

The author found attractive the metaphor of planting as a way of pointing in the direction of the research process. Various images of farming or cultivating the land correspond to the development of life, the close proximity of life and death and the intrinsic mystery of the interlinking between farmer, seed, soil and nature's blessings.

*Chapter 2: Harrowing the seedbeds: giving a layered account*

In Chapter 2, the author expands on her motivation for her research focus and her field of experience. Her explanation inevitably involves sharing part of her own story concerning her own understanding of childlessness, and is presented in a layered format.

*Chapter 3: Positioning of the research: planting and fertilising the field*

The epistemological issues relating to this research are explained and the practical theological positioning described. An exploration of the research design and methodology underpinning this thesis is set out.

The reader is then introduced to the narratives of the couples, or co-researchers, from Chapters 4 to 7.

*Chapter 4: Harvest song of Stan and Sena: surrogate motherhood*

In this chapter the narratives of Stan and Sena are documented. This includes their experiences based on the difficulties they encountered in falling pregnant with the aid of assisted reproductive technology, and the eventual outcome of begetting triplets from a procedure that included a surrogate mother. The main themes and discourses that came to the fore in the conversations are further explored.

*Chapter 5: Harvest song of Hester and Florence: losing infants, inheriting a child*

Hester, an unmarried black woman who suffers from secondary infertility, shares her story. Florence, the stepdaughter Hester inherited from her brother, joins in the description of their family situation. Issues like infertility in the African tradition, infant loss and African feminist theology are discussed.

*Chapter 6: Harvest song of Samuel and Tienie: the making of a gay family*

In this section of the research document, Samuel and Tienie, the two homosexual fathers of adopted daughters, allow the researcher into the heart of their family. The homophobia and judgmental attitudes of society at large and the Church in particular constitute a considerable challenge to their living as a 'normal' family.

*Chapter 7: Harvest song of Helga and James: from miscarriage to voluntary childlessness*

Helga and James is a married couple who have endured numerous miscarriages. The male voice on the subject of infertility is not often heard. In this chapter, they share the experiences of their loss and grief, and the alternative choice into which they have grown.

*Chapter 8: Watering the land: discourses of growth and upgrowth*

Narratives of fertility and infertility are explored from a practical theological viewpoint, and extended towards optimal cohesion with other disciplines, particularly those of medical science, psychology, ethics and sociology. Involuntary and voluntary childlessness are described in terms of identity, sexuality, motherhood, families and parenthood. Spirituality and its focus on symbol and ritual is perceived in terms of having or not having children as part one's life.

*Chapter 9: Pasturing, reflecting and giving rest to the land*

In the final chapter, the planting and harvesting seasons have made way for a time of rest and contemplation. Towards the ending of the research process and thesis, the author reflects critically upon the title, epistemology and methodology, the co-researchers, conversations and themes, and she concludes this document by sharing a dream.

*In summary*, the experiences of those living with infertility have not generally received a great deal of attention, partly because they restrict expression by others on this personal and sensitive subject. At the same time, many of the major social agents like schools, religious institutions, popular media and families either do not encourage dialogue on the experiences of infertility or else they address it in a rather superficial way. This probably intensifies the conviction of those affected by

infertility and childlessness that they are living on the periphery, and are consequently misrepresented.

This research promotes the idea of acknowledging the contextual ‘truths’ of people’s experiences by giving voice to their stories according to their interpretations. In the process, care has been taken not to privilege the researcher’s voice above those taking part in the research. The research recognises that people live their life stories within multiple realities. It also supports the plurality of the text, meaning that the research document is open to many interpretations (Ellis & Bochner 1996:15). It also recognises the position of the researcher/author as neutral, but interactive from both a personal and professional point of view. Furthermore, the language used to describe experiences and document the research process is also not neutral. This is another way of saying that we as researchers or co-researchers cannot ‘extricate ourselves from language’ (Ellis & Bochner 1996:20): it clings to who we are, and it clings to the world we are trying to describe.

In the following chapter, the researcher will share more of her own story as it is an integral part of the social constructionist, narrative approach that she prefers.

## CHAPTER 2

### HARROWING THE SEEDBEDS: GIVING A LAYERED ACCOUNT

Katz (1988) contends that many sociologists feel repelled or threatened by the unruly content of subjective experiences. They shy away from the investigation of subjectivity in much the same fashion that individuals avoid unpleasant or dangerous activities. Subjectivity can be both unpleasant and dangerous: unpleasant because emotional, cognitive, and physical experiences frequently concern events that, in spite of their importance, are deemed inappropriate topics for polite society (including that of sociologists); dangerous because the workings of subjectivity seem to contradict so much of the rational-actor world-view on which mainstream sociology is premised.

(Carolyn Ellis & Michael Flaherty 1992:1)

#### 2.1 My story

In Chapter 1, the researcher indicated that in this section she would expand on what had motivated her research theme on the narratives of four couples affected by infertility. The research seed relating to infertility was planted from three motivational perspectives and weaved into the narrative of this chapter: foremost was the presence of God as creator of Life, crucified Lord and unknowable mystery. The second perspective came from professional interest, while the third developed from the writer's personal relationship with infertility. These three perspectives will be woven into the chapter.

This chapter, unlike the rest, is written in an unconventional manner, using a technique called the 'layered approach' (Ronai 1995:396). The aim is to textually and emotionally demonstrate the multiple identities of the researcher as they experientially emerged in the preparation for and documentation of the research. The researcher is, *inter alia*, a curious listener, a daughter, a student, a counsellor, a childless woman, a storyteller, a wife, a sister and a friend. This layered account is designed to draw the reader into some of the researcher's lived experiences, which led, in particular, to her decision to undertake research on infertility. The

reader is intended to note the fragmented way in which multiple identities present themselves, and the different modes of language they employ.

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I remember, standing at a time and place that roughly marked the 'beginning' of this research journey, wondering how 'my story' would position itself within the framework of the story of the thesis. In opting for the narrative approach, I acknowledged the social constructionist viewpoint, which asserts that the researcher finds it impossible to stand apart from that which s/he explores. In fact, the researcher brings a 'gendered, historical self' (Denzin 2001:3) to the very processes of study. The inquirer's standpoint is a reflection of what is inquired, and how it is to be done. In speaking as a researcher, I am also therefore speaking as a woman. While I am not speaking for all women or about all women, I am also not buying into the myth of 'positionless speech', which would amount to my believing that I speak from within a category inclusive of men and women (Davis 1992:54). 'Positionless speech' claims to pave the way for 'positionless truth', which is supposed to produce the kind of truth that remains unchanging, irrespective of who one is (gender included) and where one stands (1992:54). When I indicate that I am speaking as a woman, I am not attempting to reinforce the male/female dichotomy, but am rather making an honest effort to 'mark my position as female/feminist speaker' and to highlight the way in which the sexes are 'constituted through and in terms of existing discourses' (Davis 1992:54). In acknowledging our epistemological, gendered, historical and social positions as writers, researchers and storytellers, we can become more aware of our points of reference, and, precisely on this account, act more ethically.

In adhering to the rules of narrative (co-) research, I can avoid sinking into a self-indulgent quagmire of personal emotions and opinions, assumptions and biases. At the same time, I can effectively avoid pretending to be an impartial, politically-neutral, research-scientist existing in a value-free vacuum in which I am not linked to the spheres of my understandings, experiences, dreams and ideas on self.

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After rereading the previous paragraph, I realised that something had taken place between the conception of the first and second chapters. In order to tell and write my personal narrative with a certain amount of truthful, reflexive self-expression, the identity of the ‘author/researcher’ invited the first person’s ‘I’ to stand alongside it, at least, in this particular chapter, but also, in some instances, in other chapters. Incidentally, that does not mean that I had ceased to be the researcher: I was simply attempting to reveal aspects of my lived experiences as researcher for the sake of the reader, for the sake of my own understanding, and to hold on to the demands of the text in terms of the social constructionist, narrative approach. As researcher, I shall, at certain times in the space of this chapter, allow myself to speak in the first person. My story will be told, intermittently, from the different perspectives of researcher self, professional self and personal self. In order to underscore the experience of being part of all these stories at the same time, no sub-headings will be used. A brief row of asterisks will indicate that I am ‘shifting forward, backward, and sideways through time, space, and various attitudes in a narrative format’ (Ronai 1992:103).

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I wrote this chapter in the form of a layered account (Ronai 1995:396), thereby constructing an emotional, introspective narrative (Ellis 1991:24) as understood in the context of auto-ethnography. Ethnography (Ellis & Bochner 1992:16) should not be seen as a discipline, but rather as an activity whereby ‘patterns of cultural experience’ are ‘inscribed’. It crosses the borders into narrative research by falling within the social sciences and utilising subjective integrity and social constructionism in an attempt to investigate emotions, thoughts and subjective meaning (Ellis 1991:27). Both disciplines listen reflexively to the practices, texts, and representations that circulate and mediate lived experience’ (Ellis & Bochner 1992:17). Ethnography, literally meaning, ‘a portrait of a people’, relies on up-close, personal experience and possible participation by the researcher (Genzuk 2008:2).

Ronai (1992:123) describes the layered account as an attempt to re-capture one's lived experience so that the reader can 'vicariously live' the experience through the medium of the text. She adds (1995:396):

The layered account offers an impressionistic sketch, handing readers layers of experience so they may fill in the spaces and construct an interpretation of the writer's narrative. The readers reconstruct the subject, thus projecting more of themselves into it, and taking away more from it.

In recapturing the experience of infertility, I interact with my story emotionally, revealing my values and position, as well as the 'situationally embedded contexts' out of which such emotions and responses arise.

When I am writing in this collage form, the focus is simultaneously on my experience as a person affected by infertility, and on my experience as a researcher of the stories of others affected by infertility. Further, according to Ronai (1992:123), the layered account makes it possible to express 'the multiplicity of identities I embody when making a report'. This not only takes the reader into the cognitive and emotional responses of the researcher in a powerful way, but it also reflects on the complex, fragmented way in which 'experience is experienced'. It also underscores the fact that different disciplines, for instance, various aspects of ethnography, literature and narrative research, could impregnate each other in terms of their understandings of meaning and forms of writing/documenting. Its effect is to enrich the experience of the researcher, co-researcher and reader.

When writing this chapter I subsequently took the liberty of using my more distant voice as researcher, reporting on theoretical aspects, alongside the introspective, narrative voice (Fox 1992:330) of someone living in the experience of infertility. In the end, I suppose it is really one and the same voice, expressing multiple realities of a multiple self in multiple ways. At the same time, it makes multiple readings possible (Davies 1992:75).

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As researcher, I am interested in the experiences of people who long for parenthood, and the ways in which they construct their realities when it is problematic or impossible to produce biological offspring in the way nature intended. The couples that were approached to become co-researchers are quite diverse, not only insofar as their specific, individual traits and circumstances are concerned, but also in their particular sexual orientation and views on what the concept 'family' means to them. The word 'couples' in the research title refers to both heterosexual and same-sex partners. They were deliberately chosen to represent a diversity of voices that had been encouraged to tell their marginalised stories. At the same time, their experiences are not representative of any particular 'group' to which they might belong, such as the 'group' of gays who adopt children, black females suffering from secondary infertility, IVF recipients, or married couples suffering miscarriages. Further, their descriptions of their lived experiences did not exhaust the many potential ways in which they could have constructed (and deconstructed) their realities around the issue of children.

The reference to diversity also points to the different responses of the four couples relative to their position of both primary and secondary infertility/childlessness. It also refers to the ways in which their stories developed. One of the couples had taken the route of undergoing fertility treatment and two couples had adopted. The fourth couple had made the decision, after numerous miscarriages, to remain 'child free'. Although it went against the grain of what they initially hoped for, they have gradually (and partially) grown into that resolution. They are in the process of seeing it as the working out of an alternative plan in their life story. It is what Berer (1990:10) would call a constructive choice and a positive development, in terms of their new, reconstructed life story.

It goes without saying that a couple consisting of two males or two females is physically incapable of having a biological child containing both their genetic material. With the inclusion of same-sex couples in this research, the definition of infertility/childlessness will thus be understood in its widest possible sense. An individual's particular sexual orientation clearly does not determine whether that person desires to have children or not, nor does it settle the issue of whether such

a person would be a 'good parent'. Gay men and lesbian women become parents in a number of ways: by becoming the partner of someone who already has children, through heterosexual relationships before they 'come out' as lesbian or gay, through adoption or fostering, and through the use of donor insemination or surrogacy (Clarke 2001:556).

It was mentioned that the interviewees/co-researchers have been invited to tell their marginalised stories. Their experiences speak from the borders of mainstream familial living. They do not fall within the normative standard of society; their stories are not typical. People who either cannot have, or do not want children, do not fit the norm. Those whom society often feels 'shouldn't have' children, for example, homosexuals, but do have them, are not regarded as normative either. Societies and communities frequently do not want to listen to the voices of these 'different lives'. At best, society gives them limited attention, because what they say does not accommodate the main plot and, even worse, often involves the uncomfortable elements of loss and hurt.

Sometimes, stories like these are not shared because the couples themselves shy away from revealing such aspects of their lives. In my experience, many from the Land of the Childless feel odd, different, even disabled in comparison with those who do not experience infertility difficulties. Much energy, time and money are spent in the quest for a baby. Such couples sense that stories of their struggling, unsuccessful attempts at becoming parents are not welcome amidst other successful, fertile stories. It could simply be too difficult to talk about. Because of some of the responses their stories have elicited in the past, the involuntary childless quickly become careful not to repeat themselves. From experience they have learned that they will probably have to endure lame jokes, shows of superficial sympathy, uncomfortable silences or unwanted, well-meant advice serving as an attempt to give some meaningful perspective. The emotional pain and anger caused by such remarks could be difficult to understand for those not in the position of desperately wanting to have children.

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(Gentle chuckle): 'Are you sure you know how children are made? You have to have sex, remember!' (*Thank you, I didn't think of that.*)

'You can have my children with pleasure'. (*No, thank you, I want my own.*)

'Count your blessings that you don't have kids, they ruin your body and your budget'. (*I don't think I would mind, I feel as if my body has let me down.*)

(Said proudly): 'My husband just looks at me, and next thing you know, I'm pregnant!' (*Are you trying to make me feel better?*)

'My life would have been completely empty without my children.' (*Yes, that is a good description of the painful hole in my heart.*)

'God has a reason for not giving you children'. (*I don't understand what I did wrong not to deserve children, and what you did right.*)

'Just pray and believe, and God will bless you with children.' (*I have prayed and believed, but maybe I should pray harder.*)

'Whose fault is it?' (*Would that change anything? Should the one 'at fault' then offer to separate from the one who is 'not at fault'?*)

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There are those (family, friends, colleagues) who may very well be genuinely concerned and emphatic about a couple's childless situation, but are aware that it is probably a very sensitive subject. They are the ones who want to reach out and say they care, but, precisely because they weigh their words, they are careful about raising the topic. They are unsure of the right thing to say, so they say too little or nothing at all. The opportunity to give much-needed support passes by. The couple tend to isolate themselves from those close to them, and often withdraw from each other, because it is so difficult to deal with the empty spaces childlessness creates.

Frequently, what are supposed to be pleasant social gatherings or close-knit family events can become uncomfortable, stressful situations for those struggling to have children. Baby showers, family gatherings where very young children are present or other celebrations of parenthood, such as christenings and children's birthday parties become dreaded events. Christmas is particularly stressful for many infertile couples. Christmas celebrates God's love for a sinful world, when he

sent His son to be born as the Saviour of sinners (Luke 2:11), and as the true Light of the world (John 1:9). However, for an infertile couple, that focus is also interpreted within a family structure: the birth of baby Jesus, the Virgin Mary as mother, and God's parenthood. In delivering His son to the world, God the Father forms a family with humankind. Now, more than ever before, His followers can be called sons and daughters, and Jesus, their saviour and their brother.

Within a family context, Christmas centres mainly on the needs and presence of small children. The many toys under the tree are another painful reminder of a couple's childlessness, and renew the realisation that another year has passed without having their own baby (McGuirk & McGuirk 1991:98).

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I am astounded  
Hope never seems to let up

This immense longing to see  
my unborn children doesn't waver  
All this time I've foolishly depended  
on a sense of resignation  
to gently embrace me  
to protect me  
from this river of weeping

For a long time I had no idea  
how much this shattered me  
The yearning inherits my bones  
It makes me pick family names I'll never need

Fact is my loss seems more prominent with  
the passing of time  
Mothering my aging mother brings me face to face  
with a new, bittersweet knowledge  
this is how caring for a child feels

Attending a niece's wedding  
I try to imagine how it would feel  
to be the mother of the bride

I say to myself this is the closest you'll ever get  
Remember this day

I wonder how small speaking statistically  
is the chance of falling pregnant  
at 45  
Before it is too late

Is it too late?

My body stays defiantly empty  
Its DNA formula a once-off language  
Its secrets hidden from the next generation

But hope never seems to let up

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Being confronted by the reality of struggling to fall pregnant, let alone the possibility of being infertile, many couples are struck by an initial feeling of surprise and shock. Their view of themselves as individual people, as marriage partners and as members of an extended family or group is threatened. They often feel betrayed by their bodies (Louw 1998:5).

Susan Sontag (1990:125) points out that, etymologically speaking, 'sufferer' means 'patient'. She says that everyone born holds dual citizenship of both the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick. Sooner or later, at least for a while, each of us is obliged to take on the passport of that 'more onerous citizenship'. She takes issue, not with the fact of illness (or suffering) itself, but with the fact that illness is often embalmed in metaphoric thinking, the kind of metaphoric thinking that encourages untruthful, stereotypical, sentimental or punitive fantasies about illness. Sontag says tuberculosis, cancer and AIDS in particular are diseases that have been affected by lurid metaphors of description to such an extent that it is hardly possible to separate the metaphoric characteristics that cling to the illness from the ill person (1990:3).

The infertile are not 'ill', not noticeably disabled, but are indeed afflicted by a condition that prevents full participation in the life cycle. The metaphors clinging to infertility have a ring of truth, but do not tell the whole story, because being infertile does not necessary equal living an infertile life.

The word 'barren' literally means 'incapable of producing offspring', 'not producing', 'bearing no fruit', and 'unfertile, producing no vegetation'. Figuratively speaking, it refers to something or some undertaking as 'fruitless', 'unprofitable', 'uninventive' and 'dull' (Hayward & Sparks 1982:90). It would indeed be quite correct to describe an infertile person as barren, since the word aptly explains such a person's physical condition.

Speaking of infertility and barrenness is reminiscent of desolation and despair. It is difficult to escape the label that such powerful language establishes around the lives of the childless. It evokes images of stark, sterile landscapes where neither seed nor water will bring life.

The metaphors of the barren earth and unfertile soil are often used in Scripture to convey a place, a people or a situation that is uncultivable. Furthermore, when God threatens to strike individuals or nations with barrenness it is usually meant as judgment and punishment in response to various forms of sinful living. Psalm 107:33 & 34 says: 'He turns rivers into a wilderness, water springs into a thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a barren, salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who dwell in it.' Barrenness normally points to a breakdown in the relationship between creator and creation. On the other hand, fertility in all its forms seems to be a clear sign of God's general goodness, and His blessed involvement, in particular, in the lives of people who are in right standing with Him. Deuteronomy 7:13 & 14 says: 'And He will love you, bless you, and multiply you: He will also bless the fruit of your body and the fruit of your land... You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be male or female barren among you or among your cattle.' With these scriptures in mind, people struggling with childlessness tend to ask themselves: Did I do something to anger God? Does this mean I am not blessed, and do not deserve to have children? What should I do? How should I interpret this?

Jewish people, like their biblical ancestors, regard children as 'one of God's choicest blessings and the inability to bear children as a sorrow for which one prayed for relief' (Washofsky 2000:135). Moreover, it is a *mitzvah* (religious duty) for men and women to bring children into the world as recognition of the

sacredness of their marriage union. As God created Adam and Eve from the dust of the earth, man and woman, jointly with God, now create human life. For Jews, bearing children is indeed a very special *mitzvah*, seen in the light of 'the fulfilment of the age-old ideal of Jewish life and marriage and as an act of faith in God and in our future as a people' (2000:135).

In the African culture, having children is seen as the supreme reason for marriage. According to Gabobonwe (2004:20), most African myths of creation refer to God creating men and women and subsequently ordering them to multiply. All marriage ceremonies among African nations conclude with a request to God and the ancestors to let the newly married couple have many children. God is seen as the One who gives children as a blessing, while infertility or barrenness is interpreted as 'some sign of displeasure and judgment on the side of God (2004:22).

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*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,  
says the Lord.*

*For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are My ways higher than your ways and  
My thoughts than your thoughts.*

*For as the rain and snow come down from the heavens,  
and return not there again, but water the earth  
and make it bring forth and sprout, that it may give seed to the sower and  
bread to the eater,*

*So shall my word be that goes forth out of My mouth:  
it shall not return to Me void,  
but it shall accomplish that which I please and purpose,  
and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.*

(Isaiah 55:8-11)

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It seems as if God assures the hearer in this excerpt that whatever He wills will certainly come to pass; that the creations He speaks into existence will fit His

purposes. He will make sure of that, He promises. He also makes it clear that He is unknowable, apparently, a mystery.

Van Niekerk (2005:64) explains the idea of a mystery in the following number of ways. Firstly, it is a kind of uncertainty about something that we supposedly ought to 'know'. It is different from a problem or a riddle in that we don't succeed in solving it, but, instead, it takes hold of us. Secondly, knowledge about mystery is always veiled knowledge. Although we can make corrections or reinterpretations about the mystery as time goes by, we never succeed in solving it. In fact, our greater understanding about mystery constantly drives our attention back to the mystery, and reminds us that we have hardly any understanding. In the third place, he describes knowledge of mystery as existential knowledge. It can simply never be solved. At best, we can attempt merely to try and make sense of it. Attempting to find such meaning touches the core of our being, and changes us deeply and inherently. It changes our outlook on the world. Van Niekerk (2005:69) describes knowledge of mystery as knowledge of the whole. Not even the fabulous achievements of science can explain the totality of our existence. Lastly, he says, mystery teaches us to live with uncertainty, but at the same time, we need to orientate ourselves to searching for and receiving wisdom.

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God, I actually meant it when I said, let's call it a day.  
Let's just leave it.  
You and I are never going to pull off a pregnancy  
and they' ve declined the opportunity to be born.  
Never mind, I'm fine.  
And it's really not the end of the world.

I really can find my way without my own children.

Besides, I've learned a few things from Infertility:  
how to wait  
how to live  
how to know their voices without hearing them  
how to care for the others who are disabled, off centre  
how not to think about You  
how to realign my faith

I can find my way without them.

I've been thinking, God,  
what makes a good mother?

And if You were a mother, would You have healed my womb?

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Agricultural communities of old learnt from nature herself the 'doctrine of death' (Lewis 1940:82), of the buried seed and the risen corn. The repeated cycles of the seasonal changes tell the drama of spring awakening from the death of winter. Lewis states that the concept of sacrifice, whether of animal or human, is as long as the history of mankind. The shedding of blood (of life) under the law is a requirement for the remission of sin and its guilt (Hebrews 9:22). Both the Indian ascetic and the Greek philosopher understand that some form of death is necessary to attain wisdom and life. 'Before the soul can stand in the presence of the Master, its feet must be washed in the blood of the heart' (Narayani 1992). It means that only through some sacrifice or suffering can we move forward.

Life and death are blood brothers and soul sisters. Hand in hand, it seems as if one is present the other is also near. A kind of death (a leaving behind, a letting go of something or someone) often necessitates the breaking forth of life. Suffering and elevation are named in one breath. One of the major themes of Christianity echoes this law:

*I assure you, most solemnly I tell you.  
Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,  
it remains just one grain: it never becomes more,  
but lives by itself alone. But if it dies,  
it produces many others and yields a rich harvest.*

(John 12:24)

Although life is planted in us by God as an abundant gift, to actually grow in fullness and richness like a seed in good soil is not necessarily a given. If Death begins with birth, then Life has to be fought for, or at least sought out. It seems that to comprehend even a little of the processes of growth and fruitfulness, and to attain and radiate them, a counter-entry must be endured. A certain amount of

disability and death must be accepted. Maybe none of us deserves this life, and this life doesn't deserve us.

Lewis (1940:82) points out that, when it comes to the doctrine of death, the great act of martyrdom has been initiated for us, and done on our behalf, by Christ at Calvary:

There the degree of accepted Death reaches the utmost of the imaginable and perhaps goes beyond them; not only all natural supports, but the presence of the very Father to whom the sacrifice is made deserts the victim, and surrender to God does not falter though God 'forsakes' it.

The epistemological principle of the theology of the cross, says Moltmann (1973:26), can only be the dialectic principle, that the deity of God is revealed in the paradox of the cross. Christ revealed his identity amongst those who had lost theirs, namely the sick, rejected and despised. It was precisely those who 'had been deprived of their humanity that recognised Him as the Son of Man' (1973:27). It is the marginalised who contradict societal norms, or who find themselves unable to participate in the *imago Dei*, that manages to find their experiences in the Disabled God (Willis 2002:223). Jesus is aptly named the Disabled God, because He chose to become disabled on humanity's behalf, because He refused to abandon those on the margins, but also because He was resurrected as the Disabled God. His body, bearing the marks of his wounds, corresponds with all humankind, disabled humankind, who knows and live in successive moments of disability (Shearer 1984:i), but especially with those who are noticeably and permanently disabled in body or mind.

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My initial research topic was on far safer ground in terms of my 'embodied, lived, emotional experiences' (Ronai 1992:103). I planned to explore the relationship dynamics of couples, one of which was religious and the other not. It was most certainly intellectually stimulating, researchable and scientifically acceptable, and would have made for a number of interesting stories. It would have been, by far, the easier research road to take in terms of emotional vulnerability, but it lacked an

element of authenticity and risk, because its origins did not lie within my own experiences and reflections.

Victor Frankl (1962:5) likewise expressed vulnerability when he wrote a book following his three years in four different Nazi death camps, where he came face to face with the worst of human suffering. Initially he wanted to publish the book anonymously, using only his prison number. However, he came to see that this would devalue his convictions, so, despite 'his intense dislike of exhibitionism', he eventually published under his own name. In sharing his thoughts and experiences, some of which he was not particularly proud, he lent integrity and truthfulness to his existence. He wrote about ghastly inhumaneness without resorting to drama and self-pity, and came to the conclusion that endurance is stretched to the extreme limit if meaning can be found in suffering.

I use the word, 'vulnerable', because in doing narrative research, the researcher has little place to hide behind a front of distant aloofness (read objectivity) and expertise. Richardson (in Blyer 1996:335) says the narrator's (researcher's) voice is not a 'godlike, all knowing voice, without human subjectivity and fallibility'. The stories of the researcher and the researched are, indeed, interlinked in a way that leads to a multi-voiced and participatory situation. He says the way in which the participants (researcher and co-researchers) tell their narratives must be seen as types of social analysis.

I was somewhat reluctant to do research on infertility, because I felt that confronting a personal issue with co-researchers and reflecting teams, and eventually documenting it would be too much of an expressive risk. Another personal difficulty lies in the images the very word 'infertility' conjures up. I do not think one can even mention the issue without stirring up images of unfulfilled longing, grief and wretchedness. It is potentially a dark, sombre, heavy subject. I have journeyed a long way with this theme and I have met sorrow and disappointment head-on, but my severe disappointment was tempered by time, some acceptance and even, at times, relief that I have no children. However, in choosing this theme, I worried about being perceived as a glutton for grief. In fact,

that was exactly how I felt at one of the PhD student group gatherings that were part of this research passage.

During one of those student meetings, after I had shared some of my research notes on the subject of infertility, a male co-student expressed his discomfort: 'Oh no, please, I haven't got the stomach for all this aching and agonising. This suffering's going to drive me to depression!' The group, including me, laughed heartily and with understanding at his desperate attempt to avoid the topic of loss and death. My interpretation of this minister's comment was: 'I empathise with you, but this is really too heavy for me. Rather get over it in private'. I felt like one of those 'tedious despairing literary mothers', in the words of Piet Gerbrandy referred to in the following paragraphs.

My preferred reality means not being perceived as someone who pines and suffers over her losses, and then forces her tale of woe on others. I didn't want to skim over it, or try to generate sympathy. At the same time, I wanted to write about it.

In a recent article by Leon Hanssen, *Een dorst die nooit vergaat* (2004:41), he comments on the fact that some male Dutch literary reviewers, namely Jos Joosten, Ilja Leonard Pfeiffer and Piet Gerbrandy delivered scathing critiques on female poets in particular and writers who have written about devastating sadness in the context of the death of children. He says that a tradition has evolved in which male reviewers scornfully criticise the textual pathos of grieving women writers. This is particularly so if the writing is about the loss of these mothers' own children and the grief that accompanies it. They have been accused of using their personal pain to get publicity. Instead, they are advised to try and work through their dramas as quietly as possible. '*In plaats van het drama zo stil mogelijk te verwerken, had ze de publiciteit gezocht in de rol van 'die droevige mevrouw die zo aangrijpend over haar dogter schrijft'*' (Hanssen 2004:41). This comment was made about the poet Anna Enquist, who wrote '*De tussentijd*' after the death of her grown daughter in a road accident. She has been labelled as one of the '*literaturelurende wanhoopsmoeders*' (tedious literary despairing mothers) and advised not to parade her grief any longer if she wished to be taken seriously by

readers of poetry. It seems that to take autobiographical reality as a starting point, trying to achieve originality, makes for bad poetry, according to literary critic Piet Gerbrandy. However, Hanssen (2004:41) tries to show that these poets are, in fact, in a long line of respectable autobiographical authors spanning centuries.

P F Thomése, a Dutch writer, who used to be very critical of writing about personal pain, which he called 'the curse of the authentic', lost his baby daughter in 2002 and wrote *Schaduwkind* (Shadow child), which was translated into a number of languages. He said that writing about her death in an autobiographical way made it possible for him to understand his grief, and that everything he had ever learned about how one ought to write immediately became irrelevant when she died.

Renée Marais (2007:2) asks how the use of language and the process of documentation can help in assimilating the loss of a child. (And, I want to add, the loss of a child who will never be born, will never even be formed in the mother's uterus.) She discusses Jan Wolkers' novel *Een roos van vlees*, which addresses the death of his two-year old daughter, who died in 1951 from burn wounds. Wolkers was convinced that, instead of writing things away from you, you write them, in a fitting manner, towards you. Thomése (2005) uses language to preserve his daughter, to keep her in his memory. In lamenting her, he maintains that, if she is yet to be found anywhere, it is in language. At the same time, though, he bemoans the insufficiencies of language and the fact that he has to look for language to keep her alive: 'Uit haar lichaam getild en in de taal gelegd. Ze is iemand geworden die steeds opnieuw geboren moet ziet te worden: in die woorden die ik voor haar vond' (2005:80). She is now dissociated from her body and embedded in language. She has to be born anew in the words that he (her father) composes for her.

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I have a red, red ring.

I wore it on the day I looked at that painting by my friend, Maryna.  
She opens herself to her subconscious, she says,  
and spills her guts in oil on canvas.

Her subconscious left a raw inferno  
that took up nearly all the white space.

I have a red, red ring with nine rubies.

Behind the rampant waves of fire in the foreground  
I saw something that looked like a wooden cross.  
Simple and slightly skew.  
Ha! She didn't even notice it!  
Maryna's writing stands out in tall, bold letters,  
'Red is the colour of loss,  
And it smells like burnt roses'.

No, I protested, it's unfair. Red is also the colour of life.  
She smiled as if she knew.  
Just then I remembered the damned menstruation.

I have a red, red ring with nine blobs of blood.

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My decision to do research in this context is relevant to my career as counsellor and trainer. I head up the Counselling and Spiritual Care division of an independent organisation at a state hospital. My approach to counselling is influenced by my studies in psychology and theology. I assumed those two disciplines would help to unlock the 'truth' about the intricacies and mysteries of human behaviour and the human mind.

Years ago, as a drama student, I was intensely interested in the motivational thinking of the characters in the plays we rehearsed. I wrote page after page of personal notes in my quest to find reasons and meaning for every action and response in their lives. The thinking behind the thinking behind acting and the reasons for a character's emotions and beliefs fascinated me. Why does character A perceive the situation in that way, and why does character B respond like that? Why are people so different? What makes them want to change?

I spent nearly as much time trying to understand the mind of the character as I did rehearsing the play. One of our textbooks stated the following: 'An actor must make the study of human nature one of his major concerns' (McGaw 1980:69). I

took that seriously. It seems that both acting and counselling have something in common with archaeology. Both try to unearth the hidden, what is not in line with an obvious, surface scan. Actors try to find the meaning 'of what lies beneath the line, how it is related to the dramatic action and to the motivating desire of the character' (McGaw 1980:152). And narrative therapists are interested in many possibilities, more realities than only the known, familiar ones. They help people experience alternative realities in their lives (Freedman & Combs 1996:11), and make use of the constructive powers of language to do so. Finding meaning, negotiating meaning between people, unearthing new meaning in things we think we've understood in a certain way can be a continuously enriching experience.

In my capacity as counsellor at a hospital, I'm involved in the holistic medical and emotional landscape of pain, illness and suffering arising from a whole spectrum of ailments. Even in this apparently depressing picture, there is hope and healing. While it may not always be on the physical level, it is often on the emotional or spiritual. I am privileged to be witness to that.

I've also been involved in the lives of patients who've experienced infertility, who've lost embryos, fetuses and children. I've journeyed with patients who've had abortions, either by choice or as an unfortunate, painful experience. I've also met and counselled those who have chosen, for various reasons, not to have children.

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I like to believe that I have discarded many of my prejudices about people's decisions about their lives, their children and their bodies in the 12 years I've worked in the hospital environment as counsellor. It can be a difficult challenge for a woman struggling to fall pregnant to understand another female's decision to deliberately abort her baby.

For six years I was involved at the TOP (Termination of Pregnancy) clinic as supporter/counsellor/tea-maker. I was responsible, with the sister-in-charge, for briefing the potential abortion patients on their pregnancy choices. They were

reminded of their options on termination, adoption or keeping the child. Often shocked and panicky, the young girls or women would tell nobody else about their pregnancy, and then struggle alone. Sometimes they were 'nudged' to take a certain option by their mothers, friends, husbands or boyfriends. We had the responsibility of making sure that the pregnant women made an informed decision. We gave them emotional support in whatever decision they made.

If those female patients decided to go through with the termination, they would come back two to three days later to have the procedure done. The intention was to give them time to think their options through.

Working in the TOP clinic was often very hard on some of the staff members. What really got the sister in charge down was that some women came back repeatedly for termination after termination. Despite her explanations and admonitions to take precautions against falling pregnant, some girls tended to see the abortion procedure as a contraceptive.

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'There will be no anaesthetic and as soon as you feel ok you can go home.'  
The blonde woman looked spaced out and a little scared.  
'O', she said, only half believing it.

Afterwards, she looked ancient, and had to lie down  
in the recovery room.  
Voiceless, she held my hand.  
I tried to 'be there for her', but  
I sensed her spirit  
had left the room.

When she eventually got up, she only managed a few steps  
before her arms and legs shook  
and jerked into extraordinary forms.  
Her head pulled backwards and away from her body.

It all happened so quickly then.

The doctor (from some Eastern bloc country,  
Speaking incomprehensibly bad English) appeared from the theatre.  
He shoved the 'bedpan' in my hands to help.

I shouldn't have looked at the bloody chaos

an abstract painting by Jackson Pollock  
scrambled dialogue from  
the theatre of the absurd  
a beginning that forwards to its end

a nowhere to be seen father  
a fractured counsellor  
a rejected blonde

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Heather Walton writes about conceiving theology out of infertility when she listens to 'tales of fate and not judgment' among 'women in a hospital for wombs', where she herself is a patient (Walton 2000:196). She describes a female side ward ('an alcove') where she and other women are admitted, linked by one thing: their wombs. Heather suffers from infertility and the next day a camera will probe into her body to solve the riddle of why she cannot conceive. Another patient in the ward has a dead baby inside her that has to be removed. Then there is a third patient, a minister's wife, who is also barren, like Heather. She is offered an in vitro fertilisation option that she finds impossible to accept as such an intervention would not be from the 'hand of God', but from 'human hands' (2000:200). There is also the fat, old mother, scheduled to have her womb cut away the following day. Last of all, a new girl arrives in the ward. She shrinks away from them, hiding behind 'a novel and French cigarettes' (2000:200) and apologises because she is there to have an abortion. She curses the fact that they are all 'mixed' together in such a manner. It is obscene, she says. Heather feels that, although this is abstract, it seems preposterous and awful to have all of them with their different needs in the same ward. 'In reality it feels there can't be another way' because the 'hospital is the same place exactly as the whole universe' (2000:201). In the context of her experiences in that hospital for wombs', where 'the small stories of human freedom and divine judgment' are lived and told by her and her 'sisters', she recognises God and knows herself. When she hugs her sisters to her bosom, whether it is the one with the dead baby, or the one preparing to end a life, she begins to understand. She hopes that, perhaps, 'in the future the almost impossible birth might take place in one of us' (Walton 2000:201). Instead of only

looking towards the light, she now sees God 'beyond the little lights and into the greater darkness' (2002:201):

Here is your faith  
God is God  
of the living and the Dead  
this is how theology is done

I can echo the same kind of strange acceptance of what Heather talks about. To 'look into the greater darkness' (Walton 2002:201) means to flow with the mystery of why life gives us different gifts.

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Human beings love and long for and care for children not only with their minds and their hearts, but also with their bodies. A woman who has carried a baby and given birth shows the physical signs of her pregnancy and labour of love. The story of her motherhood is written all over her body. Her breasts respond with flowing milk when she merely thinks about nursing her baby.

Interestingly, Candice Pert (in Damant 2003:17) proposes that emotions have a molecular basis in the body. The molecules of emotion apparently link the body and mind in one system. She sees infertility as a possible way in which the body tells a story of unexpressed pain.

The nature of trauma is such that when an individual experiences something of such great significance it cannot be ignored. However, trauma and emotional anguish are often inexpressibly painful, sometimes the person is unable to voice the pain verbally. It seems that in such instances the body is reverential of the story in the pain, and not allowing the mind to disregard the narrative, the body respects the mind's inability to language the complexity of the pain and therefore stores the story in cellular memory. The body then becomes the template on which the story is etched and subsequently played out (Damant 2003:24).

This could explain why couples that have been to gynaecologists to undergo tests concerning their inability to fall pregnant are sometimes told that: 'There is nothing really wrong with you, physically. There is really no reason why you shouldn't be able to conceive'.

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Part of my personal life story involves a desire to fall pregnant and have children. This has played a role in planting a seed connecting researcher and research context. I thought long and hard about the wisdom of writing about and researching the issue of infertility, because it reaches into the soft belly of my own story.

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I've just read that, and decided to rewrite it.

Part of my personal life story involves a desire to claim my place amongst women, a place reserved for those who have carried children under their hearts. Not being able to give birth has planted the seed connecting researcher and research context. I thought long and hard about the wisdom of writing about and researching the issue of infertility, because my story lies in the intimate lines of my womb.

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It was long after my childhood years that I was conducting this research on infertility, and was once again reminded of this story. Some stories are told over and over again, as if no other interpretation is possible, just as certain recipes are always made without ever changing the ingredients. With time, the listener gets to know the story by heart: the content, the intonations and the 'message'. As a child I often listened to the story of 'The Childless Couple' alternatively entitled 'Poor Dawid and Rosa' (although that is not their real names). The couple were good friends of my parents, and were more or less the same age.

While three little girls were born to Mom and Dad, their friends remained childless. For many years they were hoping and trying for a child. When I had grown too big for the cot (painted blue-gray, decorated with little black elephants), it was passed on to them to furnish their nursery. Sometimes, when you prepare for something to happen, even if it's highly unlikely, it actually does. However, the cot was returned after a few years when it had become clear that there would be no baby.

When the story of the 'Childless Couple' was recounted, their plight was described somewhat in the fashion of a Greek tragedy. It contained the heart-rending elements of desire, bitterness, pain, hopelessness, defeat and reconciliation. It went like this. They got married because they loved each other, but life played a cruel trick on them. It was their allotted fate not to receive children. They suffered loneliness, grief and bewilderment. They tried to find answers, because they wanted to make sense of their loss. Nobody understood why it happened, and they certainly had not done anything to deserve it. Unable to come to terms with their 'disabled, second-rate marriage', scarred and shamed by their childlessness, they eventually decided to divorce.

In the year before I started school, my mother took up a teaching job. An arrangement was made with her friend, Rosa, to look after me during the mornings, until I could be fetched. My mother never dropped me without my green blanket and lots of miniature bottles of sherbet. Then auntie Rosa and I would have a ball. We sewed clothes for my yellow teddy bear on the Singer, played house-house outside in the garden, baked cookies and painted pictures.

The subtext of the 'Childless Couple's' separation implied that one of them probably blamed the other and that they subsequently decided to part ways. It was suggested that the collective pain over the children they would never have cancelled out everything that was worthwhile in their relationship. Perhaps they wanted to be free to find new partners, get married, and again try to have children. In fact, they both stayed single after the divorce, and after some time they got back together again. The often-repeated comment at this stage of the story was that

they had resumed their relationship because, after all, they only had each other. So they shouldn't live apart.

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As I've mentioned, it was long after my childhood years, while doing this research on infertility, that I was once again reminded of this story. Some stories are told over and over, as if no other interpretations are possible, in the same way that some recipes are always made without ever changing the ingredients.

In the year before little Cindy started school, I took her under my wing. She has small fingers and thin black legs. I'm white and grownup. She's like a child and I'm like a mother. We often have a ball. We play with Barbie, do puzzles, draw pictures, and eat sandwiches dipped in hot tea. She hates potatoes.

It is then that I wonder how auntie Rosa must have felt when I was five years old and spending all those mornings with her.

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Females are born with approximately 400 000 oocytes (ova/eggs). Every month during a woman's reproductive life only one will mature (Van Zyl 2005:18). A procedure called super-ovulation involves stimulation of the ovaries in order to increase the number of available oocytes for fertilisation (2005:29). The aim of hormone therapy is to stimulate egg production in order to enhance the chances of falling pregnant. As a woman ages, her eggs steadily deplete.

In my case, trying to fall pregnant included several unsuccessful in vitro attempts. It was an expensive endeavour in more ways than one. Financially there is a high cost to pay, and emotionally it can, at times, become unbearable. Amongst other things, it fiercely challenges a woman to revisit and re-negotiate many aspects of her life: her identity as a female, her understanding of what it means to be called a mother. It can also force her to face up to her faith in her God, in fact to ask herself in what kind of God she believes.

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In the light of the general narrative question posed in Chapter 1, which referred to the experiential narratives of the four couples living with multiple interpretations of infertility and childlessness, as well as in view of the above layered account of the researcher's own story, further narrative questions are posed. Identifying the questions that concerned me at this early stage of the research helped me find direction for the planned conversations with my co-researchers. As expected, though, more research questions and concerns were articulated as conversations with the co-researchers commenced. They developed even further after feedback from the reflecting team. It was meaningful to revisit these questions at the closing stages of the research and the writing of the thesis, although the epistemology and methodology followed in this study never intended to seek for answers, but rather to develop dimensions of understanding and meaning. This thesis, therefore, does not build towards 'findings' and 'recommendations' in the traditional sense of the word.

- The first question stemmed from my curiosity about infertility from both a personal and professional perspective. I am living with infertility. I have never given birth and have never experienced being pregnant. I underwent numerous assisted reproductive procedures as a patient. I also function as a counsellor for people experiencing issues with their children, or because of their lack of children. I wanted to find out how the people in these research groups experienced and coped with infertility, as well as how and why they had opted for alternatives.
- Infertility is a sensitive subject. It does not correspond to the norm, and those affected by it often suffer in silence. A certain stigma surrounds it, which is more prevalent in some cultural contexts than others. I believed that the insights and interpretations that this research would bring forth would be helpful in empowering and emancipating these silent, and

sometimes shamed, voices. In what ways can the infertile, the childless, speak out without feeling even more helpless?

- The questions of morality and ethics came to the fore with the advances in new biomedical treatment options. There are, for instance, the possibilities of using donor eggs or sperm, surrogate mothers, and freezing fertilised eggs to implant at a later stage. Discarding fertilised eggs begs for ethically responsible conduct. The issue of adoption also stimulates the need to expect integrity and fairness in making and passing legislation, and the use of selection procedures. The issues of gay couples adopting children, single persons adopting babies and the practice of adopting children from a race group other than your own, ought to be revisited.
- As societal norms change and adapt to people's real life practices, family structures that were unthinkable a few decades ago are becoming more and more common. However, such 'different' families often suffer because they are seen as abnormal and unhealthy. In this research I wanted to ask the question: What constitutes a family? What meaning do children have in the lives and family relationships of the co-researchers?
- I am interested in the concept of infertility or barrenness not only from a theological viewpoint, but also from the standpoint of other disciplines. Psychological issues and societal rejection or alienation relating to infertility and parenthood make it paramount to integrating those disciplines. What kind of questions and in what language are psychology, sociology and medical science asking about infertility, and in what ways do these questions connect with the discipline of practical theology? Literature and scripture are saturated with images, words and symbols representing motherhood and fertility. Interestingly these can have enormous, albeit subtle, power in enhancing the grief and discomfort of the involuntary childless.

- The concept of fertility has a certain mythical and mystical character. From earliest times, different societies have believed that fertility can be invoked and maintained by some kind of offering. Infertile couples are often tempted to hold on to similar beliefs. Sometimes they find that their gifts have not had the desired effect, even if they've sacrificed dearly. The question of finding alternatives for infertility came to mind, and I believed that the use of a narrative research approach would lend itself well to that possibility. If, and how were the stories of infertility integrated into the lives of those affected by it, in order to make healing, fruitfulness and empowerment possible?
- Asking myself what the ultimate narrative question would be within this thesis context, the question that no one has ever asked me and that should be asked is, I think: What is the poetry and interconnectedness of love of all those who are mothered and become mothers in whatever way (including the mothering that males give).

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*In summary*, both my personal experiences of battling with infertility problems and my role as counsellor have led me to this field of research. Certain preferred research questions and concerns grew out of those experiences, and it is with those issues in mind that I have constructed this research study. To a great extent this gave form and cognition to my approach and the design of this thesis narrative. In addressing the issue of people's lived experiences with infertility, I have also addressed the issue of the silences that surround it.

I chose to use the layered account to convey my story. In the process, I demonstrated that multiple identities of myself: researcher, childless woman, wife, counsellor, friend and daughter, exist side-by-side, all giving voice to this narrative.

In sharing some of my own story, I have clearly demonstrated my position as a female, subjective researcher. My biases, values and perceptions are standing in

the way of objectivity and detachment. In identifying myself as a narrative researcher, I have chosen to conduct this research process and thesis narrative with subjective integrity, within the realm of social constructionism. In Chapter 3, I will therefore proceed with an explanation of the epistemological positioning and methodological approach.