

## CHAPTER 6

### **HARVEST SONG OF SAMUEL AND TIENIE: THE MAKING OF A GAY FAMILY**

In a short introduction, the narrator will set the scene for this particular research narrative. Then the lead actors, Samuel and Tienie (a homosexual couple, and the parents of two adopted daughters), will take centre stage in sharing parts of their story. Tienie's responses have been scripted in greater detail than Samuel's, perhaps because he expressed their story in a more elaborate, amusing and animated fashion. Some of the supporting actors on Samuel and Tienie's Harvest Song stage also play their roles in the life drama from childlessness to parenthood. Samuel and Tienie share their experiences of being gay in a mostly straight world of adoption and parenthood, the Dutch Reformed Church's response to homosexuality, God's presence in their lives and their desire to be accepted and respected by society as 'normal people', as 'just ordinary persons'. Then related issues emerging from their story will be touched on. This chapter does not claim to be an exhaustive account of Samuel and Tienie's story or of the issues associated with it. It merely offers a glimpse. It could be compared with a selection of edited film scenes, or isolated acts in a play.

#### **6.1 The opening act**

Berg (1998) describes dramaturgy as a theoretical perspective involving the elements and language of theatre, stagecraft and stage management, and illustrates the research method of the interview in terms of the language of dramaturgy. Drama is seen as a mode of symbolic action 'in which some individuals act for others who watch symbolically' (1998:59). Between these two groups, the actors and the audience, a social performance takes place. In the dramaturgical approach, the interviewer makes use of the constructed relationship of the interviewer and subject to draw the subject into conversation. He makes a distinction between 'the interviewer's role' and 'the roles an interviewer may perform' (1998:75). The interviewer's role is located within a certain epistemological and methodological point of departure, for instance, the 'role' of the social constructionist narrative researcher. At the same time, within that role, a certain leeway exists, a repertoire of possible interpretations. The different accents

the interviewer/researcher could adopt would depend on the expectations of the subjects, and the specific circumstances of a subject in a particular context. For instance, although this researcher had research conversations with four different groups of co-researchers, on the same research theme, with the same methodological approach, she played a different role each time. The roles were never preplanned, but flowed from the conscious and reflective manner of the researcher whenever she approached the conversation with the co-researchers. Berg (1998:81) says sending and receiving messages between the interviewer and interviewee, by both verbal and non-verbal channels of communication, constitutes in part a conscious, social performance. He describes the interviewer's role as one of multiple identities: actor, director and choreographer. In terms of the actor's role, Berg proposes the 'performance of your lines, routines and movements. This involves being aware of line cues, in order not to interrupt the interviewee'. The second identity in this performance drama involves the interviewer as director. Staying conscious of and reflecting on how you and your interviewee/ co-researcher perform your lines helps you to remain within the framework of the methodology of the approach at hand. The interviewer as choreographer (a role the interviewee plays as well) is able to respond in a thoughtful manner, without giving over to 'spontaneous intuition or innate insight', in a self-conscious social performance. Awareness and reflection throughout the interviewing process means that both participants are able to choreograph their script and movements in response to each other's performance. Berg points out that within the dramaturgical framework interviewing should not be seen as phony, manipulative acting, but as an attempt to keep the research on track, within the outline of the methodology.

Awareness of the language spoken in the interview helps to convey respect and ask about meaning. Becker and Geer (in Berg 1998:68) express this as follows:

Although we speak one language and share in many ways in one culture, we cannot assume that we understand precisely what another person, speaking as a member of such a group, means by any particular word. ...we often do not understand that we do not understand and are thus likely to make errors in interpreting what is said to us.

A friend to whom I mentioned my research on infertility introduced me to Samuel and Tienie. I told her that, in view of the current debate on homosexuality in the Reformed Churches and other religious communities, I would be very interested in hearing how a same-sex couple experienced and addressed their desire for parenthood. For some reason, it took a lot of courage for me to invite them to take part in the research, because I had assumed they would want their exceptional family arrangement to remain private. I was therefore immensely gratified when they agreed to become co-researchers. It was interesting that they, more than any of the other groups of co-researchers, wanted their story to be heard. More than once they said that although the research invaded their lives to a certain extent it gave them a chance to speak from the heart about their point of view, and to get a word in on behalf of other gay parents. They hoped people would conclude from their story that there are more similarities than differences between gay and heterosexual parents, and that gays can indeed be responsible, fine parents. One of their major themes is that they see themselves as 'normal', not deviant, sick or dangerous. They would welcome it if heterosexuals, society, and in particular the Church, could regard them as ordinary people who have the right to be themselves. They experience the presence of God in every aspect of their lives: past, present and future.

They were astounded that a single aspect of their humanness, namely their sexual orientation, could overshadow so many of their other ordinary, irritating, good, interesting, unique, boring, unpleasant, desirable and shared human attributes. When Tienie said that, it reminded me of Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. In Act III, scene i, on a street in Venice, the Jew, Shylock complains to Salerio, the friend of Antonio and Bassanio, Shylock's debtors, that the Christians hate him because he is a Jew. Shylock argues bitterly that he is a human being, no less so than the Christians:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?

The 16th century Venetian Christians, like those of the rest of Europe, rejected, despised and marginalised the Jews. Samuel and Tienie claim that, likewise, Christians (and others) in their milieu reject and despise gays on account of their homosexuality. Their humanness, their value in God's eyes, their contributions to their communities and the general similarities between them and heterosexuals are ignored. At times, people highlight Samuel and Tienie's sexuality out of all proportion to the integrated wholeness of their being, making statements that seem to them to be justifiable and proper: 'You will burn in hell,' 'You are sick and perverse,' 'You will bring God's wrath on us all.'

The word 'homophobic' refers to those who feel antagonistic towards homosexuals, who have certain 'fears' about their way of life. Such feelings specifically include the conviction that the social order and key institutions in society are under threat (Freeman 1996:313). According to Lev (2004:120), homophobia is alive and well, and is a force to be reckoned with. However, the big surprise is the 'internalized homophobia' that gay and lesbian parents often encounter from other LGBTs (lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders). Homophobia does not always come from 'outside'. The 'inside' is also manifested when rejections and judgments are spelled out by LGBTs that having children is selfish and unfair to those children (Lev 2004:124).

Both Tienie and Samuel came from big, child-centred families, with seven and six siblings respectively. They had formed a monogamous, loving, long-standing relationship with each other lasting more than twenty years, and wanted children to complete their union as a family. The opportunity to adopt children is stated in the constitution of 1996, which prohibits unfair discrimination against, *inter alia*, sexual orientation. Although the best interests of a child are always paramount, homosexuals and single parents are at least on an equal footing with heterosexual couples. In other words, to be homosexual does not disqualify someone from adopting a child. Given their desire to parent and to experience the love and needs of children, Samuel and Tienie set out to adopt.

It was a difficult journey during which they had to battle discrimination and homophobia from those implementing the adoption system. They fought against

unfair judgments from family, and even other gays and lesbians in their circle of friends on their ability to raise children. However, believing that God would honour their genuine desire to give a home to a child who otherwise would be worse off, it was only a matter of time before they had two daughters under their roof and in their hearts.

As researcher/narrator, I had three discussions with Tienie and Samuel, attended their daughters' birthday parties and other social functions, and was invited to a Church service. I am documenting this research by shining the spotlight on each of the actors taking part in this story: Samuel and Tienie, the parents of Anri and Katryn, 'Ma Maria' (their black 'mother', who has worked for Samuel and Tienie for the past seventeen years), and her two children, Petrus and Sarie (godchildren of Samuel and Tienie, and 'siblings' of the little girls). Then there is the supporting cast: Grandma Viola, and the aunties, friends and godfathers of the girls and the reflecting team.

As researcher/narrator, let me say at the outset: it is a tremendous loss for the reader not to have had the visual and audio 'real life' experience with this family that I had. Their story begs to be told in a rowdy, fearless, poignant film that would elicit tears and laughter in equal measure. The discussions were in Afrikaans, their mother tongue. They have the knack of expressing themselves in the most colourful, humorous, vivid language, which I found impossible to represent in English in a way that even remotely does them justice. At certain points in the next section, when Samuel and Tienie perform their lines, I have taken the liberty of adding a few sentences in Afrikaans, for the benefit of those readers who are familiar with the language. The words are conveyed exactly as they delivered them.

In Act II, scene vii, lines 139-143 of Shakespeare's play, *As You Like It*, Jaques addresses Duke Senior, saying:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages.

It seemed to me that Samuel and Tienie inadvertently play out their roles not only on the one stage of life, like the rest of us, but also on the stage of the 'out of the ordinary' homosexual minority, the Other Kind, the gay parents. These are roles on a stage within a stage. Being gay makes them the odd ones, the others, the 'other-wise' ones. As gay parents, they have to contend with stares, looks of confusion and disgust, and gossiping behind their backs as they visit places, and attend functions or social gatherings in public spaces. Samuel and Tienie doesn't mind being watched and reviewed from their position on the stage of life, as long as they can live authentic lives. They would often improvise comments to members of the audience from their stage position. Denzin (1992:27) says that life is never lived realistically.

It is lived through the subject's eye, and that eye, like a camera's, is always reflexive, nonlinear, subjective, filled with flashbacks, after-images, dream sequences, faces merging into one another, masks dropping, and new masks being put on. In this world called reality, where we are forced to react, and life leaks in everywhere, we have nothing to hold on to but our own beings.

Samuel and Tienie's stories, their lives, and their worlds are bursting with richness, paradoxes, opposites, contradictions and mirth. They defy typecasting in every respect. They do not seem like the familiar (granted, it's only one of many), stereotypical profiles of homosexual men: professed female lovers, with effeminate, self-conscious manners, fashionable clothes, bodies well-conditioned from gym workouts, and a tendency to slight hysteria over mundane matters. I myself have a number of gay friends and family members, and knew full well that gays cannot be tagged in a predictable way, so I wondered why I even entertained that mental image before I visited them for the first time. I certainly hadn't expected what I got when I saw these two, who could easily pass for weather-beaten, rough, mampoer-drinking Free State farmers. I was impressed by the natural, spontaneous way in which they just loved their daughters to bits. Why was I impressed with that, I asked myself. Would that question have occurred to me if I had been interviewing straight fathers with adopted daughters? Did I think gay men were unable to fulfil the role of fatherhood? Sitting in the car after the first conversation I had with them, and laughing at myself, my head spinning, I said to

God: 'What happened here tonight? I'm speechless. All my preconceived ideas (that I thought I didn't have) were turned on their heads.' I felt blessed, entertained, amazed, confused and infused with lightness and thankfulness and concern. And, yes, let me say it, touched by the overwhelming presence of love that filled every nook and cranny of their household.

It is with Denzin's words on useful cultural studies that I want to conclude before I stand back to give centre stage to the actors. Denzin says that, in the human disciplines, the model of interpretation with the capacity to make a difference is the one that is not directed to the study of origins, centres, laws and structures, but one that treats the 'personal as political' (1992:23). One of its aims is to link personal troubles with public issues, which Denzin sets within a radical and plural democracy that acknowledges personal issues as the site of struggle. This interpretive model also aims at giving a voice to the voiceless, by deconstructing popular culture texts that reproduce stereotypes of the powerless. Further, it supports pluralism and cultural diversity, underscoring a radical, non-violent pluralism in which no one is repressed and all are liberated. Denzin refers to Derrida's description of such an interpretative approach that is the opposite of the study of origins and centres mentioned above. Derrida explains that human beings are never fully present to themselves or others, except through a process of deferral and delay. Language itself, being a process, is never fixed in its meanings or representations, and cannot capture experience fully. It can only be conferred in texts such as interviews, life stories, and films, themselves indirect representations of what they are trying to represent. This approach to interpretation examines how textual practices, including theory and research, reify subjects, structures and social experience. Denzin seeks to deconstruct these practices in order to disclose how politically repressive ideas are kept in place when in fact they are out of touch with the social world as it is lived and experienced (Denzin 1992:23).

Samuel and Tienie's personally lived experiences are negatively linked, on many different levels, to the politics of socio-cultural understandings and acceptable behaviour in a heterosexual context. As gays *per se* and gay parents in particular, they constantly collide with dominant discourses about family, sexuality and parenting.

Over then to the lead actors: Dada, Pappa, the daughters (Anri and Katryn), Ma Maria, the siblings (Petrus and Sarie). Then the supporting actors will have their turn: Ouma Viola, the aunties and other females, the godfathers and the reflecting team.

## **6.2 Performing the text**

### **6.2.1 The lead actors/ co-narrators**

#### *The Dada: Tienie*

Coming from a very poor family, Tienie had to start work when very young, forfeiting the chance to complete high school. To this day he believes that very hard work is one of the keys to becoming a decent person. He and Samuel have loved each other and worked together in their very successful business for the past twenty years. Having enjoyed their freedom and travelled extensively, they increasingly felt something was missing. They had an immense longing to become parents, and the offspring of their many brothers and sisters have always been a special part of their lives. At one point, one of Tienie's sisters and her children stayed with them for a few months, but, like most couples, Samuel and Tienie wanted their own brood. There was an occasion, many years ago, when they wanted a baby so badly that they attempted to buy one, which fortunately did not transpire. Eventually they adopted their children through the proper channels, the Department of Welfare.

*On the theme of parenthood*, Tienie describes himself as a soft-hearted, highly emotional person, and, while they are both quite strict with the children, Samuel is less so. There is no question that they are the children's fathers, and not their best friends. Their motto is, more or less, abundant love within the confines of discipline. '*Nee, ons het disipline, ons het lyne.*' Tienie explains that they have decided that their daughters will call them Dada and Pappa to minimise confusion for all of them. 'We can't both come running when they call: Pappa!'

Tienie is concerned that Anri and Katryn might one day hold it against them for having had to 'grow up in a house with two men', so they go out of their way to include women in their lives. They are uncomfortable with the lesbian women who



are aggressive and unfeminine, and the dykes who try to be masculine, and want to prove they can also achieve what men achieve. *'Dis hulle wat die mansbroeke dra en die manshorlosies, en die 'square cut' hare. Ek hou nie daarvan nie. Ek sal nie my kinders blootstel aan so iets nie.'*

He regards parenthood as 'the most amazing experience'. It has filled both their lives and made Tienie a more grateful human being. His wish for his daughters is that they will grow up contented, be accepted, and have happiness deep in their hearts. But, alas, he doesn't want them to grow up too soon. He's not even thinking about their marriages and careers. The last thing he wants is for them to become lesbians, he says, because they would have a very hard time.

*On the issue of adoption* Tienie says he initially wanted to adopt baby boys, because he was worried about his ability to handle the 'girl stuff' like menstrual periods. However, when the girls became available for adoption he reconsidered his point of view. He reminded himself that Samuel was not in the least intimidated by any such issue, and finds it easy to discuss things like that. Ma Maria is more than capable of handling women's issues, and there is a swarm of women in the family clan, as well as friends who could help if necessary. They also realised that society might frown if they had adopted boys, in the face of the community's persistent perception that gay men are, at heart, paedophiles.

Tienie brought up the point that Welfare and other such organisations allow biological parents too many rights, too much time and too many chances to pull themselves together to take proper responsibility for their children. Parents refuse to sign off their children. In the meantime the children stay in foster care, places of safety and orphanages, where they grow older every year. *'Nou sit daai kind in pleegsorg tot hy vyf of ses jaar oud is – agt jaar. Nou's daai boompie gegroei. Nou hoe buig jy hom?'* Eventually, when they become available for adoption they are no longer appealing and cute enough, it's difficult to find adoptive parents, and the opportunity is lost to have had a wonderful childhood in a loving, adoptive home. The focus on blood ties is very strong, too strong, and in spite of abusive neglect of their children, parents still have the upper hand.

*On answering complex questions from Anri and Katryn, Tienie says they are taking difficult questions in their stride as they go along, and that the only way to be fair to all involved is to be totally honest. They had a taste of what lay ahead when the social worker gave them ‘homework’: ‘What will you tell your child if she wants to know why she doesn’t have a mother?’ This is a tricky question because Samuel and Tienie will have to defend the biological mother’s choice and explain their homosexuality. They wrestled, prayed, talked to their minister, talked to their child psychologist friend, and came up with the next answer. Some children only have a mother, some only a father, some have both a father and mother, and you have two fathers who love you very much, Pappa and Dada, who will look after you always. They explained to the girls that their respective mothers, although they loved them very much, couldn’t look after them because of all kinds of difficulties. As the girls get older they will fill in the picture more and more. Tienie sees the mothers as two heroines, and will be grateful to them forever. ‘Want om jou kind weg te gee moet jy sterk wees, jy moet nie flou wees nie.’*

Tienie doesn’t want to give his children the ‘wrong’ answer, but what is the right one? He has armed himself with Biblical wisdom, common sense, professional advice and conversations with his life partner to help him make sense of the complexities of life, and their particular multifaceted situation. He understands only too well that his daughters will have a tough time amongst their friends, in school, and in the community, because they come from a very unusual family, some will even say, a queer family.

*On the theme of God’s presence, Tienie believes God created him and Samuel exactly as they are, and that neither of them chose to be gay. After years of sincere prayer to God to grant them children, they received Anri and Katryn from His hands. ‘Want regtig, dat ons hulle gekry het, was God se genade’. Strangely, the children even look like Samuel and Tienie, and their two mothers, and they can prove it with photos. ‘Kyk hierdie foto. Dis vreeslik. Dis identies, hoor. Kyk, tot daai oortjies.’*

Having the children baptised and undertaking to teach them in the ways of the Lord demonstrates a natural expression of their love for and gratitude to God the

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Equally important for Tienie and Samuel is to instil in their daughters the second commandment, to love and respect your neighbour without being biased in terms of race, class, gender, disabilities, or sexual orientation, and above all to be grateful, even for the hard times. They and their daughters have a living relationship with God. *'En Hy hoor my as ek met Hom praat, Hy antwoord my dan.'*

The children attend alternately a gay, predominantly white, church and a black Christian church, and they are enrolled in a Christian school with both able and disabled children in the same classroom. Tienie's experiences of marginalisation and stigmatisation on account of being gay taught him how important it is for children to learn tolerance. People are diverse and unique, but, in essence, they are just ordinary, with similar needs, dreams, fears and hopes.

*On the issue of the Christian Church*, Tienie says that although they have found a home in a so-called gay church, they and other gays grew up in the Dutch Reformed Church and deeply desire to return to their roots. They want to revisit the place where their parents first taught them to have faith when they were little. However, at present, they find it impossible to go back because they don't feel completely welcome. Tienie wants to know that in the House of the Lord he is acceptable in the eyes of God and accepted as a human being, despite 'being what he is'.

God's grace is available to all of us, he says. No one is faultless. There are no big and small sins, so heterosexual Christians should refrain from judgment. Their sexual sins are often hidden under a cloak of normalcy. The Bible condemns divorce, and even coyness, as sin. Some holy people treat gays like outcasts in the name of love, as if they had special favour with God. In the mean time, we all fall short. *'Verstaan jy, en nou wil die kerk vir ons sê ons gaan hel toe'*. Tienie is quick to point out that there are indeed Christians, ministers and churches that are not guilty of these cold, heartless judgments.

Society in general, and even some family members, see their gay relatives as black sheep and 'washouts', thereby joining the church in their chorus of criticism.

This often spurs gay people on to prove their value and competencies and become extra successful in their careers. *'En nou wil ek vir jou iets vertel...daar is nie 'n arm moffie nie. In die skool het julle my 'n sissie genoem, in die army het julle my 'n mofgat genoem, ek sal jull wys wat ek van my lewe maak.'*

Having his own children now, he is struggling with God about parents who abuse their children. He cannot understand how God could allow it. He is angry that the Bible was and is still interpreted by learned people in influential theological positions to reflect their personal ideas and support their political beliefs. The good of apartheid and the evil of homosexuality were both 'proved' by the Word of God.

*Being 'normal' and wanting to be treated in a normal manner* is a theme that Tienie came back to time and again. He calls the gay congregation just a 'normal church'. The women in his daughters' lives are 'ordinary and normal', consisting of both straight and lesbian females. He says, lesbianism doesn't make you extraordinary, and neither does being straight make you normal or plain. He points out that some straight women should never have children because they don't really want to be mothers. Their pregnancies either just happened because they were sexually active, or they fell pregnant because they thought it was the best thing to do next in their marriages. Maybe they simply could not be good mothers, even if they tried their best. Often their husbands look after the children's needs. However, this does not make their arrangement abnormal. He says some gay fathers, like him and Samuel, incline towards 'motherhood' in the sense that they are caring, protective and kind to their children. Granted, the mothering aspect of parenting appeals to them, but, after all, both genders have similar characteristics, including the ability to satisfy the growing child's needs in terms of disciplining, mothering, educating and giving spiritual guidance. Tienie thanked me, saying I had acknowledged and treated them as a normal family. I tried to put myself in his shoes when he said that. It must be hard to be in a position where you have to either hide your 'true' self, or keep on defending it to others, considering that your self permeates every part of your existence.

*On being gay*, Tienie says the bad old days of apartheid meant not only partition between races, but separation and harassment for homosexual relationships. *'Die*

*wet is nou die dag eers af. As jy twee mans in 'n bed gekry het, kon die polisie hulle doodgeskiet het op die 'spot'. Die wet het gesê 'n man mag vrouensklere aantrek, maar as hy vrouensonderklere aantrek dan moet hulle hom in hegtenis neem.'* Although homosexual relationships were not against the law, the dominant perception was that it was an offence. The prejudices and victimisation by the police and others were fomented by the aversion of the general community.

Gays had to operate as an underground movement, Tienie says, meeting each other in clubs hidden in alleys. They had people on the lookout for the police, who often raided the clubs just to get in some good 'gay-bashing'. *'En snuffel die polisie hierdie goed (klubs) nou uit, dan gryp jy maar 'n lesbian en dans met haar.'* They often had to flee and hide from aggressive gay-bashers who assaulted them to reaffirm their heterosexuality and impress each other. Those really were the bad old days, say Tienie and Samuel.

They respect other people enough not to offend them with inappropriate behaviour in public, because being gay is 'out of the ordinary' in the wider context. *'Ons was nog nooit vir enigiemand 'n verleentheid nie. Ons hang nie aan mekaar in die openbaar nie; ons lek mekaar nie.'* But at the same time, he says, it should be applicable to all people, gay or straight, since it is only decent to be considerate to others. *'Jy gaan ook nie jou man so soen voor jou ouma nie.'*

#### *The Pappa: Samuel*

He is the one who fought really hard to be taken seriously as a potential adoptive parent, with the right to a healthy, normal child from the Welfare. He attends the school functions of their black godchildren in his capacity of their father and guardian. Samuel and Tienie are proud to be involved in an organisation that helps sexually-molested orphaned girls to find their feet again by receiving therapy and learning skills like self defense, cooking and flower arranging. Among the presents they gave these orphaned children were new clothes, 'with the tags still on'. *'n Splinternuwe stelletjie klere met die 'tags' nog aan, want wanneer laas het hulle nog ooit iets nuuts gekry? Hulle het geblink soos bottles.'*

Samuel is a fighter with a heart of gold, who was 'dirt' poor as a child. He believes in giving to others, because God asks it of him, because others have less than he does, and because it always pays dividends one way or another. He believes God sent them the children to love and to cherish for safekeeping. The children have made him, a go-getter, much more relaxed. *'Ek sê nou makliker, laat Gods water oor Gods akker loop.'*

Their daughters were adopted according to different adoption models, the one as an open adoption and the other as a closed adoption. In short, open adoption means that the adoptive parents know the identities of the birth parents (or mother) and that contact can be maintained between the two families by means of letters, phone contact or actually spending time together. Closed adoption (also called confidential adoption) means the adoptive families have little or no information about the birth parents and vice versa. This process protects the adoptive parents from any legal repercussions or unwanted social contact (Lev 2004:65). At one point, Anri's closed adoption was changed to an open adoption to be more accommodating to the birth mother. However, when they experienced unacceptable interference and other difficulties with the original family, Samuel and Tienie decided to revert to the closed adoption to protect their daughter. Samuel describes that particular adoption now, as 'very, very closed'.

*The daughters: Anri (5 and a half years) and Katryn (3 years)*

Anri talks and sings all day long like a beautiful little bird. Both girls are very grateful for even the smallest thing they receive. Katryn is an angel who needs only to learn to fly. They are sometimes naughty, but also cute, as little girls tend to be. They pray at bedtime and at the table, giving thanks for their food. They have already learnt negotiating skills. *'Dankie Jesus, vir die lekker kos, maar sê vir Pappa en Dada ek is nie regtig honger nie.'*

*The 'mother': Ma Maria*

Ma Maria is a woman of many talents and identities. Depending on who does the describing, she could be seen as little more than the 'ousie' (indispensable, but without identity) tending to the necessary but mundane tasks of cleaning, washing, ironing and generally 'keeping everything together' in the household. However,

Samuel and Tienie's political sensitivities have not allowed them (even seventeen years ago when Maria started working there) the arrogance and disrespect to relegate her to such a lowly status. Long before the arrival of their adopted daughters, she was the mother in the household. She mothers her own biological children, who have been living there since birth, and in a sense she is also mothering Samuel and Tienie. Her opinion counts, her personality fills the rooms and her womanliness is a perfect balance to Samuel and Tienie's manliness. In terms of her role and daily presence, she is, in a very real sense, mother, or Ma Maria to Anri and Katryn.

*The siblings: Petrus and Sarie*

Petrus and Sarie are the biological children of Ma Maria, and the three of them live in a flat next to the main house. At the same time they have 'full visitation rights' in the main house. Tienie and Samuel are their guardians, but, even more, they fulfil the role of father(s) to them, seeing that their own father does not live with them. They join the family on outings and holidays, simply because they have been part of the family since birth. Both are now in their teens. Because their mother speaks Afrikaans fluently, and it is the language spoken in the house, they have been enrolled at Afrikaans schools since Grade 1. They are also active members of the Voortrekker Movement, and enjoy the camps, culture and traditions. They are, to all intents and purposes, liberated, in light of the apartheid legacy, from the negative (though understandable) perceptions many black South African children have of white people in general, and Afrikaners in particular. They are in many respects the older brother and sister of the adopted daughters. They were sharing in the home culture, the parents, the house, the identity and the financial benefits long before the daughters were even born. The age gap is, of course, quite large, with the younger ones respectively three years and five and a half years old.

Samuel and Tienie decided against adopting black children, because Sarie and Petrus are their godchildren. They felt it would be unfair to them, because the officially adopted children would inevitably be handled a little differently, even spoiled more. Samuel and Tienie have an axe to grind with the adoption agencies who, were willing, even eager, to place black, HIV+, or otherwise sick children with gays. It was as if gays, by way of their 'abnormal status', ought to stand at the end

of the queue, and just be grateful for the ‘left overs’ of the adoption system, who themselves are ‘seen as abnormal’ or at least, less than perfect in certain respects. Tienie told me about Samuel’s birthday party, which had been celebrated a few days previously with gay friends and their children. About ten of the fourteen adopted children there were HIV+, because ‘they couldn’t get healthy children to adopt’. *‘Jy weet, gay mense kan more swart kinders kry, veral as hulle siek is, en dit maak my die bliksem in.’*

### **6.2.2 The supporting actors**

#### *The grandma: Ouma Viola*

Ouma Viola is not the biological mother of either Samuel or Tienie. Their own mothers have passed away. She is, however, old enough to be a mother to them, and, although there are no blood ties, it is as if she were their grandmother. According to Samuel and Tienie, having strong, feminine, heterosexual women in their lives brings balance to their daughters’ perceptions of the diversity amongst gender. As a woman in her late sixties, she herself defies stereotyping, with her tall, full figure, blond hair, business skills and creative talents. As she is such a significant presence in their lives, the girls often visit her at home, go on trips and holidays with her, and in general just learn ‘how to be a woman’, and, I suppose, ‘how not to be a woman’, as well. Ouma Viola and one of her own daughters are very close to the girls, and they do lots of ‘girly things’ together, especially during a weekend visit. Hair, make-up, nails, jewellery and dressing up are high on the agenda. A favourite thing for Anri and Katryn is to run with naked, white powered bodies through the house after bath time, shrieking and screeching at the tops of their voices before getting into their pyjamas.

#### *The aunts and female figures*

A large number of different women have a feminine influence on the girls. They are young and not-so-young, straight, lesbian, analytical and creative women. I was invited by Tienie and Samuel to become more intimately involved in the girls’ lives, which I appreciated.



### *The godfathers*

Anri and Katryn's godfathers are 'just perfect', because, while they do not want children themselves, they dote on their 'goddaughters' and admire Samuel and Tienie for being good parents. With time-tested values, the godfathers are men of integrity who feel privileged to be part of such a happy family.

### *The reflecting team*

Someone on the reflecting team remarked that, in her opinion, children identify more with role than with gender. She thinks children tend to find value in the relationship with those close to them, and are not so 'hung up' on the functions of their significant others. Of course, if you teach them that different sexes have strict boundaries that cannot or should not be crossed, they will accept that philosophy (at least initially) as gospel. However, these days it is commonly accepted that the lines between the sexes concerning their roles, functions, abilities have blurred.

The reflecting team wondered about the presence of females in the children's lives, and whether growing up in a gay family is 'fair' to them. The lesbian minister found Tienie's criticisms of dykes upsetting, and pointed out that he was guilty of stigmatising those lesbians – something that he hates being done to himself. The embryologist said she respected the level of maturity that the gay parents showed in terms of their personal values and conduct to straight people. She came to the conclusion that the idea of having some 'ultimate reality' is elusive: we all seek and strive for a reality that makes sense to us in our particular context. She wondered how the girls' adolescence would affect the relationship between fathers and daughters. How would they handle the boyfriends, for instance?

## **6.3 Reflecting notes for the narrator and actors**

### **6.3.1 Adoption**

A great deal of research has been done on the social and psychological dynamics that are part of the adoption experience. Smith and Miroff, a social worker and an attorney, who are themselves adoptive parents (1987:x), refer to the fact that adoptive parents and their children find themselves in a very special situation in that they become a family through a legal rather than a biological birth process. All families share certain commonalities in terms of the joys, insecurities and fears

around parenting, the ups and downs of child development stages and peer group influences, to name but a few things. However, when it comes to adoptive families, the concerns of the so-called adoption triangle, consisting of the adoptive parents, the child and the birth parents, means that their experiences are different from those of other families. Although the element of adoption in a family should not be denied or over-emphasised, the middle ground is that it should be acknowledged and, at appropriate times, openly discussed (Smith & Miroff 1987:177).

From the perspective of adoptive parenthood, the authors believe that the unique task is feeling that the child really belongs to them, unconditionally, even exclusively. This 'belongingness', is also referred to as a sense of entitlement and has to develop not only from the parents to the child, but also from the child to the parents, as well as among all siblings involved. (This is more challenging in cases when the child is older, no longer an infant.) In the case of biological parents, the feeling amongst family members that 'we belong to each other' is much less complicated. Blood ties are strong, and are usually cemented by the pregnancy and birth process of the child into the family, as well as the fact that family members often look and sound alike. Children frequently display certain inborn characteristics and traits of their parents and grandparents. As the child grows up, family members comment on these characteristics as a matter of course, strengthening the bonds between the members, and inculcating a robust feeling of identity in a specific family.

When it comes to adoption, though, the development of a sense of entitlement can be complicated by a number of issues. Firstly, the adoptive parents are constantly aware that the child was born of another set of parents. With the research on Samuel and Tienie's adopted daughters in mind, I interviewed Linda, adoptive mother of Carinne, to find out how the adoptive issue evinces itself when the child grows older. Carinne is 16 years old. Linda also has one biological son. She told me her adopted daughter's body, which in childhood was round and curvaceous, not streamlined and angular like her own, her husband's and her son's, used to be a daily reminder that Carinne came from a different clan. These physical differences evoked repeated imaginary pictures of what Carinne's biological mother looked and sounded like, and what she thought. Linda felt that her

daughter's family of origin was constantly speaking from the wings, reminding the adoptive family that they, the original family, were the foundation in her child's life. Carinne's personality also differed noticeably from the others'. Linda, the adoptive mother, said she often wondered why the birth mother had given this child away, and she would try to imagine what had happened. She had ambivalent feelings: she felt at once appreciative and anxious about the 'real' mother - appreciative, even indebted, because without her role as biological mother and her brave (or heartless) decision to give up her baby for adoption, Carinne would never have been a part of Linda's life. She saw the child as a gift, at the same time feeling that she had a legitimate claim on Carinne because she had chosen her and cared for her in the day-to-day sense. Thinking of that, she would then see herself as the 'real' mother.

At the same time she felt anxious, because she harboured the fear that she (and her husband) might 'lose' the child to the 'real mother' and her biological family after she and Carinne had met on her eighteenth birthday. She feared that she would be sidelined because 'blood is thicker than water', or because her daughter might compare her unfavourably with her birth mother. Lest Linda should sound a little unstable and childish, let me come to her defense. She has a highly responsible job in the medical profession, is extremely level-headed and mature. She is the kind of person who is capable of giving reflective and imaginative counsel to herself and to others. Linda was, however, surprised by her volatile, emotional reactions when it came to certain issues surrounding the birth mother and especially the anticipated meeting between her and Carinne. She feels strongly that her adopted daughter belongs to her. Linda also told me she would sometimes imagine herself in the shoes of the birth mother, and would experience something of the longing and worried concern she was sure the other one must feel about her child.

The birth mother twice requested photos and information on the girl through the adoption agency that had acted as mediator. After these requests, with which Linda complied, she felt an invisible, unbreakable bond between them founded on their love for and interest in 'their' daughter.

Linda also experienced anxiety about the possible reverse scenario. Instead of dreading the possibility of the biological mother trying to reclaim the girl (if and when their future meeting took place), Linda feared the potential situation in which the biological mother might not want to meet her child after the child had requested it. Another cause for fear, according to this adoptive mother, was that Carinne and her birth mother might experience mutual disappointment during and after the expected meeting. She did not want her daughter to feel disenchanting and disillusioned after encountering the mother she had dreamed of for so many years. It would be a real let down if one or both felt they could not relate to the other in a meaningful way. Linda was also concerned about the possibility of the relationship starting on a good footing, but souring after a while. My involvement and discussions with Linda made it clear to me that the adoptive experience is fraught with emotional highs and lows.

The second challenge in developing a sense of entitlement is that adoptive parents have to handle their child's questions about being adopted from an early age. Smith and Miroff (1987:176) suggest that a policy of direct, honest communication leads to acceptance and a strong sense of identity within the adoptive family structure. The authors state that there is a direct relationship between the child's sense of belonging in the family and the parents' acceptance of their own status as adoptive parents. They mention the interesting situation when adoptive parents who have struggled with infertility sometimes feel ambivalent about their adopted child. Although they dearly wanted to and subsequently did adopt, the child is nevertheless a symbol of their biological inability to reproduce. Appropriate counselling from the adoption agency is not only vital before adoption, but should also be encouraged up to the time the child reaches adulthood. It could also be in the form of support groups for adoptive families.

Open communication addresses and places in perspective the themes of loss experienced by all parties in the adoption triangle (Smith & Miroff 1987:178). For the birth parents, it is the loss of their child as well as the lack of information about their child's health, development, personality, looks and well-being that is at stake. The adoptive parents, depending on their circumstances, express their perceived

losses in unique ways. If they are unable to have the biological children they dearly want, it could be seen as a life-long lacuna in their situation even though they love and appreciate their adopted children. They could also sometimes feel sad that the adopted child is not their biological child.

Some infertile adoptive parents manage, to a great extent, to overcome their desire for biological offspring. An adoptive mother of two sons, let's call her Anke, told me that although she has never had children of her own she thinks the process of falling pregnant and giving birth is somewhat over-rated. Those things are not essential to becoming a mother. She feels her boys were lent to her for a time to care for and learn from, in the same way that birth children are 'lent' to their biological parents. She experiences the dual situation in which one of her sons is subject to an open adoption policy and the other to a closed adoption policy. She does not necessarily prefer one to the other, she says, and feels that both arrangements have strengths and weaknesses. She does feel particularly blessed in her relationship with the birth mother in the open adoption arrangement. She and the birth mother give each other much-needed support. They discuss the problems and joys concerning 'their son' on a regular basis, usually telephonically. She says there is no defensiveness or competition between them, only a sense of gratitude and sharing. The birth mother and son communicate only by text messages on their cell phones, and have done so for many years. Both have decided to postpone their reunion at least to his eighteenth birthday. Anke says the arrangement works well for them. She herself feels she has an ally and friend in the birth mother, someone who is emotionally mature and genuinely has their son's best interests at heart. (The child was adopted shortly after birth.) The fact that there is respect, honesty, humour and humility, as well as boundaries, provides a framework of gratitude for all involved. The boy, aged thirteen, feels he is an integral part of the adoptive family. At the same time he knows that he originated from a different family. (His grandmother on his birth mother's side often visits him and takes him on outings.) He is also familiar with the reasons why he was given up for adoption, and knows that his biological mother loves him, but chooses to stay in the background for the first eighteen years of his life. The fact that his brother is also adopted, and that the thorny emotional issues are handled

in such an easy-going, mature and stress-free manner has gone a long way to his accepting his special situation as a normal part of his life.

This brings us to the third side of the adoption triangle, the adoptee. The loss here involves not knowing and not growing up with birth parents and the extended family, being in the dark about the circumstances of their adoption and the depressing feelings of having been unwanted or rejected by those who should have granted them a place in their lives (Smith & Miroff 1987:179). Telling the adoptive story, if done in an appropriate and sensitive way, and taking the age and questions of the child into account, can become a healing experience.

Filis Casey (2004), lawyer and founder of the first international adoption agency in Massachusetts over thirty years ago, says many classic misconceptions about adoption still exist. They include the idea that families formed through adoption are second best, that parents who adopt a child from another race or culture are saints, and that most adopted children have emotional problems (Casey & Casey 2004:xiii). Filis's daughter was internationally and trans-racially adopted at the age of three. It meant, amongst other things, that she found a family who wanted her, but she had to learn a new language and has accepted her name change from Francis Catalina Cuartas to Marissa Catalina Casey. She said she continually questioned her identity over the years: not knowing her medical history, craving to know if her mother shared the same green eyes, wondering about the 'secrets' of her birth-experience and the reasons she ended up in the orphanage. She used to be bitter and angry that her path was fraught with detours and missing signposts. Now, at twenty, she's beginning to realise that 'there isn't a family dynamic more true or real than any other, and that family is what you make it' (Casey & Casey 2004:9).

There is, of course, great diversity when it comes to adoptive families. Some consist of only adoptive relationships, while other parents have both biological and adoptive children. During the past few years, interracial adoptions have become more and more common in South Africa. In some instances there are extended family relations between adoptive parents and children, for example, when someone adopts her/his daughter's, son's or sibling's children. The distinction

between open and closed adoptions has already been described in the previous section.

Adoptive parents have to face the possibility that their child might want to meet his/her biological parents. Even adoptive parents who are accepting and encouraging about this aspect are taken aback by their emotional reactions when contact is made between the child and biological parent(s). This scenario could complicate the development of a sense of entitlement towards the child.

### **6.3.2 Lesbian and gay parenting, parents of gays and straight spouses**

#### *Lesbian and gay parenting*

In fourteenth century Europe, the common punishment for homosexuality was burning at the stake. By the time of the American Revolution, thanks to Thomas Jefferson's liberal proposals, the death penalty had been replaced with castration (Baca Zinn & Eitzen 1993:415). Gays and lesbians in South Africa now have the legal right to get married and to adopt children. Although much has changed in terms of the law, they still undergo oppression. Gays continue to experience both ideological oppression, in which their behaviours stigmatise them as immoral, and occupational oppression (covertly, as this is illegal) in which jobs, advancement or income are restricted or denied (1993:416).

Feminist research has pointed out that, although motherhood is socially constructed as fulfilling and vital for all women, many groups of women are devalued as unsuitable and defined as inappropriate mothers. This includes older, disabled, teenage, and working mothers. Although this feminist research has examined the ideologies underpinning the construction of appropriate and inappropriate categories, it has often failed to address the experiences of marginalisation undergone by lesbian mothers and gay fathers (Clarke 2001:555). She identifies six common arguments frequently used in opposition to lesbian and gay parenting. These arguments are designed to maintain the heterosexist status quo. In using these arguments, Clarke says, opponents of lesbian and gay parenting place the responsibility for their views on God, nature, children's developmental needs or society. At the same time, they express their concern for children's welfare, thereby sidestepping the responsibility of answering for their

prejudiced opinions. These arguments, she says, are endlessly recycled in their proponents' efforts to cling to the notion of the traditional nuclear family, and to perpetuate the stereotypes of gay men as paedophiles, and lesbians as aggressive, masculine and confused about their sexuality, not worthy of being parents.

- 'The Bible tells me that lesbian and gay parenting is sinful.'
- 'Lesbian and gay parenting is unnatural.'
- Lesbian and gay parents are selfish because they ignore the 'best interests' of the child.'
- 'Children in lesbian and gay families lack appropriate role models.'
- 'Children in lesbian and gay families grow up gay and confused.'
- 'The children of lesbian and gay parents get bullied.'

The first argument has the longest history of all, partly, perhaps, because of its simplicity and extreme resistance to change. After all, God's plan cannot be put to any empirical test, and there are numerous Biblical verses that seem to point clearly to God's disapproval of homosexuals. Although the argument is out of step with current scientific, theological and political opinion, it persistently suggests that religion and gay and lesbian rights are fundamentally in conflict with this. The trump card is that God dislikes gays and homosexuality, but that, under certain circumstances (for instance when gays remain celibate) a deal can be struck.

Clarke points out that gay and lesbian parents usually respond to their critics by resorting to a limited number of themes, which are inadequate for deconstructing these persistent anti-gay beliefs: 'Love makes a family', whereby the boundaries of sexuality are transcended, or 'We are just the family next door', which highlights their ordinary character. They draw parallels to heterosexual families, stating that the only difference is that the parents in theirs are of the same sex. In response to arguments about a lack of suitable role models, lesbian and gay parents and their apologists point out that, in their family or support network, there are ample examples of the 'right kind of role models' (Clarke 2001:567).



Arlene Istar Levy says that, for gays and lesbians, the fantasy of building a family is often not as easily attained as had been hoped. Much more than in the case of homosexual partnerships where it is nearly always assumed that both partners would want children, gay partners might not see eye to eye on the issue of children, and some are adamantly opposed to having them. Other problems like financial and emotional stability and addiction can stand in the way of parenthood. Despite the increase in the number of lesbians having children by insemination, pregnancy and birth, many lesbian women are considering parenting in their thirties and forties. Since infertility increases exponentially as women age, attempting to become pregnant later in life means that they could encounter infertility problems (Lev 2004:87). Infertility and pregnancy loss are rarely discussed topics in the lesbian community, and the potential for conflict, competition and blame in a partnership where there are two wombs is tremendous. Some gays and lesbians have children from previous heterosexual relationships. However, other than adoption, there are numerous potential ways of becoming parents. Artificial insemination, donor sperm, donor eggs and surrogate motherhood are possibilities. Sometimes a gay man and a lesbian woman form a partnership to parent a child. It could be asked whether it is morally right to create a baby in such a way. Not all gays and lesbians think there should be no impediments when baby hunger strikes. Some feel it would be more acceptable to adopt an already-existing child who is in need of a family.

Lev points out that same-sex parents who choose to have children together are often without models to parent effectively together. Their childhood models of heterosexuality may not be relevant to the families they are now creating within an alternative family structure, since LGBT people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) can hardly follow the prescribed gender roles of their straight parents (2004:164). Homosexual parents try to implement an egalitarian approach to parenthood, becoming peers in all the decisions and daily tasks, although in practice one of the parents usually spends more time with the children (2004:166). Building support systems is crucial for survival as gay parents, and would include their LGBT families, as well as their families of origin. LGBT people, she says, are bicultural, with one foot in the dominant hetero-normative system and the other in

their unique queer cultures. Although LGBT people have often been pushed out of their families, their relationship with their families of origin and the ancestral thread (birth and adoptive) are critical to their self-definition. These connections should be maintained or reconstructed for the sake of all involved, especially, too, for the children of gay parents (Lev 2004:144).

### *Parents of gays*

Because of the persistent social stigma attached to being gay, closet gays and their parents and families often find it very threatening to tell the truth. Even gays who have come out are likely, in certain situations, to conceal their homosexuality. It is not only the gays and lesbians themselves who find it difficult to 'come out of the closet', but their heterosexual parents as well. Du Plessis (1999:107) reminds parents of gays that their open communication and acceptance of their children affects the family and society in a healing, positive way. Parents who keep their child's homosexuality a secret from friends and family (what will they say?) becomes locked into a place of shame and fear. Anger against the child and self-loathing as a reaction to the homosexuality can keep parents isolated. Weinberg (in Du Plessis 1999:101) says it is a myth that parents are responsible for their children's sexual orientation:

As a result of propaganda from many sides, millions of parents, on discovering that their child is homosexual, sink under the weight of awful reactions. Believing that they have wrecked the life of their child and loved one, they feel demoralised and ashamed.

Lidia Theron (2005:51), mother of a lesbian daughter, says she and her husband went through a hellish journey before eventually accepting her daughter's sexuality and right to be treated with dignity as a full human being. The critical attitude of their community and church towards gays made it extremely hard for her and her husband to be open about their 'dilemma'. They felt they had 'lost' their child (or at least the one they thought they knew), that she 'did this to them', as if she deliberately chose to be lesbian, that her soul was irredeemable, out of reach of God's grace, and that they, as parents, caused her homosexuality because of their personalities and child-rearing practices. They consequently heaped enormous blame on themselves, experiencing extreme shame and disgrace. In the eyes of

some of their colleagues, friends, family and members of their congregation, they were seen to be failures and their child confused and disgusting. Lidia's daughter says that she nearly lost her faith, because Christians spread the 'truth' that if she continued to live according to her nature and disposition, God would reject her (2005:140).

David Aveline (2006:792) carried out research on parents who retrospectively made sense of their sons' gayness by re-visiting their earlier years. Aveline calls this retrospective making sense a 'selective re-examination of the past and a reinterpretation of its events'. It is a process whereby parents come to terms with what they now know (that their sons are indeed gay) as opposed to what they had originally thought. This process suggests a second-level interpretation of what led them to the original interpretation of the events, traits, or behaviours in question (that their sons are not gay). An interpretation of their stories yielded three broad types of second-level interpretations: revelations (*I never noticed until now, but did I have blinkers on?*), confirmations (*So, I was right*), and justifications (*How could I have known?*). Many parents attributed their inability to see the early signs of their son's homosexuality for what it was to their church's lack of any reference to homosexuality, to the fact that no-one discussed it in their own growing years and to society's general intolerance of gays, and its broad failure to prepare parents for having gay sons (Aveline 2006:794). Most of them wish they had had the insight and opportunity to accept and support their son's homosexuality, as it is not something that can be changed. With hindsight, they realise that their children had manifested signs of their gayness throughout their lives, sometimes from a very young age, but they themselves had been blind or had pretended to be.

### *Straight spouses of gays*

Amity Pierce Buxton's (2004) *The other side of the closet* is a comprehensive study of what happens to husbands, wives and children when one spouse decides to come out of the closet and discloses his or her same-sex attraction. She writes from her own experience as the spurned wife of a gay husband. She interviewed a thousand straight spouses and children, and countless spouses who, at a particular point in their marriage, had acknowledged their homosexuality to their families. To a great extent she blames the 'domino effect of homophobia' as the

very root of the pressures that make many gay, lesbian and bisexual persons marry in the first place, believing it is 'the right thing to do'. The charade ultimately becomes impossible to maintain, and a shattering experience fraught with pain, confusion, anger and severe loss of self-esteem follows. She says families that eventually undergo a successful transforming process (something that could take many forms, but would include the gay parent's presence in the lives of the children), demands a complete re-evaluation of fixed, traditional viewpoints. Levy points out that all the research that has conducted on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people) coming out of a heterosexual marriage found that children can survive this major upheaval with few setbacks. This is especially the case if those children are stable and well loved. However, issues like internalised homophobia and high levels of shame and stigma will be there (Pierce Buxton 2004:105).

Goldberg's research on adult disclosure practices cited by lesbian, gay and bisexual parents (2007:123) found that reactions amongst the group of adults were quite diverse. Discovering during childhood that one of their parents was gay received a range of reactions, which changed during their life course, highlighting the fact that people have multiple selves that are not always in harmony (Goldberg 2007:124). He found that a number of social influences affected disclosure, especially people's interpretations of their immediate context, for instance the presence or absence of homophobia. It is true that these adults live in a time when matters of gay rights and gay parenting are openly and frequently discussed in the media. It is also true that attitudes to gay rights are becoming more and more tolerant. However, Goldberg found that many participants in his survey disclosed their parents' lesbian, gay or bisexual identities even when the audience was potentially negative. They disclosed in the context of educating others, because they wanted to be authentic and be able to identify potential allies (2007:123).

### **6.3.3 Christian and ethical views**

Du Plessis (1999:48) maintains that neither homo- nor heterosexuality is *per se* moral or immoral. Rather, the morality of a person's life depends on whether it is rooted in the context of a responsible and moral life style. The gender of those in a loving sexual relationship is less important than the kind of relationship maintained

between them. He is amazed at the number of gay people who have 'kept the faith' in the face of persistent discrimination from Christian churches. He quotes Gary Lamont, gay minister, who says that gays should no longer ask the Church to accept them, because they are the Church. Having so many gay members, the Church is, amongst other things, already gay (1999:48).

*Die Hervormer*, a church paper (2003:4), asks whether, considering current findings in the human sciences, testimonies of gays themselves and exegesis, homosexuality is like so many other things in life, a mystery. Perhaps it is something for which we will never have a final answer, because there are so many explanations for it. The conclusion of the article lists four points on a broad Biblical basis. First, it says that the Bible describes marriage between male and female as the natural and normal way in which God created humans and in which sexuality is played out. Secondly, hermeneutical arguments and exegesis point out that the Bible, if taken in its entirety, condemns homosexuality. Thirdly, the Bible is against all forms of promiscuity, lust and immorality. Lastly, the writer says that the Church cannot and will not close its doors to certain people, because God loves the sinner. A new life in Christ is possible when an individual travels along the road of repentance and forgiveness. The alternative is death. The theme of acceptance for the homosexual, but rejection of his/her active homosexual lifestyle, is prevalent in the Christian Church. Du Toit (1994) points out that the Church has a definite responsibility both to be a social home for gays, and to prevent them from being entangled in all kinds of subcultures. The question is, however: Would homosexuals feel they were in the bosom of their family when the clan expects them to renounce their sexuality, an integral part of their identity, and equate it with sin? Homosexuals argue that, even if they wanted to, it would be impossible to abandon their sexual orientation as if it were simply a bad habit. They maintain that sexuality is in a different category from sins like hate, anger, murder, covetousness and unbelief.

Van Wyk (2004:13) holds that, at this juncture, the Church should acknowledge the necessity of listening seriously and respectfully to what homosexuals are trying to convey about the pain, rejection and loneliness they and their families experience sitting in the pews. He reminds the Church that the gospel grants us

the full privilege of being humble, and that Jesus was far less concerned with the law than he was with recognising opportunities to show compassion. Dreyer (2004:200) argues that Jesus does not include the marginalised in his Church just because they are on the margin, but because the gospel stresses the inclusiveness of God's mercy. All who believe are equal in the eyes of God. Dreyer cautions against the argument 'look to the person rather than the act', because it seems to perpetuate the dualism that undermines the oneness of body, soul and spirit. The question also arises as to whether the Church is more concerned about how a loving relationship between people is physically expressed than the fact that the relationship itself mirrors something of the love of Christ.

Geyser (2002:1675) maintains that the inclusive love of God ought to be the starting point of theological reflection on homosexuality. He focuses on existing exegetical research within the framework of four categories of literature texts in which references to same-sex behaviour are found. These include legal texts, narrative passages, lists or catalogues and creation reports. He proposes that the first thing to be placed on the table when the issue of homosexuality is discussed should be the bias with which texts are read and people judged. Secondly, he is concerned about the way in which the Church conveys God's message, fearing that this goes towards rendering irrelevant the good intentions of love and kindness. He suggests that a certain kind of hermeneutical approach be implemented, whereby not only Scripture is taken into account, but also the texts of those who have had first-hand, lived experiences of the issue. In the latter instance he points out that, in order to reflect sensibly on the issue of homosexuality, other disciplines, such as psychology, medicine and education, should be consulted.

Some theologians are less willing to accommodate the homosexual lifestyle as a valid relationship option within the Church, even if they are long-standing, monogamous relationships. Francis McNutt (2006:40), founding director of Christian Healing Ministries in Jacksonville, says that the Church should repent of its past harshness to homosexuals. However, it cannot accept the gay activist position that the homosexual orientation is genetic and unchangeable, as both scientific evidence and his personal experience as a minister of healing prayer

indicate the opposite. He has seen phenomenal results in the healing of homosexuals. Ervin Lutzer, theologian and minister, agrees, saying God's people should defend marriage as a covenant designed between God, man and woman (2004:51). He sees the current openness and activism of gays as part of a strategy of deception to convince straight people that homosexual unnaturalness is natural. The increase in same-sex marriage is a dangerous threat to the natural order that God intended in marriages, families and society. Lutzer's personal experience is that many gay and lesbian people have been hurt as children, molested or neglected and that their homosexuality is a compulsive act to hide their pain (2004:37). He has personally helped many people through prayer, repentance and the healing power of Jesus to break away from homosexuality, who are now living as heterosexuals.

De Villiers (2006:186) argues for reforming the Christian approach to the contentious issue of morally evaluating homosexuality in general, and the homosexual relationship in particular. He foresees that such an approach would allow Christians to avoid the trap of either blindly opposing homosexuality as an unnuanced, conservative evaluation or uncritically accepting it as an unnuanced progressive agreement. De Villiers points out that the moral evaluations of homosexuality formed by Christians are shaped by four pivotal crossroads: their dominant emotion about homosexuality and their views on the causes of homosexuality; the possibility of being healed of such a tendency; their views on the nature of the authority and role of the Bible in terms of texts about homosexuality in particular and current moral issues in general; and their views on the extent to which traditional Church beliefs on human sexuality are still morally valid today.

It is highly likely that Christians would strongly oppose homosexuality if they had a strong aversion to, even disgust for homosexuals, or if they believed that homosexuality is a learned disposition and therefore curable, either with psychological intervention or with faith healing. The latter alternative means that the homosexual would have to confess his sins and, with the grace of God, turn his back on his old ways. Christians would also strongly oppose homosexuality if they were convinced that all moral Biblical guidelines are literally applicable in

today's society and if they accepted that only in marriage can sexuality be expressed, and that marriage is per definition heterosexual. On the other hand, it is equally likely that Christians would be extremely positive about homosexuality if their views reflected the antithesis of all these beliefs.

De Villiers cautions that neither of these two extremes is helpful or acceptable in finding a solution to the issue of homosexuality in the Church, and that the least acceptable way out of the dilemma would be to simply play it safe and tread the middle path. Rather he proposes that Christians should be guided by the kind of neighbourly love that Jesus showed. That means showing respect for the homosexual and applying the concept of fairness in terms of the ways in which they can express their sexuality as full human beings. Secondly, Christians should be willing to accept scientific, medical and psychological facts relating to homosexuality, even if these do not concur with their own spiritual beliefs. He cautions against the dangers of relativistic and fundamentalist points of view on the authority of the Bible. Christians should not focus blindly on the few Bible texts that seem to condemn homosexuality, and in the process miss the wider picture of the Christian tradition that says sexuality must be expressed in the space of a marriage in which two people adhere to certain values. Could homosexuals who are willing to form lifelong, monogamous relationships, adhering to Christian values, find a space to express their love in a 'marriage' that the Church is willing to acknowledge? Clearly, a culture of discussion and kindness is needed to come closer to fair and sensible answers (De Villiers 2006:197).

#### **6.4 The last act: the making of a happy family**

Samuel, Tienie and their daughters are a family. Not a family that expanded in the natural and normal way between a husband and wife, where pregnancy after pregnancy produces their biological children. This family is different. Very different indeed from the notion society used to have of what a family should look like even forty years ago. This is a homosexual partnership. Those words alone have the capacity to disqualify their relationship as not only wrong, but sinful. Now add the following: this is a homosexual partnership that fathers two adopted daughters. It makes them a family. Some people respect their family and are delighted for them.



Some people would not even want to call this a family. They might, perhaps, say that it is not a family - it's just a shame. Others might say to Samuel and Tienie, 'You have such a special, delightful family', but behind their backs fear for the psychological well-being of all involved, including the wellness of a society that allows such relationship units. It is the researcher's opinion that families like theirs are here to stay, whether society and the Church like it or not. Or the school board. Or the neighbours, for that matter.

Samuel and Tienie know something about families. They have learned much from their families of origin. That it is hard to be poor, and hard to be one of many, many children, because you get only a little attention. That you have to share even the little that you have. That you have to put yourself in your family members' shoes. That you have to love and forgive, and laugh at yourself. That you have to work very hard, and that life doesn't owe you anything just because you've arrived on the planet. That God has made you different from the rest of your siblings. That He loves you, and gives you wisdom along the way. That Christ is unfathomable, but good, at the same time a mystery, and one who answers prayers in the form of beautiful, precious, little daughters. They know that families are never quite perfect, even if you have all the right, normal and natural ingredients, like a man and a woman and their biological children who all love each other. They know, they come from such families. Samuel and Tienie understand that family is about a circle of people who choose to live closely together with all their different human foibles, and who care deeply, respectfully and practically about each other, who give each other room to grow, and to make mistakes. They believe above all, in the power of love.

What is a family? Müller (2002:15) proposes the metaphor of storying culture or an interpreting community. It is seen as a group of people who, within a particular context, understand and interpret their lives. The same metaphors, symbols, expressions and narratives inform them. Such a storying culture (family) tells stories about themselves, who they are, where they come from and where they hope to go. Families change, and have changed tremendously over the thousands of years of human history. Müller says, instead of blindly defining or following the ideal family in terms of objective norms of family structures and family models, the

question is rather: Does the storying culture of a particular family facilitate the basic Christian values of love, respect, and care for the others (2002:17)? Müller says the neatly worked-out theological theory of marriage, with the roles of husband and wife mirroring the relationship between Christ and the Church, is miles from the practical reality (2002:37).

Fundamentalism betrays Christianity, says Bruce Bawer. He accuses James Dobson (of *Focus on the Family* fame), Pat Robertson and others of being completely bent on projecting an image of wholesome, happy family life (Bawer 1997:324). They embrace ideal pictures, and pretend that they live in an Andy Hardy movie, where dads are always strong and hardworking, moms always loving and admiring, boys always interested in cars and sports, and girls always sweet and quiet and on their way to become perfect homemakers. Things like adolescent junkies, teenage pregnancies, gay offspring and alcoholic wives do not exist in their Norman Rockwell picture. The trouble is, says Bawer, that fundamentalists connect evil with anything that does not fit the bill of the wholesome family and their designated roles (that barely exist, given the high divorce rate, and the fact that people no longer adhere to stereotypes). He says fundamentalists are aggressively opposed to homosexuality and perpetuate a culture of blame in the Church, holding homosexuals responsible for various social ills. In addition, their mere presence signifies the demise of the good order and offers proof that the end times are near. The answer to homosexuality, according to Dobson, is to simply accept Jesus as your saviour, and he will help you change. The homosexual can have a happy ending: by transforming into a heterosexual s/he can get married and have a family (Bawer 1997:255). Bawer thinks this could be extremely cruel to both parties in the marriage, because, in the end, it means embracing a lie: trying, for the sake of acceptance in heaven and on earth, to be what you are not. He quotes Hans Küng, who says the decisive factor for Christian action, Christian ethics and Christian practice is Jesus as the normative, concrete person, and not the relative unimportance of doctrine.

Samuel and Tienie have made a gay and happy family. They have constructed a family story in which they live out their belief that love – mere love – is really what it is all about. They see Jesus as the one who has utterly transformed their lives,

not only by his death on the cross, but by his gift of granting them children. To them, homosexuality means much more than just experiencing sexual attraction to another person of the same sex; it is to feel the same sense of comfort, rightness and wholeness in a same-sex relationship that a straight person feels in an opposite-sex relationship (Bawer 1997:254).

Although the curtain is beginning to fall on this particular act on the parenthood of Tienie and Samuel, the play is not over.

In Chapter 7 the narratives of Helga and James will be presented. An artistic, bohemian couple, they suffered three miscarriages before deciding to live a childfree marriage.

## CHAPTER 7

### HARVEST SONG OF HELGA AND JAMES: FROM MISCARRIAGE TO VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS

This chapter presents the narratives of Helga and James on their experiences with infertility and miscarriage. They chose to postpone having children until both had reached thirty, but their pregnancies ended in three miscarriages in eighteen months. After that they consciously decided to stop trying to become pregnant. They now have a childfree marriage, at the same time enjoying the children in their circle of friends and family. The main themes of their discussions with the researcher, during which they revealed their ideas, beliefs and experiences about childlessness, are shared with the reader. These include the dissimilarities in their responses to the miscarriages, the meaning they attach to having a full, rich life and reflections on powerful discourses on parenting. Relevant topics developing from these main themes are included to expand and amplify the story, including ideas on women and blood issues, and the role of ritual in addressing reproductive loss. Westerfield-Tucker's (2002) arguments for using the metaphor of adoption as a primary, preferred figure of speech instead of, or at least alongside, the metaphor of procreation to define fruitfulness in a Biblical context, as well as designing prayers and rituals for use in the experience of infertility will be presented.

#### 7.1 The narrative

Helga and James have been married for twenty years. On the autumn day of their wedding, she wore a grey-white leather wedding dress with a headpiece fashioned out of deep purple roses in full bloom. He wore a striped suit as an English gentleman would. This was a very alternative cocktail of a ceremony and subsequent marriage, but it was a mix of all the right ingredients. Helga and James is a bohemian, imaginative, artistic couple. The researcher found their house to be a treasure trove of complementary and opposite colours, textures, spaces, patterns, pictures and shapes, a house that was forever changing. James would leave for work in the morning, and find on his return in the late afternoon that Helga had painted the stairs a different colour or had added dots to the

triangles on the kitchen cupboards. Even the structure of the house looks like a mockery of Newtonian laws. Helga is a painter, a wonderful creature. She is a combination of weirdness and fluidity, but, at the same time, she seems to be planted in solid earth like a familiar, age-old coral tree. The salt of the earth: what you see is what you get. Truth to tell, she is also magnificent, a tall, olive-skinned Amazon, with thick, wavy, auburn hair, a woman who laughs like a child, and paints like a goddess. Her husband, James, once said to me: 'You know, beautiful people like Helga experience the world differently', as if she belonged to an unusual species. Considering her artistic talents and exquisite uniqueness, I couldn't help thinking it was a shame that her genes would not be passed on. Then I smiled at myself for my typical response: falling for the idea that the strong, the attractive, the talented and the intelligent are more valuable to society, somehow inherently more worthy. James is a professional man, working hard during the day in an eight to five job, but he detached himself long ago from the idea of a fixed outlook. In his free time, he 'potters' around at home. He paints (and abandons his creations after a time, because 'I have to move on, otherwise I will keep on reworking it, ad infinitum'). He makes movies, writes prose, plays his guitar and prepares 'slow' food. He believes in grace and he loves Helga.

### **7.1.1 Theme 1: responses and resolutions to miscarriage**

Helga and James consciously decided to delay starting a family, resisting the wave of baby frenzy that overtook many of their friends and contemporaries shortly after marriage. There were even times when Helga and James more or less resolved not to have children. From the beginning, they never felt they needed to 'make children' to seal their marriage. They never thought their lives as individuals and partners would lack fullness or depth if children were left out of the picture.

At one stage, when they were thirty-something, they decided to try for a baby. At that time Helga was working on her first exhibition. Her body giving her signs that she was possibly pregnant pleased and amused her. It was also an impetus to work even harder to finish her paintings in time. She did not go for a medical check-up to confirm whether she was indeed pregnant. She just sensed it and enjoyed the fact that life was growing inside her. When she miscarried a few

weeks later, it was both a confirmation of the pregnancy and a rude reminder of how fragile new life can be. The miscarriage was a traumatic time for her. She felt exceedingly alone and describes the situation as one in which ‘James wasn’t emotionally involved; he didn’t understand what I was going through’. Although she had not been bent on becoming a mother, by the time she was pregnant she wanted the baby with every cell in her body. After the loss of life, she was perpetually angry.

The second miscarriage took place during the next pregnancy. A few months went by, and then she fell pregnant again. The third spontaneous abortion happened at four months, just when she thought she had had made it through the vulnerable stage. ‘Everything was there already, it was a real baby.’ James says her body took a hammering. They agree that the main difference in their responses to the miscarriages was the fact that James always missed the sonar showing the heart beat. Helga saw the heart pumping with life. And she ‘felt the little heart beating under her own heart’. Being pregnant awakened a primeval force in her that made her want to protect her child, give birth to it; nurture it. She allowed herself to be present in the future of this child.

After experiencing the raw edges of loss they decided that they were simply too old and set in their ways to have children. Even if Helga were to fall pregnant again, and manage to keep the pregnancy, she would have to undergo an amniocentesis test. She did not want to be faced with having to decide on the fate of a less than perfect baby. Neither did Helga feel she could deal with intrusive IVF procedures, and the possibility of multiple births. It would not be fair to have so many children at once, they thought. And how would she cope if she had to abort one or two if she expected triplets or quadruplets. Although she is disappointed and angry, and still grieves over her lost babies, she is now philosophical. This is how it is with children: you can’t always choose what you want. James and Helga are now childless by choice.

James is far less affected by the miscarriages and the reality that they will, as a couple, indeed remain childless. He has never felt a strong desire to have children anyway. In his twenties and thirties, he thought it was wonderful not having them.

Now in his forties, he can say it is great. Being childless does not mean loss or a damaged identity. What he values is his freedom and his good relationship with his wife. Joking, he says he can spend all his money on their needs and dreams. He is truly content with his life right now.

Helga dreams a lot and always has done: she is a seasoned dreamer. For instance, she often dreams that she is saving animals in distress, or children who are in trouble. A week before a near tragedy during a family holiday, she dreamt that she rescued her brother's little boy from drowning. And that is exactly the way it happened a few days later. They were on holiday with the extended family at a small seaside resort. The children were playing on a tube in the river, when little John slipped off. She was the first of the adults to react when he started shouting for help. She sprinted across the wooden deck and swam like crazy to pull him out of the water. After the miscarriages she repeatedly dreams that she is giving birth to small, very white tissue-type babies, drenched in blood. They always stay small, she says, like Thumbelina. They are real little Thumbelinas. Helga says she doesn't know what it is like to have a child, but she is holding onto the experience of the love that she felt the very first time she became aware that she was pregnant. She knows how that love simply overwhelmed her. She will never forget it.

### **7.1.2 Theme 2: Living a fruitful life**

Helga and James feel they have been blessed in countless ways. They greatly appreciate the knowledge that God deeply loves them, that they are alive, and that they can pray for and receive wisdom for themselves and others. Wisdom becomes possible when you are taken out of your comfort zone. It is never learnt directly, but always throws you a curved ball. And it often involves hurt, thinks Helga, but is always worthwhile. James is fascinated by the paradox of life and death. It brings wholeness and purpose, and it makes sense. The moment you receive life you are challenged to let go, leave something behind and accept your losses, he says. In short, with your feet planted in Life, you start to die in different ways, for different reasons, which leads to new avenues previously unattainable and unforeseen. Sometimes, surrendering to the deaths rather than having them forced on you, brings greater opportunities for growth, change and hope. James

shared an example of the two of them ‘dying to themselves in their marriage’ which lead to renewed vigour and a reappraisal of their marriage. He recounts how one day, in her anger and frustration with him, Helga called him from their bedroom, and said: ‘Come sit next to me on this marriage bed of ours, and listen how I say to you that I don’t think I want to have your children, because you don’t do right by me.’ James said that fortunately Wisdom took hold of him, in spite of his initial impulse to retaliate. He decided to act with grace and humility, and to really listen to Helga’s fury and hurt. That event, which potentially could have irreparably destroyed their union, became, in fact, one of the most life-giving, decisive moments in their relationship, propelling them forward together.

In answer to the question as to why they thought they had been born into this world, Helga jokes that in their case it was not ‘to multiply and fill the earth’. She doesn’t think she would have been a particularly good mother, but feels rather that she is here to learn to love unconditionally. She wants to become more and more non-judgmental. At the moment, she says, she is still judging those who judge, and she has to release that now.

Being an artist, a painter, she lives closely with her creative drives. She says that without God’s inspiration her art would be lifeless, despite her carefully honed techniques. She never specifically paints themes like birth, ripening or fertility. However, her work is alive with being and spirit. Individually and together James and Helga construct their selves and their environment, sometimes laboriously, but usually and purposefully with growth and ripening in mind. For them, to love and care for children is only one of many ways in which to taste life in its fullness. In fact they are concerned about the possible perception that there is only one category of couples ‘who can’t have children’. There are, in fact, many different groups with different chronicles of infertility. Besides, the various stories seem to mutate as time takes care of them, and they become stories within stories.

James and Helga’s story of infertility gave birth to many accounts in different shapes, and most are in full bloom. For instance, they do not perceive their marriage as dry and barren because they are without children. James and Helga’s marriage continuously gives birth to seeds of life that the Creator intends for



growth. However, the responsibility for watering those seeds belongs to them. Some of the seeds include: a settled, calm life; an interesting, creative existence; a special identity of two people who are 'one', despite the fact that there is no child factor to hold them together; time and energy to do what interests them. The seeds have also given birth to a language of humour and grace, and a stack of home movies that depicts their love of nature, holidays, families and self-development. One of the seeds gave direction to an old dream from their youth: to travel and see the world. It came to fruition by moving to a European country where they now live and work. They literally have a new life, and enjoy the best that Africa and Europe can offer. They insist that there is no 'mould' into which the infertile fit. They are not depressed or sad because of their childlessness. They have moved on; they have left their disappointments and grief behind. They are happy and childfree, not happy despite being childfree. There is no need to pity them, to think, what choice did they have? They have accepted that this is the way it is. No, it is more than acceptance. They have taken on 'childfreeness'. They carry it within them, and in turn it holds them, bears them and takes them to a particular life they would never have known if they had had children. Helga thinks they will bear the consequences of childlessness for the rest of their lives. She will bear it differently from James, though, because she is the one who saw the heartbeat on the sonar, and she felt the little heart thumping under her own heart. But there again, being childfree suits her.

### **7.1.3 Theme 3: Reflections on relevant discourses**

The discourse that *men should play the role of protector and supporter in the event of their suffering a miscarriage* is very strong. James feels that men are overlooked when it comes to tea and sympathy about their partner's miscarriages. The focus is mainly on the woman. It is her womb, her pregnancy and, to a great extent, her loss. A great deal of attention (rightly) focuses on her, while her husband tries to support her as best he can. While his wife often needs to submerge herself in grief and bewilderment for a long time, the man would like the crying to stop after a reasonable period, and feels he ought to do something about it. Devastated as he is, he tries to take his mind off the matter by planning the next step. Unfortunately, either she herself or other people blame the woman (or her body) for the miscarriage. James points out that male magazines tend to focus on

muscles and sex, not infertility and miscarriages. Men are not prepared. Articles like that are for women's publications. Besides, one can't be prepared for a miscarriage, and when it happens it is alien territory.

James, by choice, stands outside the father-team that so highly prizes sons. He feels the strong discourse that says *a man badly wants a son* is perhaps a little inflated and overrated. However, a son carries the family name, and a youthful adult son literally reflects the aging father in presenting a younger image of himself. James says men are not only hunters, they're also planters. They need to leave their mark in the form of a family because of their drive for immortality and structure. Although he stands outside of that, he can understand that, for a man who wants children (and most do), infertility must be devastating.

The discourse that proclaims, *if you don't want to have children you are selfish, and disobedient to God's plan*, is nonsensical as far as James and Helga are concerned. Does having children prove to society and yourself that you are selfless, or are you simply left with little choice but to care as best you can for your own offspring lest the Welfare admonish you, your conscience and parental instinct torment you, or your children hate you? Helga asks whether 'selfless' to some people could mean to 'literally store' your life and identity in your children's living space. Far more sad and pathetic than some childless person pining for years after an unattainable child are parents who 'become their children's lives, and disappear from their own'.

In reaction to the argument maintaining *that your children will look after you in your old age*, Helga smiled. She said she is quite sure that she will be able to look after herself, or, if she can't, the paid staff in the old age home will happily do so. The sad truth is that some of the elderly living in rooms, homes and retirement villages are not visited and loved by their children. Often ignored, and neglected, their loss is so much greater if the children they do have do not care enough, she said, or when the meaningful relationship the elderly parents wish for is not likewise returned by their children. Helga enjoys and appreciates her large family, parents, cousins, brothers and nieces, and there are precious things in her house that she sentimentally feels her brother's children ought to inherit one day. However,

children are no insurance against loneliness or the realities of old age, although a close-knit family can surely help to make it sweeter, she thinks.

The reflecting team asked a number of interesting questions. They wondered whether James and Helga would have decided to stop trying to fall pregnant if they had not had the choice. In other words, if they had been informed that they were to be involuntarily childless, would that have influenced their responses differently? The couple definitely felt that having a choice, albeit limited, in the matter made them feel less helpless than they would otherwise have done. They knew they could 'keep on trying' if they wanted to, because Helga did at least fall pregnant, unlike some infertile couples who were unable to manage even that.

The team also reflected on the way in which Helga and James managed to shift their focus away from wanting to have biological children to caring for their animals, and acknowledging the importance of children in their lives. Far from being second best, these so-called 'substitutes' for their own children have a new, valued place in the modified structure of their creative lives. They now look differently at the children present in their lives.

As Helga is 'a painter and a dreamer', the reflecting team wanted to know if and how her reproductive losses find expression in her art. She said that she hardly ever, in a deliberate and realistic way, intends to paint anything 'out of her system', no matter what it is. Art is a combination of premeditated and unintentional processes, and she would be forcing a course of action if she tried that.

The researcher was curious as to whether Helga and James wanted to express their emotions about the miscarriages in ritual form. Had they designed their own ways and means of dealing with their losses, or do they perhaps look to their church to offer symbol and ritual that would help them convey their pain and new identity as a childfree couple? They hadn't contemplated any such ritual, they said. However, they saw their emigration to a European country as a new life opening up for them. Symbolically speaking, they could interpret it as a new birth for their marriage. Helga spontaneously gave the researcher a painting. As she was preparing to leave after the second interview, Helga took the painting off the wall.

It depicted a cross, made up of different painted leaves, with a feathery look. Light and unstructured, as if it could float, the two axes are nearly the same length. Right in the middle is a blood-red heart, decorated around the edges with studs. Looking at the painting again today, the researcher wondered if the red heart in the middle had anything to do with the beating heart Helga saw on the sonar. James gave the researcher a copy of a poem that had meant a lot to him during the time of the miscarriages. It is Charl Jooste's '*Detailalmag*', describing the Creator's pleasure in putting small (and humorous) detail on His handiwork, by playing with feathers, fins, beaks and horns of all shapes and sizes. In addition, James added two home movies (or, as he calls them, 'moewies') he had produced as his gift to the researcher. He had specifically chosen one particular movie he said, because, 'it shows how we interact with children'. The movie had been shot on the family holiday when the near-drowning incident took place. Someone on the reflecting team mentioned that Helga's dreams about saving children could mean that she believes she has a lot to give children. Whether they are her own or not, she could be, amongst other things, a mother to them.

In Chapter 9, the chapter on reflection, the researcher will expand on the gifts she received from the rest of the co-researchers.

## **7.2 Dimensions of meaning**

Certain areas of significance that grew out of Helga and James' narratives will be discussed in greater depth.

### **7.2.1 Women and blood: menstruation and miscarriage**

#### **7.2.1.1 Menstruation**

In this thesis narrative, the womb is ever present, in its corporal form as the gestational location and carrier of a new human being, or as a mystical sacred sphere representing spiritual power and cyclical reproduction and renewal. It has been called 'a sacred place where life is nurtured at its most vulnerable stages' (Hunt 1984:276). The womb has two faces: the mother and the 'unmother', the protector and the refuser. The womb brings forth life, and, at the same time, is a bleeding organ.

The womb or uterus is shaped like a pear or a fig, with the stalk tilted down into the vagina. The uterus, says, Kitzinger (1983:46), is not just a bag hanging there, it is a living network of muscle fibres which, although not under conscious control, tightens and releases regularly in response to certain stimuli and at special times. This process of ebb and flow, folding and unfolding, opening and closing takes place during the menstrual cycle and probably during orgasm. During pregnancy the uterus regularly contracts as a kind of dress rehearsal for the birth event. The uterus also tightens when the breasts are stimulated, which is why the uterus contracts during breast-feeding, and is toned in the process, so that it returns quickly to its previous shape and size.

Hidden from sight as the uterus is, tucked away in the body's mysterious cavity like a purple sea in the centre of the earth, most women probably have a much better mental picture of what their wombs look like than the literal image of their genital organs. Eve Ensler, author of *The vagina monologues* (described by *Variety* as 'both a work of art and an incisive piece of cultural history, a poem and a polemic, a performance and a balm and a benediction') writes wittily, but movingly about women's experiences of their sexuality. 'In the first place it's not so easy to even find your vagina. Women go weeks, months, sometimes years without looking at it. I interviewed a high-powered businesswoman who told me she was too busy; she didn't have the time. Looking at your vagina she said, is a full day's work. You have to get down there on your back in front of a mirror standing independently, full-length preferred. You've got to get in the perfect position, with the perfect light, which then is shadowed somehow by the mirror and the angle you're at. You get all twisted up. You're arching your head up, killing your back. You're exhausted by then. She said she didn't have the time for that. She was busy' (1998:4). Humorous as it sounds, many women would recognise the irony that although they are cyclically reminded of the functioning of their wombs, which takes up anything from a seventh to a fifth of their adult lives until the menopause, its secrets are carefully concealed, and the female genital organs half veiled by its tilted configuration. No wonder women are called mysterious beings.



From time immemorial, says Germaine Greer (2003:53), the womb has been associated with trouble. Many women die of illnesses of these reproductive organs that they have ignored virtually most of their lives. In the South African context, it is a tragedy that more than 3400 women die every year from cervical cancer (CANSAs 2008). Until the twentieth century the pathology of *hysteria* in Europe, as a form of fantasy of the womb, was prevalent. It was believed that the *hysteria* (at first called the *mother*) manifested itself as the wandering womb that rose up into a girl or a woman's throat and choked her. It was generally believed that unmarried women and widows suffer the most from *hysteria*, and that a good husband could fix the problem. Anatomists of that era, adhering to a strange theory of pelvic congestion, believed the womb was 'charged with blood and stale seed from whence arise foul and ill-conditioned damps' (Greer 2003:55). Some doctors believed that the womb was somehow a part of every illness among the female sex.

Some of the other 'terrifying' functions of the womb, for instance childbirth, have been medically researched, understood and brought under control, especially during the twentieth century. The clinical way in which gynaecology and obstetrics rendered the labouring mother a patient who had to lie down and take a passive role, has been criticised by feminists as a way in which mostly male doctors, stripped a woman of her control while giving birth. It isolated her from female support (midwives) during the birth process, even ridiculously separating her from her own infant for hours after the birth, rationing her instinct to breast feed and hold her baby. The conventional half lying or sitting position to give birth is probably the worst in mechanical terms. Making no use of the force of gravity, it leads to a lot of wasted energy. It is, however, the most convenient position for the obstetrician (the Latin *obsto*, means 'I stand in front', and the word 'obstacle' come from the same root) for the use of instruments (Odent 1985:71). The so-called 'natural childbirth movement' offers some modification (Laird 1991:130). Frederick Leboyer's book *Birth without violence* revealed him to be a poet-obstetrician, one who took into account the feelings and emotions, the meanings and atmosphere of the process of birth. In the process, he also enraged many in the medical establishment (Odent 1985:20). However, the need to consider the needs and instincts of mother and baby, and to make childbirth more of a family affair, took

hold. Fathers were allowed into delivery rooms and the value of the parents' touching and speaking to the newborn were dearly recognised. It was not only the mechanics of birthing that received attention, but also the atmosphere, which should be conducive to a good birth experience.

Greer points out that 'the most pervasive and magnificent manifestation of that atavistic fear about the womb is in the common attitude towards menstruation' (2003:56). Society appears to have only three ways of addressing menstruation: the vulgar resentful (*the curse*), the genteel (*I've got my period, or I'm indisposed*) and the scientific jargon (*the menses*). Within the Moslem, Hindu and Mosaic faiths, women are regarded as unclean during menstruation, and seclude themselves for a time. This discourse of 'dirtiness' reverberates in the female fear of leaving any trace of staining or odour while menstruating, resulting in a purifying operation of huge proportions. They are constantly advised 'to cleanse, douche, and perfume their private parts, presumably once again as a reminder of their polluting properties' (Laird 1991:134).

Kendrick puts it like this: 'So we bleed. There just isn't any way of getting around it. Women bleed. We bleed in secrecy, for the shame surrounding the monthly flow of blood is still virulent' (1994:145). She maintains that menstruation, the mystery of a woman's bleeding, has been historically shamed to such a degree that the menstrual experience is seen as wrong and indecent. This perception touches women at the heart of their beings. It influences their personal and social identities and dictates how they introduce their daughters, generation after generation, to womanhood. Female embodiment includes menstruation, and the cultural and personal myths and feelings associated with female bleeding are central to the understanding of female psychology and spirituality. Kendrick describes a girl's first menstruation as the start of an embodiment of pretence: we deny that we bleed, or that we are bleeding at this very moment. We pretend not to bleed. Furthermore, menstruation is negatively judged and experienced: the first flow of our menstrual cycles is not properly celebrated within the context of our womanhood. It has a bad name: it causes cramping and discomfort, it could be detected if all traces were not wiped out diligently, and it stands in the way of sexual intercourse. It is used as a tool to devalue and joke about women's position

on something: 'Stay out of her way today, brother, she has 'pms'!' Overall there hangs a weird, shameful silence in the cultural air about one of the most critical aspects of what sets us apart as women.

If the structures of menstrual taboo were to be overthrown, a new understanding of human and divine reality could be reached. Nelson (in Kendrick 1994:149) argues that the way in which people experience their embodiment and sexuality informs the way in which they attempt to live out their faith, and the way in which they understand their humanness and 'participate in the reality of God'. It seems that there is ample room for the God-given event of menstruation to be re-interpreted as a life process in a creative and truthful way to help heal the historical, social, religious, gender injustice towards the bleeding female identity. There are possibilities of replacing the negative images of blood flow that permeate the understandings of female embodiment and spirituality. One striking metaphor of 'passage' is used to describe spirituality, connecting it to their menstruation experience: 'Before all else, women's spirituality depends on an open passage within, a free channel for the flow of life and the creative birthing of a continually renewed self' (1994:149). In addition, the meaning of blood as life and deep sharing are focused on, as well as the fact that in both women's blood and Jesus' blood the creative tension of joy and pain are held together. In using such a hopeful metaphor of passage, the power and sacredness of blood are highlighted and the shameful inconvenience that blood brings is cast away. The likelihood of life, of powerful creativity that menstruation promises, seems to be a reflection of the shed blood of Jesus, birthing and bursting into resurrection power.

Luke 8:43-48 tells the story of a woman who, for twelve years, had suffered from a flow of blood and had spent all her finances upon physicians, but nobody could heal her. She came up behind Jesus in the midst of a crowd and quietly, but hopefully, touched the fringe of His garment, and immediately her blood flow ceased. Jesus perceived that healing power had gone out from him, and he stopped. The trembling woman realised that she had been noticed. Simultaneously afraid and elated, she found the courage to declare in front of everyone present the embarrassing reason she had touched him, a rabbi, and how she had been instantly cured. From the Jewish perspective, this is a very



destructive ailment. She had experienced rejection from her own people and almost certainly, self-repugnance. Jewish Law declared such a person unclean, condemned to a secluded life. Leviticus 15:19-30 refers to the condition of a woman having her 'regular discharge of blood from her body', and the fact that it rendered her unclean, as requiring her to separate herself for seven days because everyone or everything she touched, sat or lay on also became unclean. She was avoided, an outcast. For instance, she wouldn't have been tolerated in the women's section of the synagogue on the Sabbath.

Jewish leaders tended to see a causal relationship between illness and sin. Her condition placed her under suspicion: what sin had she committed? The fact that her illness had lasted twelve years probably made others declare her a hopeless case. Possibly she had a very lonely existence. Kept at a distance, and expelled to the fringes of community life, somewhat like a leper, she was constantly reminded that she was unclean, untouchable and different. If she had a husband, he would not have been allowed even to touch her. For one hundred and forty four months, blood had flowed from her body, weakening her physical strength and devouring her financial and emotional resources. In the light of her suffering, it is remarkable that her faith was still holding out. Equally remarkable for the crowds must have been Jesus' response, because rabbis were not allowed to speak to a woman in public, not even their own wives, daughters or sisters, because it could jeopardise their good name. Some Pharisees, who could not bear even to 'see' a woman walking in the street, would shut their eyes and blindly walk into walls or houses. Women, that species that was not to be laid eyes on, were sometimes referred to as the 'bruised and bleeding Pharisees' (Karssen 1987:80).

But this desperate woman reached out to the Rabbi. Jesus, who has now also become 'unclean' because of her touch, acknowledged her presence, her need and suffering. Instead of scolding her for her presumptuousness, he restored her with the precious words: 'Daughter, your faith has made you well! Go (enter) into peace (untroubled, undisturbed well-being) (Luke 8:48). 'Daughter', he called her. Jesus deliberately renamed her as an unblemished, young girl. Daughter! He reconstructs a pure identity for her as if she was adolescent and pre-menstrual, and at the same time cloaks her with cleanness in her mature womanhood. Jesus

goes against the flow of tradition, rabbinical thinking and society's rebuff. He does not reject her in the least, either because she is a woman, or because she suffers from blood flow. Is she perhaps the only woman mentioned in Scripture who personally took the initiative for her own healing (Karszen 1987:81)? If Jesus judged her, it was according to her faith only. And to Him, that was more than acceptable.

Breaking free from the mantle of secrecy, Ntozake Shanga (in Kendrick 1994:49), an African American poet rejoices as follows:

I've decided to wear my ovaries on my sleeve  
raise my poems on my milk  
and count my days by the flow of my menses  
The men who were poets were aghast  
they fled the scene in fear of becoming unclean

There is a tenacious belief that menstruation is associated with impurity and uncleanness, and in many societies women undergo elaborate purification rites at certain times, such as after childbirth or menstruation. However, some cultures associate menstruation with power, and their ritual, myth and folklore demonstrate the belief that the menstruating woman is dangerous, emitting a supernatural power (Laird 1991:134). Passages in the Hebrew Bible attest to a mysterious, even sacred power inherent in the blood: 'for the life (the animal soul) is in the blood and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls' (Leviticus 17:11).

In the Western world, the menstruating female is more often defined as 'sick', suffering from a syndrome, unstable and emotional, an unreliable worker and in need of isolation and rest (Laird 1991:135). The onset of menstruation is not regarded as a joyous and powerful rite of passage, but more often than not is accepted as something 'that happens to you'. In no way does it increase a young girl's sense of pride in her own body, enhance her sense of self-worth, or give her a 'symbolic framework within which to find resources for her questions of meaning' (Washburn, in Laird 1991:134). Naomi Wolf (1998:142) points out that in Western society 'becoming a woman' is often met with silence. Instead of older women

teaching the young ones ‘the skills of seduction and sexuality, the responsibilities of both preventing and preparing for fecundity, the pleasures of adornment and of caring for our health, the art of balancing work and motherhood, the sacredness of femininity, or to test us rigorously in the skills we would need’, there is silence. No trial by fire or water is to be found for such an important rite of passage, instead, girls concoct rituals in line with their vulnerability to the ‘tests’ of starving and grooming that magazines offer (Wolf 1998:142).

Another major transition in a woman’s life is the menopause, also associated with menstruation. Like the latter, it has mainly negative connotations, ranging from hot flushes, through the empty nest syndrome to old age.

In contrast with Western views, the indigenous worldview of the Native American universe sees knowledge as a process of coming-to-knowing, which releases a special kind of power from the interactive relationship with the integrated wholeness of everything and everyone in the material and spiritual world. Life is seen as circular, where sickness and disease give way to healing, and where decay is balanced by renewal. It is a world in flux, not a persistent, unchanged world. Its worldview stresses obligations rather than rights, and ceremonies for renewal rather than destructive labelling. These presumptions help shape a different understanding of menstruation (Peat 1994:113). Thus, within this indigenous community a woman’s period is celebrated as a time of great power, and is described as her ‘moon’. She will be very careful about touching medicine or sacred objects, not because she would contaminate them, but because she is so powerful that it is believed her own spirit could overwhelm everything with which it came into contact. In this culture, where everything is connected and interrelated, the fertility within her body reflects the waxing and waning of the moon, as well as cycles of power. To the researcher, the powerful, creative likelihood that menstruation brings is a reflection of the shed blood of Jesus, birthing and bursting into resurrection power.

In light of the fact that menstruation, the marker of the onset of fertility, is so poorly reflected and celebrated, it is little wonder that the event of miscarriage continually evokes silence and embarrassment.

### 7.2.1.2 Miscarriage

Men generally tend to downplay the emotional and spiritual effects of grieving over a miscarriage or infertility (Distelberg & Helmeke 2006:231), but most of them feel that 'they and their wives went through this together'. However, in one sense a husband can never experience a miscarriage in the same way as his wife, because she is the one who carried and then physically lost the foetus (Grossoehme 1995:429). Miscarriage is surprisingly common, with 10 to 20 percent of known pregnancies ending in this loss. It is highly probable that many women become aware of this only after they have had a miscarriage. Many couples complain they were ill prepared for the likelihood of miscarriage, or the signs that such a loss may occur (Seaton 1996:40) and that their doctor should have warned them beforehand. However, the question could be raised as to whether patients might regard their doctors as inappropriate and insensitive. Furthermore, would warnings about the possibility of miscarriage in any real way lessen the shock and disappointment when it occurs? However, James and Kristiansen (1995:59) found that the more women blamed themselves or their doctor, the more severe was their reaction. Fortunately, Helga had a close relationship with her (female) doctor, who gave a great deal of emotional support when she was utterly vulnerable. She clearly felt that James did not understand the pain and turmoil she was going through. Madden (1994) cautions that it should not be assumed that all women are equally devastated by miscarriage, as both research and care provision perspectives have shown. To do that would amount to stereotyping women's reactions to reproductive issues and reduce pregnancy to a 'unidimensional experience that fails to reflect the richness of women's lives' (1994:101).

Miscarriage has profound physical, emotional and spiritual implications. It is described as the loss of a foetus before it has developed sufficiently to survive outside the uterus, occurring in about one out of six pregnancies (Seaton 1996:39). Even as little as twenty years ago, most physicians did not acknowledge the grieving process that followed miscarriage (which they would have done in the case of a stillborn baby), the assumption being that attachment to the foetus (baby) as a separate person does not begin until after quickening (feeling foetal

movement) in the womb (Stack 1984:162). Many women's experience, including Helga's, seems rather to be that the relationship with and attachment to the 'child' begins the moment they find out they are pregnant, irrespective of movement. The child exists in the mother's imagination, as well as in reality, and when a child is lost a dream dies as well. It is incredible but true that attachment to an imagined child often occurs even before the child is conceived (Westerfield-Tucker 1989:13).

*Bleeding and expulsion of tissue are all the visible remnants of the expected child. The woman didn't realise that the end of pregnancy must include the delivery of the foetus or placenta (Seaton 1996:39). She was shocked by the intensity and length of time it took the contractions to empty her womb. Her body has lost control and the loss is happening to her, at her, against her (Hunt 1984:271) This, ironically, within the sights and sounds of the maternity wing, stunned her. She panicked and her immense aloneness seemed so much greater. While 'bodying forth' (Dubose 1997:366) her pregnancy was disappearing. In a few days there would be absolutely no sign that she had been the bearer of life. She had miscarried her infant. She had now become the bearer of death. How could that be? She thought s/he was safe under her heart.*

Having miscarried, says Dubose (1997:367) he and his wife were 'missing what would never be lived. Time, space and expectations of new ways of being with our child were in disarray'. He and his wife's bodies refused to let the child go. They tried to bring the vanished one back by seeing the baby in visions and dreams and smells and moments. They had to rebuild their self-in-the-world again, because they now found themselves in a different life world than the one they had inhabited before the miscarriage. They asked themselves repeatedly: Who are we now, now that the little body of bone, blood and tissue is gone?

The body is blamed for the miscarriage (Abboud & Liamputtong 2003:38). What did I do wrong for this to happen? The body feels like 'empty arms', and the woman often feels detached, as if she has unhinged herself from the body that could not or would not carry the pregnancy. It is as though she would like to set herself apart from her unreliable body in the same way that she has now been set

apart and excluded from the 'mother club'. At the same time, she just wants to hold her poor, bleeding, sorrowful body. Helga shared only a little about the actual process of the miscarriages she endured. Experiencing miscarriage rendered her voiceless, which alone spoke volumes. To her, it was simply terrible.

Serene Jones (2001:228) attempts to answer the question of what the body of the woman who has miscarried looks like in the space of God's unfolding grace. And who is this God who holds her body and her hope in the folds of this grace? As a woman and a minister, Jones is interested in women who want to have biological children, but are unable to do so. They see their bodily inability as failure, and they experience profound loss. However, human hope is tenacious, 'always multiple, conflicted, and persistently indeterminate' (Jones 2001:230). Sometimes we are not even aware of its presence, because we think we have given up, but it is still there. These hopeful women include those who suffer from infertility, have had miscarriages or experienced stillbirth. Jones places the value of 'motherhood' and 'production' within powerful cultural assumptions, which assess women's bodies in terms of the 'treasured capacity to give life', thereby 'making' someone a mother in order to fulfil the dominant gendered identity script. This script, though, allows for different forms, thanks to the advances of feminism. Living in a culture that measures a person's value in terms of what they are capable of 'making' or 'producing', to have an 'unproductive body' is tantamount to experiencing that body as a social failure, so that the (false) hopes about the useless body are also a failure.

Jones wants to know what the grief of such women looks like in what she calls the 'drama of reproductive loss'. First, there is the guilt about the unproductive, infertile body, which produced miscarriage or stillbirth. Then there is the sense of a future lost, because the un-co-operative body could not 'make' the future in the form of a child. There is grief at the loss of bodily integrity (the rupturing of the self). The borders marking the body's interior and exterior are not to be trusted: the body is leaking blood into the world, the infant is abandoned in the womb to die or falls out before its time to be safely released. The body's blood now signals death, each new cycle of menstruation an advent announcing the end. The fourth dimension of these women's grief is almost too dreadful to mention; it is an unspeakable grief.

They experience their bodies as deathbeds, their wombs as graves. Death becomes them, it fills them, but cruelly they do not die. Such women often become mute. They cannot, simply cannot name, what they know: that death lives inside them. They just wail like wolves, or cry silently without tears. Some unfortunate women even begin to see themselves as the active agent in the deaths of their fertility and their children.

Jones criticises other theological themes, such as Mary as womb and chosen agent, and the doctrine of sin, creation and eschatology, as doctrinal loci that are not strong enough to hold and shape the unique characteristics of grieving over reproductive loss. Instead, she proposes the image of the Trinity to carry the experience of infertility, miscarriage and stillbirth in a profound way: 'a vision of divinity into which one could crawl and then rest' (Jones 2001:240). The Trinity experienced one of its members bleeding away on the cross, and 'God takes this death into the depths of Godself'. When Christ was crucified, God's own child died. Thus the Trinity holds death: the First Person holds the Second, united by the power of the Third, the Spirit. God, who sent Jesus the child into the world, experienced the death of the son. But the death is a death of hope, although it happens deep within – perhaps in the womb of God. The image shows a 'death bearing grave of a God, where God paradoxically doesn't die, but lives. She lives to love yet again and to offer the world the gift of a future' (Jones 2001:242). The reality of the death on the cross reverberates in the reality of women's experiences of infertility, stillbirth and miscarriage. It points to the ironic fact that the image that 'most effectively captures the nature of God's redeeming grace is not an image of mothering, but an image of maternal loss' (2001:243). This image of the Trinity experiencing death in its innermost being speaks in a new way to women experiencing reproductive loss. It gives them a place of hope to creep into when their bodies refuse to bring forth life. It is a warm, womb-like place where they can identify with the mother God and the father God, who lost a child. It is a place that can make them whole again, so they can be born into a new spiritual understanding of the One who knows how it feels.

## 7.2.2. Ritual and reproductive loss

### 7.2.2.1 Jewish thoughts

In commenting on the argument that Exodus 21:22 indicates that the foetus is valued as less than human or inhuman, Fuller (1994:180) maintains that within the wider ancient Near Eastern legal context generally and in the Bible specifically, this does not stand up. Simply because different punishments apply to perpetrators when it comes to injury of the mother and foetus, it cannot be deduced that the foetus's life is valueless or that it can wilfully be destroyed in an abortion act. Exodus 21:22 refer to an unintentional, negligent assault on a pregnant woman, and not an intentional assault on the foetus. Other Biblical passages clearly show that God regards the foetus as more than a lump of tissue; in fact its life is unfolding under his watchful eye.

Susan Grossman (1992:285), a committed Jew, describes her overwhelming feelings of helplessness when she suffered a miscarriage. The actual miscarriage itself, she says, is a terrifying experience, with the body bleeding uncontrollably. At one point she feared for her own life. In the aftermath, though, after she had recovered physically, she had no answer to why it happened and no assurances that it would not recur in the future. She found nothing of comfort in Jewish ritual and prayer. A foetus under 30 days old is not defined as a person, and the laws of mourning subsequently do not apply to it, along with the high probability of miscarriage and infant death in the pre-modern world. This only partially explained the lack of traditional prayers to recite over a miscarriage. Rather, the fact that Jewish traditions were framed by men, and thus reflected male concerns and viewpoints, is to blame. She wanted to 'seek in liturgy a way to turn to God in my pain and fear and sense of helplessness, to seek comfort in the protection of God's grace' (Grossman 1992:287). She composed a meditation for herself to address her loss, one of a number of new liturgies being composed by women rabbis, scholars and lay people. Grossman found that the process of creating is itself healing, but especially the processes of *commending*, *lamentation*, *praising* and *imploring* God in conjunction with a larger or smaller part of the congregation (1992:287):.

O God, I commend back to Your safe keeping the potential life entrusted to me for so short a time. Not yet having reached 40



days of life, this foetus did not open my womb, it was not my *bakhor*, still I grieve its passing out of the protection of my body.

Who are we to understand your ways, to know what future would have lain ahead for myself and my child had it come to term?

*Ha-Rahaman*. O Merciful One, heal my body and my soul; heal my womb so that I may carry to term a healthy soul, that I may come to sing your praises as a happy mother surrounded by her children in the courtyards of a Jerusalem at peace.

Interestingly, Grossman also proposes a ritual for affirming and accepting pregnancy, in order (despite its 'naturalness') to recognise and appreciate parenting as valuable and sacrificial. She bemoans the fact that all the major biological events of women's lives have been ignored by religious tradition, to become secular events. It includes menarche, sexual maturation, pregnancy, lactation and menopause.

In line with this understanding, Rabbi Debra Orenstein (in Berner 2000:44) points out that Jewish men and women are in need of far more ritual acknowledgement and sanctification of life's key moments. Already, feminist Jews have been instrumental in expanding the definition of the life cycle in four ways, ways that the Christian Church could take into consideration. 1) Women are included in the observance of passages that formerly spoke only to and for men, for example, establishing Bat Mitzvah (for girls) alongside the Bar Mitzvah. 2) Supplementing or altering traditional rituals related to the life cycle, e.g. divorce rituals. 3) Valuing and often ritualising the events of women's biological cycle: menarche, menses, childbirth, miscarriage, and menopause. 4) In addition, sacralising non-biological passages or milestones not contemplated by tradition, such as ceremonies celebrating elder wisdom or healing from sexual abuse (and, one could add, healing from infertility, whether or not it would lead to children).

The Church and the Synagogue may have many faces, but they certainly house a lot of grief-stricken members. One very common version of complicated grief has been termed by Peppers and Knapp (in Witzel & Chartier 1989:19) as 'shadow grief'. Shadow grief is not overt; rather, it can be likened to a burden that some mothers carry for the rest of their lives. It tends to emerge on specific occasions when they recall their loss. It is described as a 'dull ache' that infuses their lives

and it leaves them mildly sad and anxious. This grief is exacerbated by reminders of the child a woman doesn't have, or the child she lost, and it can be triggered by everyday images of mothers or fathers and their children doing everyday things. Taking the statistical figure into consideration, it could well be that 25 percent of women in a congregation have experienced miscarriage and a certain number are infertile. Men and women, though perhaps differently, suffer equally when it comes to reproductive loss. The researcher can imagine that even a simple expression of concern and acknowledgment in the sermon could help to bring them healing. An unidentified Reform Jewish rabbi spoke about the need for community acknowledgement of pregnancy loss, saying that her own miscarriage sensitised her to the need to help lift the silence surrounding pregnancy loss (in Singh, Stewart & Moses 2004:53):

On the eve of every Sabbath at my synagogue, we read a list of the names of the members of our communal family who are not well, and then we say a blessing for healing. Only those suffering from socially acceptable afflictions are mentioned, by our mutual consent. In the last few years it has occurred to me that the list is a well-meaning sham...Those with broken covenants, troubled children and empty wombs are not mentioned.

Several authors have documented 'complicated grief' following a miscarriage or accompanying infertility, as grief that is inhibited, unresolved, delayed, prolonged and chronic.

#### **7.2.2.2 Reformed thoughts**

One of the reasons why ritual is important in addressing reproductive loss is that it can precipitate a faith crisis (Seaton 1996:41). A reappraisal of one's relationship with God, adjusting one's beliefs or understanding about God in the face of loss and suffering could be called for. The lack of religious rituals leaves a void where spiritual comfort and support within the faith community should have been found, and it eliminates the opportunity to commend the child (or foetus) to God's eternal care in the presence of the faithful, thereby communicating to the parents that grieving over the pregnancy loss is inappropriate. It also suggests that the foetus has little or no standing with God. To express and hear in Church reminders that God was with the foetus from gestation to the end of its life brings comfort, hope and closure. In cases where parents deliberately decide to end the pregnancy because of medical confirmation of significant foetal deformities, appropriate

prayer and ritual in the congregation could help them overcome both their grief and their feelings of guilt (1996:41). The possible need for forgiveness on the part of parents who decided for a therapeutic abortion could also be acknowledged, and the whole congregation could carry the 'burden'. The panic, guilt and fear with which parents have to deal when learning that the foetus is deformed, and then having the option to terminate is precisely what Helga dreaded, and it seriously influenced her decision to forego trying to fall pregnant.

Arthur McClanahan, Methodist priest, says his experience with reproductive losses in his congregation taught him that parents are angry, and that the anger is often directed at God, the Church and the clergy. He makes sense of this by saying that one of the reasons is probably that these are safe areas for venting frustration and bitterness. Couples try to keep their anger with each other in check, lest they separate. The Church should lovingly and wisely 'cushion' such understandable anger, and educate those in the congregation who think a miscarriage or stillbirth represents 'an unperson', who until then had existed only in the parents' imagination (McClanahan 1983:4).

'What has died and is dying in me and in the world that God longs to see come to birth?' was the question Lydia Speller, pastor, asked herself after she experienced a miscarriage. She found her loss to be 'so insignificant, and yet so great' (Speller 1993:9), and, although there were no remains to bury, she and her husband named the child in order to bid it farewell. Talking about her miscarriage and conducting a ritual for her loss in the congregation helped other women in the pews who had suffered miscarriage to share their pain. She believes, because she and her family had the courage to publicly share their grief and confusion, other worshippers experienced their loss through miscarriage in a new way. No two people bear it in the same way, but the empty womb matters very much to God, and can be named in the Christian community and in God's presence (Speller 1993:8). In fact, God, especially as God the Mother, can be seen as the One who 'suffers with' in this situation, thinks Hunt (1984:275). Expanding Christian symbols to include female terms is very valuable in a crisis like miscarriage, where the woman may feel she has failed in her womanly task and is surrounded by men, from her husband and doctor to her minister. The image of the motherhood of God

as she awaits delivery, enduring over and over the loss of her perfect creation, could enrich the grieving parents' understanding of God's presence in their situation. Another important factor is that the pastor or minister's primary concern is the mourners' story, the feelings and questions of the grieving family and friends (Wassner 1991:359). It is only then that the ceremony, the ritual, the prayer, the few words, and even the respectful silence, become meaningful and healing.

Social workers Mahan and Calica (1997) suggest that the act of naming means moving to a place of healing in all manner of reproductive loss, whether it is therapeutic abortions, miscarriages or stillborn infants. Perinatal loss includes miscarriages, neo-natal deaths, intrauterine foetal deaths and stillbirths. It includes the failure to conceive and the birth of a child with medical problems or special needs as losses associated with perinatal health care (1997:142). Since perinatal loss is coping with the loss of someone you never really knew, they advise parents to keep tangible remembrances of the brief life, such as hospital tags and a blanket bought for the baby. Seeing, touching and holding the stillborn and taking photographs could help to make the baby's short life a reality. They mention that some parents at the funeral or memorial service even choose to hold the (deceased) baby before it is laid to rest. The feeling that this is taking things too far or that it is sick, demonstrates how people not directly affected still underestimate the impact of the loss of a baby. Trying to console the parents with: 'You can always have another baby', or 'At least you didn't know the child very well', or 'She wasn't normal anyway', may be technically correct, but unlikely to bring comfort.

Many couples with live children have experienced reproductive loss in one form or another. Even if the foetus is lost at a few weeks, it is indeed the great and sorrowful loss of a 'real' child and it leaves a gap in the order of siblings. Different losses cannot be evaluated alongside each other, as if the one were worse than the other. This is to do the inexcusable and attempt to relativise reproductive pain. In the eyes of a woman who has never fallen pregnant, even the death of an embryo is a heartbreaking tragedy; it could have been her last chance for a baby of her own.

Liturgies place the events of human life in a context of faith and tradition. The word literally means 'the work of the people' (Newsom 2002:284). Ritual has the

potential to bring some comfort in an impasse, such as reproductive loss. The word impasse refers to the feeling that there is 'no way out, no way around, no rational escape from what imprisons one, no possibilities in the situation' (Fitzgerald 1986:288). Ritual should aid in trying to find a language, a context and a way to live with this loss. Soelle (in Fitzgerald 1986) holds that, insofar as the experience of impasse is repressed, in like manner will passion for life disappear. The most dangerous temptation would be to surrender to cynicism and despair. Ritual can uncover layers of pain and can explore how grief embodies and saturates people's lives. Ritual has the capacity to speak a unifying language in words of comfort: its symbolic richness and mythic substructure, which underlies traditional Christian worship, makes it familiar, powerful and caring. Newsom (2002:284) posits that people need ritual, and ritual needs people. It exists within the presence of a shared fellowship, because of its nature, and it implies the presence of community. It even creates the lifeblood of community. It should also, within the embracing arms of the community, give opportunity to the grieving to share their bleeding wombs by speaking out in their pain. It should give God afresh to those who have to say farewell to a dream, a loved child, a dead embryo. It should give a fresh vision of what God, as the living, renewing creator, promises in a time of death (Wassner 1981:358). Wilma Jean Hahn (in Hunt 1984:276) grieving for her little son:

Yet – I'm not mad at my God/for My God doesn't kill  
There is through Him a source/of strength, an honesty, a will  
To make it through life's painful times/when dealt a lousy hand  
To learn from it what I still have/but not to understand...  
So see, it's going to be all right/and still there will be joy  
It's also that there'll never be /a chance to raise our boy.

### **7.2.3 Two apt metaphors: The disabled God and Adoption**

#### **7.2.3.1 The disabled God**

Nancy Eiesland (1998:104) describes herself as 'a sociologist of religion' and a 'woman with disabilities'. In her book *The disabled God* (1994), she points to the value of an accessible 'practical theological method in the creation of a liberatory theology of disability', arguing that the lament, as a descriptive as well as theological act, is the first step in bringing about change in the Church and in

broader society. Lamenting, as part of a liberatory theology of disability, connects dissimilarity, specificity and embodiment. Furthermore, it leads to solidarity, anticipation and transformation. Lamenting is helpful in creating solidarity among people who suffer in the same way. In addition, the lament opens the way to healing on a personal level, because it moves people from silence to speech. It moves them to listen to what they truly feel in their hearts, because it involves a 'deep expression of sorrow'. To lament also means 'to mourn, to wail; to deplore, to grieve for' (1982:655).

Sometimes people remain silent about their deepest sorrow and pain, because they are afraid that speaking out will make them look pitiable or pathetic, they will embarrass themselves or others or seem inappropriate. If people view suffering as the result of a personal error, or as something that is simply their burden in life, it is difficult to bring this out into the open. When suffering becomes an unspeakable foe, it turns into something that must be either concealed or accepted. If it is not named openly and bravely, the possibility of using suffering as a channel for transformation is lost (Eiesland 1998:104).

Silence is a sly character. It manages to keep groups of people who are suffering in the same way isolated from each other, but it is also proficient at keeping a couple within the intimate enclosure of their longstanding relationship separate from each other. In the research discussions, both Helga and James expressed their surprise at learning how the other separately and personally experienced the miscarriages they had endured.

Eiesland (1998:104) quotes Dorothee Soelle, who explains three phases of suffering. Apart from the specific suffering that someone endures, there is the added inability to speak about the experience, which in itself spells suffering. She describes the first phase as a place where isolation and powerlessness reign because the sufferer is locked into silence. The reasons for the silence could be manifold. The second phase involves rebelliousness and boldness against the tyranny of silence. Silence is death. Lamenting brings life, because it drives despair away. Pain should be expressed and communicated, and placed within its social context in order to reach the third phase, which consists of the possibility of new life and new growth.



The lament of the Biblical matriarch Rachel to Jacob (and God): ‘Give me children, or else I will die!’ (Genesis 30:1), is found in every Christian congregation. In every religious community there are women (and men) who are living the story of infertility, miscarriages and stillbirth. Are these stories suppressed only because they are so very private, or could it be that the ‘pro-birth, pro-family Christian community has found it theologically problematic – or at least awkward – to fully acknowledge those who cannot, for whatever reason, ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Westerfield-Tucker 2002:487)? The fact that there is abundant evidence in the Bible of women whose infertility was reversed (except those who were punished with infertility, like Michal, wife of King David) reinforces the belief that ‘prayer necessarily conquers infertility and that insufficient faith is a cause of childlessness’ (2002:496). This seems to support the idea, in the context of God’s command to procreate, and as expressed in texts like Psalm 127:3 (‘Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward’); Psalm 128:1 (‘Blessed is everyone who fears, reveres, and worships the Lord, who walks in His ways and lives according to His commandments’; and v.3 (‘Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the innermost parts of your house; your children shall be like olive plants around your table’. Bearing a child was a sign of God’s mercy and favour. By default, then, the opposite also seems to apply, that childlessness could be seen as God showing displeasure and judgment, although the accounts of Sarah (Genesis 11:29-21:7), Rebecca (Genesis 25:20-21), Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29:31-30:24), Manoah’s wife (Judges 13:2-24), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-20), and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-57) do not demonstrate this to be the case (Westerfield-Tucker 2002:491). There is a pervasive tendency in some Christian circles to interpret causal relationships between sin and disability (Willis 2002:220).

Taking the above into account, infertility and childlessness in its various forms and possibilities (including, perhaps, even losing a grown child to death) can be seen as a debilitating condition. Something is wrong, and who is to blame? If it’s not the devil, God or the sinful world we live in, it has to be you. Being childless in a Christian milieu, where most members believe that ‘God wants the faithful to have children; that is clearly His will’, those that do not fulfil the norm of the dominant

discourse of the family-focused gospel, and deviate from societal norms are regarded as disabled alongside the 'able-bodied with children'. Kimberley Willis (2002:218), handicapped theologian, says persons with disabilities are oppressed by a temporarily able-bodied norm that deems disability to be antithetical to participation in the *imago Dei* (the attributes that make it capable of relationship with God). Robert Murphy, quadriplegic, says 'the disabled serve as constant, visible reminders to the able-bodied that the society we live in is shot through with inequity and suffering, that they live in a counterfeit paradise, that they too are vulnerable. We represent a fearsome possibility' (in Willis 2002:221). Differences in disabilities or the circumstances of their onset are not easily acknowledged, and persons with disabilities are often just 'lumped together' as a uniform sub-group of society. However, the common factor among disabled persons is that 'some part of the body, at some point in time, for some reason, ceased to function properly and resulted in either a temporary or permanent disability'. Furthermore, the disabled community is made up of individuals with numerous disabilities (for example, mental, physical, emotional, developmental and learning) that manifest in a variety of ways. Some disabilities are obviously visible, such as a missing limb, but others, like infertility, are 'invisible' from the outside, but are no less disabling for the individual. The person with the 'invisible' disability has to repeatedly reveal the inoperative attribute or impediment, precisely because it is not obvious.

Willis complains about the persistent social and theological marginalisation, which, coupled with fear and misunderstanding, 'exiles persons with disabilities from the community called to embody the very One who is the Bread of Life (2002:216). She echoes Eiesland's conviction that those who are perceived as different, deviant, impaired, challenged, who are unwelcome in the *imago Dei*, can incorporate their experience of disability in the Disabled God. The Disabled God is both the God who becomes disabled on our behalf, and the One who refuses to abandon those on the margins (Willis 2002:223). Eiesland says the power of the Disabled God lies in the seemingly innate contradiction He embodies. 'This revelation of God disorders the social-symbolic order, and God appears in the most unexpected bodies' (1998:100). Instead of seeking dominance or creating a new normative power, He appears at the margins with people with disabilities, and



instigates transformation from this de-centred position. Referring to the passage in John 20:19-30, which describes the interaction between Thomas and the risen Christ, Willis points out that Jesus was resurrected in a state of disabled-bodiedness, his wounds testimony to his disabling death. God not only became disabled on our behalf, but was raised disabled. The Disabled God nevertheless embodies wholeness, authenticity and transformation, and is thus inviting and genuine to all who are disabled (including the so-called 'able', as all fall short).

### **7.2.3.2 Adoption or second birth**

Westerfield-Tucker (2002:495) argues that, judging by the prayers and ritual texts of past centuries, it is evident that the Christian Church's approach to infertility is deeply immersed in the Old Testament perspective that defines a family, and specifically a woman, in terms of fruitfulness. However in the New Testament (John 1:12-13), adoption replaces procreation as the dominant way by which the faithful are 'made':

*But to as many as did receive and welcome Him, He gave the authority (power, privilege, right) to become the children of God, that is to those who believe in His name. Who own their birth neither to blood nor to the will of the flesh (that of physical impulse) nor to the will of man (that of a natural father), but to God. (They are born of God).*

Being 'adopted into God's family as the principal method of generativity in the Church', the second birth is of paramount importance, and not physical birth (2002:500). Westerfield-Tucker invites the Church to look imaginatively at the ways in which it interprets fertility and infertility and designs rituals for addressing reproductive loss.

She warns against the construction of prayers or rites addressing and acknowledging infertility, which would perpetuate the false assumption that, by being faithful and trustworthy, the barren will most certainly be changed into the fruitful. Rather, new prayers, taking the metaphor of adoption into consideration, along with the real lived experiences of the grief and frustration of the childless, should be composed. This could include the recognition of the mystery and unknowingness of the situation: Why doesn't God answer my prayers? Why is this

happening to me? At the same time, the prayers should also emphasise 'resoluteness or a move toward acceptance' (2002:502). Prayers of forgiveness, for healing and wholeness and of lamentation could be included, along with a willingness to listen to the specific stories of those in pain. If the Church could embrace more fully a theology that focused on the inclusiveness of the metaphor of adoption involving all members of the congregation, less loneliness and separation from those who do not fit the 'family model' would be experienced. The Christian family is, in the first instance, one that is established by the 'womb-like waters of the font', not by blood ties (Westerfield-Tucker 2002:502).

### **7.3 Giving birth to an alternative: voluntary childlessness**

Childless couples, whether by choice or circumstance, challenge traditional, social constructs of 'family'. They also challenge conventional and even modern ideas on femininity and the female role (Sundby 1999:13). Cohabiting couples, single-parent families, gay and lesbian (as well as bisexual and transsexual) families, and childless couples reflect different family variations (Park 2005:372). The voluntary childless stand in contrast to pro-natalism: a philosophy that encourages all births and views them as contributing to individual, family and social wellbeing (2005:375). Pro-natalism is a strong and enduring discourse for a number of reasons. Procreation is an important developmental stage in adulthood, giving full adult status to its members, and enforcing family ties. Further, all major religious groups support and encourage procreation within marriage. Biblical conservatism, particularly, is linked with significantly more negative views of childlessness, and Jewish respondents had the most negative, prescriptive attitudes about childlessness. They are less likely to have positive views about the possibility of leading a fulfilling life without children (Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell 2007:1078).

Some within the childless population are biologically unable to have children, others are merely temporarily childless, and the rest are permanently and deliberately without children. The voluntarily childless include the categories: 'do not want children', 'too busy to have children' and 'have other competing interests' (Dykstra & Hagestad 2007:1297). Sundby (1999:13) points out that because of the sensitivity of the problem of childlessness some secrets are kept: people who are trying unsuccessfully for children may claim to be voluntarily childless. Park says

society views the voluntarily childless as 'less socially desirable, less well-adjusted, less nurturant, less mature', and, at the same time, more materialistic, more selfish and more individualistic' (2005:376). Despite voluntarily childless women's assurances that they are content and cheerful about their choices, society seems to insist that they can't possibly have rewarding, happy lives (McQuirk & McQuirk 1991:152). The implication is that 'there is something wrong with them' not to want children. Could they have had an unpleasant childhood, or are they simply deviant or possibly evil? Parents in general and mothers in particular find it hard to accept any motive good enough to warrant someone (especially a woman) rejecting the idea of motherhood.

Pro-natalism includes the cultural ideal of a splendid, multi-tasking woman with the reins of her career in her left hand, and her baby's warmed-up bottle in her right hand. The philosophy points to an emerging picture of masculinity that includes a nurturing father, balancing the heavy load of the splendid working mother. It places, from a political, social and religious viewpoint, an extremely high value on the importance of family and family values as a guarantee of creating and maintaining a safe, healthy and stable social order. All these combined, powerful 'reasons' and encouragements for living the 'family life' are cause for the voluntarily childless to feel misunderstood, misquoted and stigmatised. The childless comprise one of many social groups that are strongly negatively stereotyped. Voluntary choice to be childless is seen as deviating from the norm, and as having problematic issues at a personal and social level (Rowlands & Lee 2006:55). When the voluntarily childless say they doubt their parenting abilities because of personality attributes, the pro-natalists say parenting is an acquired skill. When the voluntarily childless say they are not interested in children, the answer is, wait till you have your own. When the voluntarily childless say they would rather pursue personal ambition and leisure, they are labelled selfish, immature and irresponsible by pro-natalists. When they say they have altruistic motives like population concerns, they are told that childlessness is not a practical solution to the problem. The voluntarily childless, trying to survive in a pro-natal context, often have to lie (or engage in information control, as Park puts it), and use stigma management techniques designed for particular audiences, in order to manage their deviant identities (2004:372). At the same time, childlessness is

slowly increasing in developed countries, which might reflect acceptance of diversity, scope for individual choice and a creative 'social imaginary' about being feminine without being a mother (Wood & Newton 2006:338).

Helga and James have made a deliberate decision to actively stop trying to conceive, and in the process have chosen childfree living. It has given them a new energy to celebrate their union together, to appreciate their animals, to draw even closer to God, and to start a new life in a foreign country. McQuirk and McQuirk (1991:151) point out that there are different types of childfree decisions within the context of struggling with infertility. Some couples use contraception only temporarily to give them a break from the stresses of attempting pregnancy, and then resume their efforts again. Another group comes to an unyielding resolution that requires an irreversible act (sometimes sterilisation) to conclude their battle with infertility once and for all, which at the same time serves as a commitment to their decision to be childfree.

Living childfree does not necessarily mean living childless. McQuirk and McQuirk make the distinction as follows: 'Childless' implies to settle without wanting to, in a rather hopeless and powerless way, into a second rate lifestyle without children. On the other hand, childfree refers to a decision consciously made, after much careful deliberation, to 'stop being infertile', and to 'stop placing so much importance on having children' (1991:151). It boils down to 'minimising the desire for a biological child, in order to proceed with a (fruitful) life style that is an alternative to parenting' (1991:152). This childfree lifestyle could or need not include types of parenting to satisfy the nurturing instinct: taking responsibility for an underprivileged child in some way, baby-sitting for friends, reconstructing relationships with nieces and nephews in a new way, looking after elderly parents, or mentoring younger people in the workplace. Parenting in any of these forms could quite easily be abandoned by a childfree couple, and their new-found energy (no more depleted by feelings of inadequacy, grief and rage) used to stimulate their relationship, and enjoy a renewed purpose and direction in terms of self-fulfilment and happiness. In giving up their infertility, or rather the power infertility had over their lives, they can get on with a reconstructed life. Sundby, (1999:18) an infertile doctor who worked for many years in fertility clinics, says infertility is



problematic, but is a condition that allows for self-healing and emotional resolution. It is an experience to which is possible to adapt and recover from, whether children enter the picture of the couple in any way or not. For most people, the fact of their infertility fades, and is replaced by many other experiences and events that life presents. Sundby agrees with the McQuirks (1991) that, when a couple or individual give up the preferred best solution of a biological child, they can begin the mourning process and their eyes can be opened to other alternatives, including living childfree. Infertility can consume the most productive years of a person's life, and render its other aspects (selfhood, marriage, relationships) infertile as well. In deconstructing infertility, and reconstructing one's life in the context of fruitfulness, healing can begin, although mourning one's own children who never came into being can last a life time. The difference is that now infertility has lost its power to demand exorbitant attention: it can no longer render one passive, victimised and infertile. It has to make room for other ways of bearing life.

In the following chapter, the focus will be on underlying discourses that have bearing on this and the other three narratives of the co-researchers, as described in Chapters 4 - 7.