

CHAPTER 8

WATERING THE LAND: DISCOURSES OF GROWTH AND UPGROWTH

In the previous four chapters some underlying discourses were introduced relating to the respective narratives. However, these discourses are informed by meta-discourses, which present themselves in terms of congruency and divergence, as well as discrepancy. In this chapter, the focus will be on matters of faith, family, parenting, and discourses on death.

Cheek (2000:23) says discourses create discursive frameworks, which order reality in a particular way. By allowing for certain ways of thinking about reality, while at the same time excluding others, discourses both enable and constrain the production of knowledge. Whichever discursive frame, at any time, is afforded presence is a consequence of the effect of power relations. According to Kress (1985:7), 'a discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organizes and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about'. All the 'objects' of our consciousness, including our 'self', our perception of what it means to be a person, our own identity, are all constructed through language, and discourses, as coherent systems of representations, produce these things (Burr 1995:56). Discourses permit us to see things that are not 'really' there, but, at the same time, once an object has been elaborated in a discourse it is difficult not to refer to it as if it were real (Parker 1992:5). Freedman and Combs (1996:42) explain that people are born into stories, with their social and historical contexts continuously inviting them to tell and remember certain events, and to leave others unstoried. The reason for this is that discourses sustain particular worldviews. Not only do discourses powerfully shape a person's choices about what can be storied, and how, but people's ideas, language, communication, and actions relating to discourses keep them influentially in place (1996:43).

8.1 Faith and pluralism

Religious discourses are reflected in the stories of the four couples narrated in Chapters 4 through 7, as well as in the story of the researcher, described in

Chapter 2. Certain aspects of all five stories vary in one way or another from the dominant traditional discourses in, for instance, the Christian Church. On the one hand, the Church and other religious communities have become more aware of and sensitised towards the deconstruction of outdated policies and practices. On the other hand, though, the co-researchers continue to experience not only a lack of understanding but also marginalisation on the part of formal institutions of faith and many individual believers.

As far as growing awareness and sensitivity amongst communities of faith are concerned Stroup (1998:6) comments on the way Christian theology handled the issue of searching for the meaning of the gospel in a pluralistic world during the first half of the twentieth century. The diversity of the world in relation to religions, cultures, race and gender was then described as a problem that had to be addressed. But that changed during the later 1900s. The idea that pluralism is a problem begging to be solved came to be seen rather as an opportunity to re-interpret the meaning of the gospel and to bring new life to the Church. According to Stroup, this new thinking had at least four consequences (1998:6).

In the first place, by accepting pluralism, theology needs to admit and explore the relationship between the interpretation of the gospel and cultural conditionings. It seems as if, across the board, every interpretation of Christian faith was and is influenced by certain cultural assumptions.

Secondly, as Stroup points out, seeing that pluralism is opening up new meaning for the gospel, the willingness to reinterpret Christian identity becomes paramount. It might be safer to cling to a blind acceptance of traditional interpretations, instead of celebrating and honouring true Christianity along the lines of being faithful to 'a surprising, unpredictable, and mysterious God' who 'creates the new and unknown' and 'destabilises the familiar' (1998:7).

Thirdly, pluralism should not be uncritically accepted, because, *per se*, it is not the gospel. That pride of place belongs to Jesus and his life, death and reign. Although Christ created diversity and variety, he also invites us to test all things critically. Certain things are true to the Christian faith, while others are not.

Fourthly, the issue of pluralism puts on the table questions about the Church's understanding of the missionary role in the world. The Church could gain a deeper insight into its role by humbly accepting that God is already at work in His world and that He invites the imperfect church to learn wisdom and participate in this pluralistic world by His grace. Sadly, too often the Church sees its role as that of saviour of a sinful world, and then arrogantly and forcefully sets itself to task (Stroup 1998:8).

To revert briefly to Stroup's second sentiment, stated above, that the reinterpretation of Christian traditions should be tolerated and even pursued, Kriel and Kriel (2002:135), supporters of the so-called 'New Reformation' in South Africa, plead for the traditional Church to become more amenable to alternative understandings. They propose tolerance for doubts and questioning, and advocate for open discussions concerning those Christians who, facing intellectual and ethical problems, are trying to strike a balance between the modern scientific worldview and the 'only, official' traditional interpretation of the Jesus occurrences.

Kriel and Kriel (2002:135) point out that many sincere Christians (some more conventional, others less so) struggle with the tension between understandings of Biblical events at the time they occurred, and the present understandings about those events. In other words, the question is whether Biblical knowledge as it was formed and understood in the context of its time can be smoothly transported into our time and worldview. They are concerned that those Christians who are honest enough to express their doubts are labelled lost and sinful. The contentious issue of homosexuality is one case in point where questioning the wisdom and fairness of the traditional viewpoint elicits diverse responses within the Church. Although there is an ongoing dialogue about how homosexual orientation should be viewed, accommodated and utilised in the internal structures of the Church, it seems as if not enough dialogue is undertaken with homosexual Christians themselves. Tienie and Samuel's worst feelings of rejection and marginalisation have not been caused by society in general, because that is probably to be expected. But being rejected by Christians, not only in terms of their identity as gay men and gay parents, but especially in terms of their identity as fellow Christians who happen to

be gay, has been for them a double rejection. Tienie and Samuel were convinced that the Church and its members, ironically themselves recipients of the grace of God, and constituting, as both institute and organism, the inclusive body of Christ, should behave better to the most vulnerable in their ranks.

Because human knowledge embodies certain interpretations relating to specific paradigms, and because paradigms are formed by culture and language, not only our worldviews, but especially our religious views are continuous interpretations of interpretations. The authors argue that even the natural sciences are not a block of information that never contradicts or questions subjacent knowledge, as the complex and challenging findings of, for example, quantum theory have shown. Scientific knowledge is not knowledge about reality *per se*. It is merely methodological construction or interpretation relating to certain assumptions or preconceived suppositions (Kriel & Kriel 2002:139). Constructs as ‘realities’ and ‘truths’ are textured in a complex way and richly shaded: created and maintained by a specific approach, method and play of language. This justifies the existence of various concurrent, valid interpretations that see the ‘truth’ as complex, and the natural sciences as much messengers of ‘truth’ as are narratives, poetry, myths and other fiction genres. Putting a question mark against the historicity of certain Biblical narratives does not necessarily question their veracity, but suggests that a pertinent question would be: With what kind of truth are we dealing? Biblical knowledge that finds its source in revelation is still subject to interpretation and cannot be elevated to the absolute truth merely because of its revelatory status. They point out that an interpretation of the content of the revelation is inevitable. Interpretations lie entrenched in a believer’s religious, historic, socio-cultural paradigm. Kriel and Kriel (2002:138) propose that Christians try to assist each other in creating a living space where individual meaning and significance can be promoted and tolerated.

Müller (2008:5) argues against a theology that oversimplifies truths and reduces them to one fundamental truth; that moulds certainties into absolutes, and, in the process, reduces the gospel to universal, tried and trusted knowledge. All that needs to be done with such pre-packaged, sure-footed theological propositions is to meticulously apply and repeat the neat formulas. Further interpretation,

questioning and imagination are unnecessary and even undesirable. However, instead of choosing to suffer from a theology likened to an immovable structure, with confronting, provocative and often, loveless qualities, Müller extends an invitation to find the language of poetry and song in theology. He proposes a theology that truthfully acknowledges doubts, uncertainties and confusion. Such honest confessions tend to lead to a search for connective links between seemingly improbable narratives within specific contexts. He uses the metaphor of a fisherman to describe the character of a preferred theologian: the line (theological questions) must be thrown into deep and challenging waters, in order to elude obvious answers. Helpful theology always strives to find language to describe (and thus, construct) life in the current experience: the mundane as well as the mysteries, the material world as well as the imaginary planes, man and woman, as well as God. Such a theology moves past the fundamental, but lies on this side of relativism; it stands hither orthodoxy's exactness and in between certainty and fear. A kind of theology that is near right and wrong, breathes within context, and lives with people (Müller 2008:5).

Hans Küng (in Pretorius 2007:6) refuses to equate Christianity with thoughtless, un-inquiring belief. He says his deep faith in God and Christ is precisely the prerequisite for doubt; it prompts doubt, it leaves room to doubt, and is certainly not a sign that he is an unbeliever. The issue is not doubting *per se*, but the route taken to seek out responses for addressing and meeting those doubts.

Van Buren (1972:133) says that when people use the concept 'God', they are, in reality, testing the last boundary of language...'a word uttered when one wants desperately to say the most that is possible'...'the final speech-act at the limit of language'. It is therefore understandable that the respective couples would speak about and language God in varying ways. Stan and Sena, for example, introduced God into their narrative by viewing Him as their ally in fighting infertility by way of biomedical advances, such as IVF and surrogate motherhood. They never believed that their infertility was God's will, or that He was trying to convey some profound message to them through their struggle to have children of their own. However, at the point of their last attempt to fall pregnant Sena realised that if they failed again she would have to find a new way of making sense of childlessness in

terms of her identities as a woman, marriage partner, professional person and believer.

Hester, on her part, battles with God because she views Him as the One who can lock and unlock the womb, the One in charge of the key to motherhood. She does not understand why He has withheld children from her. For the past thirty years, she has submissively and incessantly pleaded with Him in private, as well as during parish prayers, because she views Him as her only hope of restoring her human, female, parental dignity and status.

Gerkin (1996:19) describes the complexity of pluralism in Western culture as involving a 'pluralism of values as well as a pluralism of languages for interpretation of what human life in the world is about'. The use of Christian language to formulate, evaluate, interpret and predict is currently only one language amongst many. Even more intricate is the way in which an individual would move through different languages (including dissimilar moral contexts) of different social contexts in the course of a single day. Gerkin (1986:20) proposes that pastors, in an attempt to address the pluralistic situation comprehensively, should be willing to widen the horizon of their pastoral care from one-on-one crisis ministry to culturally contextual thinking. People live much of their daily lives in social situations that do not support their Christian thinking and ethics. However, if their pastor, as 'guiding interpreter', takes the socio-cultural context of their lives into account, it gives a clearer perspective: it tends to lessen the confusion and tensions of living within a particular time in a specific space. All the co-researchers, to a greater or lesser extent, expressed this need for pastoral guidance on infertility and childlessness. Helga and James, for instance, are members of a particular religious community, but have never had sufficient trust that its leaders and membership would understand their plight and offer meaningful support. They would like to be part of a Christ-centred congregation that makes room for different people and different interpretations about life in Christ.

Gerkin (1986:20) finds the ideas of H. Richard Niebuhr, in his book *The responsible self*, very helpful regarding the meaning of responsibility when it

comes to living in a pluralistic environment of manifold choices and actions. Niebuhr uses the metaphor of responsibility in trying to fathom the multiplicity of any social situation, and to demonstrate how to apply unswerving moral action. Responsibility, in Niebuhr's view, means responding to action upon us, or responding at least to the situation that acts upon us. Because humans always try to make some kind of interpretation of meaning when they respond, Niebuhr finds it important to use a framework of meaning in which accountability to God as the absolute centre is embedded. It goes even further than that: he sees God in all actions that come our way. Niebuhr (in Gerkin 1986:21) says: 'Responsibility affirms: God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action'. His idea of the moral life is closely related to the idea of the responsible life: a specific life within a continuously forming society. Niebuhr defines the idea of responsibility as follows (1978:65):

An agent's action as response to an act upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this is in a continuing community of agents.

This framework of accountability to God also leaves room for the idea of social solidarity with other human beings. Because we are a society with others, our responses must be carefully weighed, and, because we want to be a continuing society, we must give responsible responses. Gerkin aptly points out that, even though a pluralistic world is fragmented and complex, it also contains the potential for fermentation and creativity. Hester and the gay couple, Tienie and Samuel, expressed deep concern and unhappiness about the lack of creative responses from the religious community to their desire to have children and be parents. Their perception seems to be that dominant traditional discourses are being kept intact by the Church, resulting in insufficient responsibility and solidarity, which in turn is disseminated into society at large. The ultimate consequence for these co-researchers is marginalisation in many areas of their existence.

Whitall Smith (1977:106) wrote about the difficulty of seeing God in all things when it would seem that nearly all our troubles come at the hands of other humans (so-called second causes). She feels that, although God may not necessarily be the author of our problems and difficulties, He is somehow the agent in these matters.

She is of the opinion that we should side with God at all times, and, in order to respond lovingly and patiently to those who trouble us, we need to see God in everything that happens to us. The question could be asked: Should we see God (or at least the will of God) in all things, such as infertility and childlessness? The answer to that is highly personal, and depends on how an individual interprets 'God's hand' in this issue.

When Jacob, in his dream, sees the ladder set up on the earth and reaching to the heavens with angels ascending and descending, he understood that God is everywhere. F.B. Meyer comments on Jacob's dream by indicating that, when he found God in his own heart, he found him everywhere; he had thought God was local, but instead He was in all places. 'All men feel that earth and heaven touch at the horizons of the distant past and future; but we ought to feel that the present moment of time and this bit of the world's surface are linked with heaven. This is what the ladder meant for Jacob (1966:19).

Explaining the thinking of Saint Ignatius, Hebblethwaite (1987:20) states that the overriding task of people's lives is to find the way to God, who made us in order to know him, and that the purpose of our lives is God. In short we must find God in all things and not see creation as some kind of rival to God. It is not a question of either God or creation, as if we should please a dull and jealous God by avoiding the enjoyable things in life. God can indeed be enjoyed through the world, Saint Ignatius says. All kinds of things, apart from God, should be used to help us in the search for God. For instance, the belief that romantic love for another human being can potentially stand in the way of true love and devotion to God is false. Ida Coudenhove (in Hebblethwaite 1987:22) says:

And I maintain that the way to Divine Love is not spiritual self-mutilation, however many weighty options declare it to be so, but that the gift of human love is a mirror, which though dim and broken, is still the plainest in which to see what our love to God might be; the alphabet from which, like children learning to read, we spell out the language we should speak to God.

All the co-researchers tried to find God in their childlessness, or tried to find the way to God through the language of their childlessness.

Cobb (1983:318) sees the challenge of theology in a pluralistic world as a fresh opportunity to assimilate into our faith understandings of the wisdoms of ancient traditions and cultures, especially those from China and India. At the same time, we should not abandon our own heritage and traditions, particularly our faith in Jesus Christ. Faith means to be secure enough to listen non-defensively to what others believe and to learn from that, even become transformed by it. At the same time, we need to be critical of the limitations of others' ideas, but even more so of our own. One such area, says Cobb (1983:320), is the fact that Christians often treat the Jewish community rather as a fossil than a living movement that lies at the root of its traditional identity, and whose wisdoms can bring healing to both the Church and the neglected relationship between the two parties. In fact, Smart (1977:159) describes the Jewish faith as 'fruitful', precisely because it has helped to shape Christianity and Islam, and because of its ability to survive as a vital, ethical, monotheistic religion.

This study was, amongst others, an effort to listen: to listen to the stories of the co-researchers, to listen to the narratives of their contexts, to listen to the contributions of various traditions, such as Judaism, as well as to listen to how the couples understood the Grand Narrative of God in their lives of infertility and childlessness. However, for these research participants to experience God's presence in a meaningful and relevant way, it is of equal importance for communities of faith to listen to Stan and Sena and their story of surrogate motherhood, to Hester and her story of marginalisation in the African context, to Tienie and Samuel and their story of gay parenthood, and to Helga and James and their story of miscarriage and loss. At the same time, the onus is on people living with infertility and childlessness to make their voices heard, loud and clear. This is indeed not an easy task, because the Church and other religious groups generally do not provide an accommodating climate for creative and critical contributions, especially when it comes to longstanding and fixed convictions and viewpoints, such as the preference for the traditional nuclear family, biomedical advances, homosexuality, gay parenting and voluntarily childfree lives. However difficult it might be, neither the religious communities nor persons affected by infertility can avoid their joint accountability to God. Nor can they avoid

responsibility towards each other and society by evading uncomfortable and so-called sensitive issues when trying to find greater inclusivity and care.

8.2 The many faces of family

The institutions of marriage and family give shape and substance to people's daily lives and mean that people can be married, single or divorced and can be mothers, fathers or childless (Burr 1995:54). Society expects and encourages certain practices of living from couples, from marriage, and from adulthood in general. The social practice of finding a life partner and taking part in constructing a family makes the formation of one type of sexual and familial identity possible. This emotional and biological need is ensured and encouraged by religious 'laws', as well as the formal and informal 'laws' of society.

As was previously pointed out, the Christian Church focuses strongly on the virtues of maintaining and developing traditional family life. 'Family', in the language of Christianity, presupposes adherence to values of commitment, responsibility and family roles, as they are understood by interpretation of the Word of God. The Church, both as institution and as various communities of believers, understandably, but regrettably, is often guilty of ineptness, displaying even disapproval in its approach to couples and families that live out relational patterns that do not accord with the so-called ideal family unit of a husband and wife as a union of a first marriage, with biological or adopted children. Despite the existence of family diversity, all other family forms are judged against the typical nuclear family, and code terms like 'family values' are used to imply that traditional nuclear families are the only valid families (Carter & McGoldrick 2005:10). All the research participants concurred that is not that the Church respects and underwrites traditional family structures, but that the other many faces of what constitutes 'family' are not sensitively and sensibly acknowledged, respected and accommodated likewise. The preached sermon's subtext often indicates that those who fall short of the norm are God's stepchildren and are living out a second best option, fragments and weakens the family members of the body of Christ as a whole. For the researcher, for instance, the bosom of the Church is the place where she receives, at the same time, both the most care and the least care, in

terms of her challenge of living with infertility. She can talk of receiving the most care because there is, from some quarters, a genuine attempt at understanding and showing empathy for her family composition, and that of others like her; but the least care, in the sense that the incessant focus on the rigid, traditional (preferred) family arises all year round on the church calendar, infusing weekend camps, programmes, courses, special studies, Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day and Family Day celebrations. One of the possible effects of this focal point is that childless couples, single adults, divorcees, gays and even widows and widowers, feel hurt and sidelined, because their differently (and often painfully) constructed lives are undervalued. They could come to feel that they had missed their 'true' identity in Christ and in the community of believers, as if their lives lacked fullness and value, as if God's blessing had passed them by. The dominant discourse of this 'truest' description of 'family' as the traditional one could comfortably grow into the idea that this was 'God's will' for everyone. In turn, the perception is nurtured that those outside the mainstream are not blessed, and are even somehow to blame for their own marginalisation.

The researchers are not disputing the Church's role and concomitant responsibility to address unhealthy and destructive relationships in families, nor are they negating the ideals of God, for which the community of faith should strive. However, all the research participants questioned the wisdom of doggedly holding on to the traditional template as measuring rod to validate and evaluate the so-called ideal family life, especially, in light of the considerable number of congregational members who do not fit this pattern. The reality is that even Christians get divorced, and subsequently form new relationships. All families are constructed. But 'new' constituted families are painstakingly re-constructed by grandparents, parents and children who lack the privilege of blood ties. Furthermore, there are Christian couples who either do not want or cannot have children, and there are Christian gay couples who feel they need the Church's blessing on their relationship and their parenthood. Ironically, although Stan and Sena, at great cost, brought their triplets to South Africa from half way around the world to have them christened, they were not completely open with their congregation about the surrogacy origin of their babies, for fear of being judged one way or another.

What, then, constitutes 'family'? Müller (2002:12) states that any group describing itself as a 'family' should be honoured in that way. The term 'family' should be inclusive, and how a family is put together should not have to conform to pre-conceived definitions but should be defined according to the members' subjective stories of belonging to a particular family. For example, Zucker (2003:34) refers to the life of Abraham and Sarah, depicted in Genesis as 'that wonderfully dysfunctional first family' whose issues of love, hatred, physical violence, blended families, the other woman, the other man, step-children, jealousy and favouritism make 'quite a narrative'. Gillis (in Carter & McGoldrick 2005:15) argues that our family cultures should be kept diverse, fluid and unresolved, accepting of the input of all who have a stake in it. Even our rituals, myths and images should not serve the interests of any one class, gender or generation, but should be open to perpetual revision. 'We must recognize that families are worlds of our own making and accept responsibility for our own creations' (2005:15).

Some of the varying shapes of 'family' were demonstrated in the stories of the different research participants, with all of them experiencing the general unacceptability of these non-traditional forms, judging by the largely negative responses they had encountered from various communities in the different contexts of their lives. This was despite the fact that all the families to which they had belonged had esteemed the values of commitment and respect, values identical to those held by members of traditional families. Helga and James, for instance, were very aware of the disappointment amongst some of their close family members that they had chosen to live a childfree life. It seems that a greater willingness to reinterpret the concept of 'family' would be helpful and healing to those on the borders of conventional practice.

Balswick and Balswick (1998:254) point out that Jesus radically redefined the concept of family as inclusive when he said: 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother' (Mark 3:34-35). With those words He deconstructed the idea of family characterised by blood ties, contract, law and conditional love, and challenged the community of faith to be 'family to one another, so that we can offer Christ's love and support in emotional

and physical ways...’ (1998:254). On the face of it, it could even seem that Jesus actually undermined the family, if one takes into account that he chose the single life, and taught a radical discipleship which placed its adherents at odds with their families: ‘For from now on, five members of a family will be divided, three against two and two against three; father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother against son’s wife and son’s wife against mother-in-law (Luke 12:52-53). However, in the wider context of His teaching it is evident that He was not against strong family life, but heeded the warning that loyalty must transcend family life and extend to the Christian community of family, as a whole (Balswick & Balswick 1998:298).

From a research point of view, Jorgensen’s (1991:212) study on how families define themselves as ‘families’ made it clear that there are often great differences between the professional therapist’s understanding and that of families themselves. Various disciplines (clinicians, ministers, lawyers, researchers) regard the term ‘family’ in a number of different ways: all are in line with the particular epistemology in which they are positioned, and the activities they are performing. However, in the context of this thesis narrative, the researcher was reminded of how fluid the descriptions of family are from the viewpoint of the co-researchers, and how graceful, empowering and loving it is to include the a-traditional family, in thought and deed, in the Family of Christ. Müller (2002:106) points out that in light of the fact that Christianity is an inconclusive religion, standing in the present, but reaching to and dreaming about the future, the Christian family reflects this inconclusiveness. It is, therefore, essential for families to reach out to each other, and be liberated from unbending structures that are damaging to the concept of family life.

8.3 Parenting: motherhood and fatherhood

According to Horowitz, Hughes and Perdue (1982:2), parenting can be defined as a role, a process, a task and a skill. Parenting, as a role, is performed by individuals, families and institutions. It is a process that involves individual parents in direct nurturing and nourishing activities. The parenting activities of families and institutions tend to contain the element of coordinating and facilitating events and resources associated with the growth and development of children. One of the

main tasks of parenting is taking up the challenge for adults and institutions to create an environment favourable to the child learning social participation and personal responsibility. In the words of the authors, parenting, with all its joys and pains is, and always has been hard. It involves 'the skilful and creative use of knowledge, experience and technique. It is a 'complex, multifaceted act' (Horowitz et al 1982:3). It is also an act that complicates and enriches one's identity.

Furthermore, parenthood is seen as part of the developmental stages in life. Erikson (in Meyer, Moore & Viljoen 1988:170) describes eight different life stages, with each stage embodying a developmental crisis. These crises are precipitated by an interaction between social influence and epigenetic development (Meyer et al 1988:161). Early adulthood gives the opportunity to share one's life (and one's identity) with another. Failure to become intimate with a partner so that one would be able to generate procreation, amongst other things, could lead to isolation (Meyer et al 1988:170). Sena was the one co-researcher who openly expressed her need to take part in all the stages or seasons in life, in order to feel that she had truly participated in the fullness of life. She had a deep desire to become a mother. Even as a teenager, she looked after the neighbours' babies for the sheer enjoyment of it. Declining payment for her efforts, she would even sleep over when the parents went out for the evening. In the middle of the night, when the children woke up crying, she, and not the parents, would be the one to soothe them and change their nappies. She felt isolated during the nearly twenty years she and Stan were childless. She described her position as that of someone who simply did not fit in: as a childless person, she didn't belong even with the 'childless group', as those women were career-orientated, while she just tagged along from one place to another because of her husband's professional opportunities. The researchers' experience was that that children serve as 'markers' of development in terms of the rites of passage of the life cycle. For instance, attending the weddings of friends' children reminded James and Helga that they would not take part in such profound rituals celebrating the various stages of adulthood. Becoming part of the parent club was seen an achievement and a huge enjoyment for Sena, Tienie and Samuel: they felt it made 'real' adults out of them.

The arrival of children 'to begin or complete a family' is usually taken for granted, and encountering fertility difficulties is met with feelings of utter surprise, denial, frustration, isolation, anger and bewilderment (Barker 1990:9). The pastoral viewpoint of Anthonissen (1989:60) highlights the effects that infertility had on the co-researchers:

Infertile couples at times experience intense alienation from God and view themselves as stigmatised by and excluded from the normal flow of life. They view themselves as non-entities without hope or future. They are in need of a God, a Father, who is bent upon humanity and who is offering liberation for the excluded.

8.3.1 Motherhood

In all cultures, the ability to fall pregnant and take on motherhood is regarded as an important milestone in the female developmental graph (Szabo 2002:1). If that potential is obstructed, it usually leads to stress and anxiety. The presupposition is that children (at least in a heterosexual marriage) are both a right and an expectation from various communities and society in general. Ironically, many couples use contraceptives, or apply other preventative measures for years to prevent pregnancy, only to find, when they are emotionally or financially 'ready' for children, that it has become nearly impossible to achieve. The discourse that couples can plan, space and control the number of children, had, in the case of Helga, Sena and Stan, contributed to their feelings of helplessness and anger. Hester felt out of control and vulnerable, because she could not fulfil the maternal expectations her community had of her.

According to Schwartz (1993:48), the maternal figure is 'other', not merely to men, as Simone de Beauvoir maintained in her book *The Second Sex*, but to all human beings. For instance, our awareness of self begins as we distinguish our body from our mother's body. Furthermore, whatever 'Mother' was or what she was imagined to be, continues to be a reference point for the rest of people's lives. Schwartz says many ideas surrounding motherhood are born of fantasy and need, leaving room for plenty of contradictions. For example, maternal behaviour is seen as inborn, so that every woman should be capable of being a good mother, yet

'bad mothering' has been blamed for a lot of 'societal ills', from homosexuality to overeating; in her personal capacity, a woman may be powerless, yet as 'mother' she is assigned strength. Further, on the individual level, a mother is often taken for granted, while society imbues the institution of motherhood with a series of attributes that glorifies her as altruistic and nurturing, making her larger than life (Schwartz 1993:49). Motherhood, much more than fatherhood, it seems, is infused with qualities of creativity, and powerful life-giving energy. It also speaks of heroism, not only in the day-to-day sacrifices that most women make for their children, but also in the fact that before the medical technological advances in gynaecological practices of the past decades, many women lost their lives during childbirth.

Chodorow (1978:11) says that although we can talk about a man 'mothering' a child, if he is the child's primary nurturing figure, or acting in a nurturing manner, we never talk about a woman 'fathering' a child. Being a mother, then, is not only bearing a child, 'it is being a person who socializes and nurtures' (1978:11). She points out that women as wives and mothers reproduce people (their children and partners), physically and psychologically. But they also reproduce themselves, in terms of reproducing 'mothering', both daily and generationally (1978:36).

These dominant discourses concerning the power of motherhood, make the failure to attain maternal identity a substantial loss, for both a woman who does not 'become' a mother, and her partner, who fails 'to make' a mother out of her. Sexuality and parenthood are closely linked, although in the Western culture this is rather underplayed, as opposed to the African context. However, when couples experience infertility problems, there is a much clearer connection between sexuality and the ability to procreate. Couples often develop sexual difficulties when they repeatedly fail to become pregnant (Coetsee 1989:23). Sena mentioned that sexual difficulties plagued them from time to time as a matter of course, as it did other couples who went through similarly gruelling infertility procedures.



8.3.2 Gay 'motherhood'

In Chapter 6, the issue of gay parenting was addressed in great detail, and it was pointed out homosexual men and women are still seen by wider society as unfit to raise balanced, well-adjusted children. Comments such as 'sick', 'wrong and perverted', 'sinful' and 'promiscuous' are often heard in the same breath when gay parenting is mentioned. Tienie and Samuel felt that this discourse is partly fuelled by lack of knowledge, and taking part in this research was one way in which they could try to change perceptions and biases. Another reason for the negative evaluation of gay parenting, they felt, was straight parents' conviction that their beliefs and values relating to 'family' and childrearing would be undermined if gay parenting were 'allowed' to openly exist. They found that, if they were willing to candidly discuss their unconventional situation with strangers who stared at them or made negative comments, they could put a personal face to gay parenting, and escape the identity-less power of stereotyping them as 'those gays who think they can be parents'. Tienie and Samuel understand the concept of mothering in a very wide sense: it is not something that only females can do, and they see the roles of father and mother as interchangeable and fluid.

Tournier (1963:71) wrote about the enormous power of fear, saying that it 'is the catalyst of suggestion, and suggestion implants all kinds of stubborn and absurd fears in the hearts of even the most intelligent and courageous men' (1963:67). It appears that even the fear of fear causes people to become afraid to acknowledge it. Fear then turns into 'a vague anxiety' that hangs persistently in the air because it has no specific object. Tournier (1963:69) says that every fear nourishes all other fears in an individual's life. Fear tends to create what it fears. He posits that the most damaging fears that crop up in childhood are those related to sexuality.

Weingarten (1994:152) describes how homophobia makes it particularly difficult for lesbians to become mothers. In recent years, lesbians have been rebelling against mainstream culture and its disapproval of a homosexual partnership when it comes to rearing children. Not too long ago, the practical issue of becoming pregnant or adopting as a single mother was a real obstacle, but the internal struggles are often even more trying. With the aid of sperm banks and new adoption laws that do not discriminate against gay couples, the possibilities of

lesbians becoming mothers without conceiving children in heterosexual arrangements broaden considerably. Weingarten (1994:153) posits that lesbians tend to find themselves in an unfortunate double-bind situation concerning motherhood. As young girls (whatever their sexual orientation turns out to be), they grow up within the western culture of 'compulsory motherhood'. In other words they should want to become mothers in order to fit the bill of being true, balanced and sound females. However, the double bind kicks in when the lesbian expresses and/or pursues her desire to become a mother. She is then told by society that it is wrong. Culturally, motherhood and selflessness are intertwined, and the idea of a lesbian mother is, by definition, selfish. The reasons are twofold. First is the absent father rhetoric that says children suffer without a dad. Second, in openly living as a lesbian, the mother exposes her children to society's homophobic discrimination and the feeling is that children will subsequently be damaged by it.

8.3.3 Fatherhood

Fathers are important to any child's development, and one cannot say that all family lifestyles are simply equal. Yet the lifestyle where fathers dominate, intimidate or use violence is certainly highly objectionable. In that case, no father at all is the better option, according to Weingarten (1994:142). She points out the important role that some men play in children's lives, in spite of their not physically living with the lesbian family. Men like grandfathers, uncles, friends, honorary fathers and, of course, biological fathers can supply a strong male presence to add to the female household. She also points to the upside, that children in lesbian households gain another mother, alongside their 'primary' mother.

Weingarten (1994:143) underlines the importance of fathers in the lives of boys and girls alike, as well as the notion that masculinity and nurturance combine well. However, the strong belief that fathers are the main financial providers and disciplinarians for their families challenges the discourse of fathers as nurturers. The family is, amongst other things, a power system, with power unequally distributed between parents and children and between spouses, with the male typically dominant. Male dominance has been perpetuated by societal systems

and religious teachings (Zinn & Eitzen 1993:338), and a perceived threat to male dominance is often met with hostility or violence of some sort.

Weingarten (1994:143) challenges some of the assumptions of the absent father rhetoric, such as the idea that an absent father is completely absent, while he is, in fact, merely physically absent, but psychologically not at all. Secondly, 'if father absence causes problems, father presence prevents them'. And lastly, there is the assumption that the two-parent family is always preferable to the single-mother family, and that the second parent should be male. It is not so much the generalities of behaviour in families that are crucial, but rather the contexts within which they are taking place. Competent adults (of any gender), living in peace and harmony, can parent well. To be able to provide the beautiful experience of 'home' is what the crucial factor in parenthood boils down to, according to Weingarten. To be able to make a home, to actively produce a place (physically, psychologically and spiritually) where you and others feel at home, is a sign of good living and good parenting. It will be a place where intimacy is nurtured and creatively sought out, by all ages and genders in the family, regardless of life's difficulties and members' personalities and whims. It boils down to radically listening to each other, being aware of cultural influences, and resisting and transforming those cultural messages that are oppressive (Weingarten 1994:211).

The structure of the family is seen as entrenched in a larger network of influences. Although parents are important socialising agents, the child is also an active social being who shapes the parents, and both are shaped by the larger contexts in which they live (Zinn & Eitzen 1993:315). Both Stan and Sena, and Tienie and Samuel were very aware of how differently they perceived themselves after they had become parents, and how differently others in turn saw them.

8.4 Discourses of death

8.4.1 Infertility as death

All the researchers had at one point had to grapple with the strong discourse surrounding infertility that it is somehow equated with death, and is usually articulated in two ways. In the first instance, infertility spells death for a relationship, or could very well lead to its demise. In the second, infertility is, in one

way or another, the result of deadness already present in the relationship. The reason is that infertility is both a medical condition and an emotional experience. The longer a couple struggles with infertility, the greater the probability that their relationship will experience enormous strain (McGuirk & McGuirk 1991:16). Infertility can destroy the love between two people because it maims the dream they had of themselves as parents caring for a family of their own; it disables their sense of self, their sense of being a couple and their sexuality. When a husband battles to *make* his wife pregnant, or when the wife *loses* the baby, or when the couple does not manage to *acquire* a pregnancy, it is often experienced as much more than merely a medical, physiological problem at the cellular level. Infertility has the capacity to announce and speak to the couple about the quality and validity of their relationship on an emotional, psychological and mystical level. Infertility can subtly, but powerfully suggest to the couple that their very relationship is basically infertile, and therefore does not bear fruit. Infertility can mercilessly taunt one of the partners that the other one doesn't really love him/her, doesn't really want to have children, or have un-confessed sins and for those reasons the pregnancy is being 'blocked' in the mystical, spiritual sphere. The voice of infertility can, rightly or wrongly, place blame on an individual, in an attempt to find reasons and make sense of the helpless situation. When infertility is present, its deadness, sadness and starkness can cast doubt on every area of a relationship, if its misconceptions are not firmly kept in place. It has the cruel ability to curse even the fertile parts of a couple's world, and can transform that which is growing and breathing life in their union into a parody.

Infertility cuts off the next generation. Infertile couples lose not only the chance to have offspring, but to see themselves and their partner in their offspring as proof and reminder of their commitment to each other. It is a double blow, and the lifeless voice of Infertility is often quick to come with a nasty suggestion: 'You are wasting your time with the wrong partner. Get out while you can, and try to have children with someone else. The fact that there are no children is a sign and metaphor of your barren, unfruitful, uncreative relationship'.

Infertility does not limit its effects to the infertile couple. Unless the would-be grandparents have other grandchildren, infertility can also brand them as 'infertile

grandparents' (McGuirk & McGuirk 1991:16). All the researchers had asked themselves: Who am I if I'll never be able to have children? What am I willing to do to have children, and how can I grow past the desire for children? What would children bring into my life and relationship with my partner?

8.4.2 Grieving for loss

Grieving is the natural response to the experience of infertility as death, or at least as a significant loss. Kübler-Ross (1969:28) developed great insight into the different phases of grief, and regarded the 'dying as teachers' to those who wanted to learn more about the emotional journey they were on (1969:28). In her book, *On death and dying*, she simply tells her dying patients' stories of fear and hope. The infertile person or couple is dying to their ability to procreate. The process of dying to dreams of becoming the parent of a biological child also involves dying to a part of self, and it resonates with Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief, applicable to losses of various kinds.

The first stage is described as *denial and isolation*, when most patients refuse to believe the diagnosis. Some would concoct long and intricate ways of holding onto the refusal to accept the reality presented to them. Denial is not only initially present, but reappears from time to time in order to make it possible to carry on and even pursue life while it is still available (1969:39) The second stage she refers to is one of *rational and irrational anger*. It involves a movement from: 'It can't be happening to me' (from the first stage) to a bitter question of: 'Why does it have to be me?' Anger is a way of staging a revolt against the dire situation, and an effort to get some emotional relief from extreme feelings of helplessness.

The third stage involves *bargaining*, which is employed for brief periods during the illness from start to finish. Kübler-Ross (1969:84) sees bargaining as a typical human manoeuvre, one that even children are capable of, and involves asking (instead of demanding) to postpone the inevitable. It places its hope on attempting a kind of transaction: 'If I promise to behave in this or that manner, please grant me this one (last) request.' She found that patients mostly bargained with God, and that the promises made could often be traced to feelings of guilt about some or other issue in their lives.

The fourth stage involves realisation of the loss, and it typically leads to *depression*. According to Kübler-Ross, the patient usually expresses or describes two kinds of depression in dealing with terminal illness. Reactive depression refers to the sadness and feelings of guilt the patient experiences when losses are contemplated and endured in the course of the illness, a kind of looking back to past losses.

But a different kind of depression sets in when the patient realises that death (infertility) is imminent and the losses in the future will even be greater. There is no future. Kübler-Ross describes this sadness as ‘a tool to prepare for the impending loss of all the love objects, in order to facilitate the state of acceptance...’ (1969:87). This is a silent grieving, during which the patient turns his/her emotional and spiritual resources to the mystery of what lies ahead after the end has begun. It is also a time when a renewed search for meaning of the person’s life, with all its disappointments and joys brings a sense of peace and closure.

The last stage of *acceptance*, if it is reached, is usually devoid of depression or anger. The patient has gone through a period of mourning and has reached a point where the fight is over. There is an element of relief, even of calm expectation.

8.4.3 Grieving for a dead child

Although it is possible to grieve for a living child for various reasons, Geerinck-Vercammen (1998:58) states that experiencing the death of one’s child is one of the most difficult forms of loss to endure. When a child is stillborn, the bitterness of Death is even more cruel than usual. The natural rhythm of life has been turned upside down: birth brought forth the end of life, and parents have to say their goodbyes to a child who should have been welcomed into the world. Parents have usually formed a concrete attachment, and made physical and emotional room for the new child in the family (Werner-Lin & Moro 2004:249). Medical personnel encourage parents to see and name their dead baby, even to handle the body and in the process gather as many memories about the child and the situation around the birth and death as possible. Jolly (1987) and Janssen (1995), cited in

Geerinck-Vercammen (1998:59), concur that seeing the deceased baby, even though it is difficult to face the pain, generally holds more positive than negative possibilities. In looking at and even taking pictures as mementos of the baby, there is a real, tangible person to mourn. Even if the baby is deformed, is it still advisable to face the child than be haunted by images of some kind of monster delivered by the mother.

Although the experience of loss cannot and should never be placed on a scale of grief, there are perceived differences (at least in the way society tends to see it) between losing a foetus through miscarriage, losing a child through stillbirth and losing a baby who was born alive. In the case of the stillborn baby, a relationship with the parents and especially the mother was formed in utero. The father's hopes, dreams and DNA secured the baby. The child grew and developed because of their symbiotic union: 'the most intensive bond possible between humans' (Geerinck-Vercammen 1998:58).

She mentions a number of specific aspects that normally present around the issue of stillborn babies. The parents never saw and knew the baby as a living child, and that makes it hard to fathom a true image of the child as a person. Although the contact between the parents and the baby is very short-lived, the temporary meeting does help the grief process along, because the sad reality is confronted full on. When a child is stillborn, the parents contemplate their potential share in the outcome, and blame themselves for real or imagined wrongdoings. A mother in particular could have severe feelings of guilt and uselessness. These could take many forms and tend to leave her feeling that she (or her body) could not protect the baby from death, that she is incompetent as a woman and mother. The parents tend to feel very alone in their grief. The child has not been known and loved by their social circle, so, while they receive a lot of sympathy for their loss, it is thought that they, as parents, should be able to get over their pain relatively easy. Geerinck-Vercammen (1998:59) goes on to explain that not only has a child been lost, but the parents are affected by a dent in their self-confidence about future pregnancies. If they fall pregnant again, that pregnancy and birth are usually filled with anxiety and fear. Normally a lot of attention is heaped on the grieving mother (probably because she is the one who went through the delivery process),

but less on the father. He often struggles with negative feelings of self-worth, while he tries to support his partner and understand his own disappointment and loss.

Geerinck-Vercammen (1998:52) describes four stages of grieving parents' reactions as she saw them in her experiences as a social worker.

The first stage of denial, betrayal and deadening is characterised by total disbelief at what has happened, ranging from mere minutes to weeks. The parent(s) are engulfed by an emptiness that is made evident through a kind of emotional absentia, great difficulty in concentrating and an inability to fathom and accept the dire situation. It is nearly impossible to counsel such persons at such a time and it is more meaningful to show them emotional support. These reactions are obviously extremely functional, in that they take the impact of the emotional pain to such an extent that it shields people from going mad with grief.

The second stage is described as non-acceptance, whereby emotions of anger and protest are prominent. The search for reasons for the loss is on and the guilty party is snuffed out. It could be seen as the doctor, God, the deceased baby, the partner or the person themselves. Even a situation that had nothing to do with the tragic event can be viewed as the reason for the heartbreak. A feeling of helplessness prevails, whether a 'guilty party' could be found or not.

The third part of the process is basically a head-on confrontation with the horrendous loss. Intense grief is experienced, and the full realisation of the death of the child as well as the loss of the imagined future together is felt. Emotionally and physically, the grieving parents suffer. Moreover, they sometimes find themselves at a spiritual crossroads, when their trusted theology no longer fits into the mould of what they have recently endured. Interestingly, this phase of confrontation is described as the most helpful and positive in the journey, despite the despair that goes with it. It seems that the act of confronting grief aids the process of healing and acceptance in the time to come. The term 'confronting' in this instance does not mean to have a confrontation with or to resist or put up a fight with grief. It seems rather to conform to the following definition:

To confront is to be able to face things (or people) without flinching or avoiding them, simply being fully aware of them, paying attention to them, being present comfortably with them, and not necessarily having to do anything to them or about them. In talking about confronting, we are talking about awareness: consciousness, the ability to perceive.

(French & Gerbode 1992:34)

The fourth and last stage involves acceptance and integration. The act of grieving is a natural process, and the focus should be on an active participation, not a passive experiencing. Keirse (in Geerinck-Vercammen 1998:57) describes the action of overcoming grief in terms of various tasks. The reality of the loss has to be accepted and the pain has to be experienced. The person must adapt to the environment without the deceased and inject sufficient emotional energies into old and new relationships.

The discourse that infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth or the death of a baby shortly after birth are not as trying and devastating as losing an older child, with whom there has been more bonding, is short-sighted. It tends to lead to the kind of well-meant advice to 'get over' the loss as quickly as possible, and try again for a baby. The researchers who had had these experiences were adamant that death demands grieving for a particular pregnancy, or a particular child. Even in the case of loss of an embryo, anguish and sorrow are experienced. Hester, Helga and Sena agreed that, little as one child cannot replace another child, one pregnancy, cannot replace another.

8.4.4 Daring to denounce death

The death discourses described above do not imply a passive submission to the effect of infertility on the part of the co-researchers. To the contrary, as explained in Chapters 4 through 7, as well as in this chapter, none of the co-researchers simply accepted their 'allotted fate' of infertility and childlessness. Instead, they tried all possible means within their power to rise up against their given reality. For instance, they made use of medical biotechnology and surrogate motherhood, exercising gay parenthood, adopting a child or reformulating their childlessness by living a childfree lifestyle.

These respective pro-active means of responding to infertility and childlessness reflect a theological positioning which finds its roots in the resurrection of Christ. In rising from the dead, we have arisen to a new life. His resurrection is a resistance to death and a rising up for life against sin and for salvation, against evil for good. His resurrection is also a resistance to the deadness of infertility and childlessness including the discourses supporting these realities. At the same time, it is a rising up to bring new and alternative narratives to life in the face of barrenness, as in gay parenthood and childfree lives. Gutierrez (1977:158) says the work of Christ on Calvary should be conceived as a re-creation, a breath of freedom and complete fulfilment.

In summary, this chapter discussed some meta-discourses underlying the narratives introduced in this thesis. Although numerous discourses relate to the various stories, those presented here are dominant. In the following chapter the researcher will reflect upon certain aspects of this and other chapters, including the research process in its entirety and the thesis in general.

CHAPTER 9

PASTURING, REFLECTING AND GIVING REST TO THE LAND

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart
And try to love the questions themselves.
Do not seek the answers that cannot be given you
Because you would not be able to live them
And the point is to live everything
Live the questions now
Perhaps you will gradually without noticing it
Live along some distant day into the answers.

Rainer Maria Rilke

9.1 Overall impression

During the research and documentation of this study the researcher was continuously, involved in a spiraling process of designing, conversing, writing, contemplating, re-designing, reflecting and anticipating. However, having arrived at a point where the last chapter had to be written, long after the gestation of the research idea had taken root, and sprouted life, the researcher was challenged to reflect anew on the process. In shaping the last chapter, it was essential to take a retrospective look at the research journey. In a sense she, the researcher, had come full circle: the end evoked the beginning in such a way that the end itself seemed to be a new beginning.

The configuration of the nine chapters was designed to tell a particular research story starting at Chapter 1. It presented as an idea on infertility that could be compared to a seed planted in rich soil, insisting on being narrated. One of the most important things discussed was the motivation for the particular research theme. Chapter 2 presented aspects of the researcher's personal and professional identities, layered and intersected with her identity as researcher, which showed, among other things, how she was herself, subjectively, part of the research. Two of her identities, the 'self' as childless woman, and another, her identity as researcher, were emphasised in the context of the infertility theme.

Chapter 3 outlined the epistemological and methodological points of departure of the postfoundational, social constructionist narrative approach employed.

Metaphors of working the land, tilling, harrowing and planting, harvesting and giving rest to the soil were used throughout to describe the researcher's figurative understanding of the research process. 'The Seven Movements' described in Chapter 3 were used as the specific methodological metaphor and practical rite throughout the research thesis in a spiralling, and recursive manner. In Chapters 4 through 7, the narratives of the diverse groups of co-researchers were shared, with each group reflecting a different (but, by no means, exhaustive) manifestation of infertility and childlessness. The 'harvest songs' of the respective storytellers resounded through the chapters as they communicated their experiences and responses. In the following Chapter 8, traditions and discourses again came to the fore in an interpretation of the corresponding, related and discordant themes of the various co-researchers on infertility. Eventually the research configuration came to a time of rest in a place of pasturing and reflecting in this final chapter.

In this chapter, the title, the research process, dimensions of understanding, the co-researchers and their relationship with the researcher, as well as the influence of the research undertaking on the researcher are reflected on in terms of both insights and limitations. The researcher also included a dream she had that presented itself amidst the dreams and hopes, anticipations and images of the co-researchers. The researcher presented her dream to all the co-researchers and the reflecting team as a gift.

9.2 The title

The title: *Narratives of couples affected by infertility: daring to be fruitful*, developed eventually into the preferred name of the research undertaking. It was easier said than done to formulate this, because right from the start the researcher wanted to include the story of a same-sex couple. Thus, the traditional understanding of infertility, referring to the inability of a male and female partnership to produce biological children, was challenged. In Chapter 1, however, the researcher explained that, in the context of this thesis narrative, the definition of infertility would be expanded to reach beyond the obvious literal, biological limits. Until a few years ago, it was accepted that gay and lesbian couples would be childless, because of the biological impossibility to produce children with someone from the same sex. In a sense, they were regarded as childless (or

infertile) by design. Muzio (1999:197) says, until recently, it was thought that mothers and lesbians were two, discrete, nonintersecting groups. It was assumed that children could not be born independent of heterosexual relations. Lesbian mothers are a relatively new social phenomenon, reflecting 'the birth of increasingly active and cohesive lesbian communities' (1999:197).

The term 'narratives' refers to the 'storying' of the research theme by the co-researchers. It denotes the fact that they described their realities in the context of their infertility and/or childlessness in story form to the researcher. She was more interested in the meaning and social constructions of these stories than in the 'facts' of the details or the sequences of the events (Freedman & Combs 1996:40). The word 'narratives' also implies the epistemological assumptions of the social construction and narrative research paradigms that influenced the researcher in her approach. Further, 'narratives' in the plural form, point not only to the various stories of the four different groups of co-researchers, including the story of the researcher herself, but also to the many narratives of multiple meanings within the one story of one single group (or couple). These multiple meanings highlighted the fact that individuals live their experiences in terms of their multiple identities. The co-researchers, as individuals, and as couples, also demonstrated their multiple identities. It points to the phenomenon of plural identity in terms of Ricoeur's description of 'cohesion of life in common' (Barash 1999:33). It assumes an intermediary configuration between two extremes of being an individual and being part of the spirit of peoples: 'a social-political entity above and beyond the individuals constituting it' (1999:33).

The use of the preposition 'of' indicates the notion of 'by', implying that the couples themselves took subjective ownership of their narratives. It means that these personal stories are told from the viewpoint and lived experiences of the co-researchers, by themselves, in the language they preferred (Kotzé & Kotzé 2001:viii). In addition, they were involved in all the aspects of their entire storytelling process, starting from the first word of the first conversation, and moving on to the documented thesis manuscript, as it currently exists. If the title had used the word 'on', instead of 'of', the implication would have been that the researcher was speaking for them, interpreting on their behalf and presenting

them to the reader on their behalf. Heshusius and Ballard (1996:175) proposed a reimagination and articulation of what being a researcher means: 'in restoring a participatory and embodied understanding of what is involved in constructing knowledge, we might perhaps think of research as a responsiveness to the integrity of life forms beyond the self.' It refers to a 'non-egocentric responsiveness', an 'awareness of kinship' with the research subjects, and require respect and wisdom (1996:175).

According to the co-researchers, a couple is composed of two people choosing and negotiating to connect and relate to one another as a couple. It includes those who are married and those who live together. It can be said that any two people who describe themselves as a couple, can be seen as a couple. The concept 'couple' should be understood as the exclusive, committed partnership between those individuals who are in a physical (sexual or romantic), emotional, intellectual and spiritual relationship with each other, e.g. James and Helga, Sena and Stan, specifically in the context of desired parenthood. 'Couple' in this sense, thus easily accommodates the homosexual partnership of Tienie and Samuel, in view of the fact that homosexuality and gay parenting exist socially and are lawfully acknowledged. The researcher does not regard Hester and her daughter, Florence as a couple because they are not in an emotional, sexual relationship. In fact, Hester's current partner, and/or previous partners were invited to take part in the research, but they all declined. They felt it would be an awkward social situation, and the specific theme of infertility made the prospect even less attractive. In order to thicken Hester's story, the researcher and Hester decided to include Florence in the narrative.

The word 'affected' refers to the fact that being infertile or childless has had an influence on the couple or individual. They do not feel neutral about the issue of having children, rather, it 'acts upon them', 'moves' them, 'has an effect upon' them and 'touches' them (Hayward & Sparkes 1982:18).

The concept of 'infertility' lies at the heart of this thesis and is used in the biophysical sense of the word (stemming from the Latin, *infertilis*), namely 'not fertile or unfruitful' (Hayward & Sparkes 1982:603). On one level it refers to the inability to achieve a viable pregnancy after 12 months of regular, unprotected

intercourse (Smith & Smith 2004:48). At the same time it, it should also be understood in its mysterious and prophetic sense of the word with the implied meanings of growth, development, transcending, birthing, adjusting and transforming. Living a fruitful life would involve much more than merely begetting biological off spring, but would also reflect a certain attitude to life where ideas, relationships, dreams and language comes to fruition in a way that not only enhances oneself, but is life-giving to others as well. It refers to the capacity to create something of abundance, to shape a dead end into an open possibility. It means to be able to bear fruit and be prolific in various areas of life. It carries with it the aptitude and gift to enjoy what you have, and 'to simply have your whole mind on what you are doing' in such a way that 'a well-cleaned, well-cut carrot is a praise of God (Versfeld 2004:31). Fertility is and becomes a way of being, far more encompassing than the biological and historical state of begetting children. At the same time, giving birth to children, fathering children, adopting children, or just loving the children in your world – even if they are not 'your own', is indeed one of the most profound ways of being fruitful, and experiencing the fullness of life. If something is 'fruitless', it is 'unsuccessful, unprofitable, vain, idle and useless' (Hayward & Sparkes 1982:463). A person can indeed be 'fruitful' in some areas of life, and fruitless in others.

The extension of the title: 'daring to be fruitful' indicates both a declaration concerning the responses of the researcher and co-researchers to infertility and childlessness, as well as a subtle invitation to the reader of this thesis. It summons a dare or challenge to the reader, and especially those with biological children to re-think the notion of childlessness and those affected by it. It also dares those readers who want to, but cannot have children of their own, to ponder on and recognise the fruitfulness that is apparent in their thinking and actions. The notion and proposal of daring to be fruitful, furthermore, lies in the greater scope of the spiritual understanding of God's presence in the world and the lives of people. Ghandi said: 'Act, but seek not the fruit of your actions'. For Vardey it means, that your actions flow out of who you are, that is your fruit. It's a bit like being in love – when love just flows out to the person you are in love with (Vardey 1995:85).

9.3 Epistemology and methodology

The preference for a practical theological and postfoundationalist, social constructionist epistemology was stated in Chapter 1. In accordance with the interdisciplinary movement of postfoundationalism, relevant literatures of various disciplines were consulted to inform the research theme. This included quantitative studies, and systematic sociological introspection angles, besides research approaches from ethnographical and narrative perspectives. However, one of the researcher's motivations for taking a position in the above-mentioned paradigm is that it represents her current academic, professional and personal position.

The researcher's interdisciplinary literature search generated a much greater research harvest on infertility from positivistic and quantitative perspectives, than from social constructionist standpoints. In approaching this thesis from a social constructionist viewpoint, the researcher subsequently did not focus on medical or psychological classification systems with regard to infertility. This thesis, shaped by its postfoundationalist point of departure, was much more interested in the interpretations of the subjective experiences of infertility and childlessness than in scientific definitions of the state of infertility.

The choice of this particular methodology gave the researcher the freedom to concentrate on a small sample of only four stories, contextually, and in depth. However, this intensive research process was laborious and slow. In the context of narrative research, having as many as four different couples (five, including the researcher) taking part in the research, meant that the processes of continuously conversing and reflecting, from the first conversation to the last written word, added up to a time-consuming and concentrated effort. The researcher had at least three conversations with the respective co-researchers (with one couple she had four), which in the end, proved worth her while. As the relationship between the researcher and co-researchers became more relaxed, and as they became more comfortable with the strangeness of being actively involved in the social constructionist, narrative approach, they started to share their stories with more ease.

'The Seven Movements' developed by Müller (2002:8) were used as the specific postfoundationalist, social constructionist, narrative tool to apply the practical

research procedure. It presented the possibility of doing research in a non-linear, reflexive manner, while acknowledging both context and tradition. It opened space for reflection on God's presence, without forcing preconceptions. This approach furthermore focused on interdisciplinary investigation and developed alternative interpretations that took into account the specific contexts of the co-researchers and researcher, but also pointed beyond the local community.

The in-context experiences listened to and described, provided a thick description around infertility and childlessness, and enabled the researcher to explore related disciplines in order to understand and write the stories of the co-researchers in their complex entirety.

The interpretations and development of experiences in partnership with the researcher, co-researchers and reflecting team comprised a reciprocal interaction of going back and forth. This proved a very interesting part of the research process, as various members of the reflecting team commented on and interpreted experiences in markedly differing ways. It was clear that, *inter alia*, they were unmistakably influenced in their thinking by the different disciplines they worked.

The influence of dominant discourses on the co-researchers' experiences, thinking and attitudes in relation to infertility and childlessness was glaringly obvious. From the researcher's perspective, the 'presence' of traditional beliefs and historical standpoints was almost palpable as a force to be reckoned with, and some co-researchers found it very liberating to become more aware of the power of these 'knowledges'. The gay couple, Tienie and Samuel, and the black woman, Hester, were the most cognisant of the often, destructive, propensity of these interpretative traditions, because they were the most affected by them.

The co-researchers unselfconsciously wove God into all their stories. The researcher never introduced it into the conversation, but asked questions relating to the experiences already shared. Possibly the mere fact that the researcher, was carrying out research in the discipline of Practical Theology, and not Psychology, for example, influenced the co-researchers to focus more, and share more about spiritual considerations. This tendency refers to the so-called Hawthorne effect, cited in Babbi and Mouton (1998:642). It again became clear that God means

many different things to different people. The mystery and familiarity of God became apparent in these narratives. He was sometimes close enough in their lives for His hem to be touched, like the woman who suffered from blood flow, and often so clouded as to be completely impenetrable.

An attempt to thicken the research narrative by relating it to other disciplines highlighted the diversity of understandings within different academic areas. It also demonstrated that various thinking paradigms do enhance each other. The practical theological and postfoundational social constructionist narrative point of departure was, however, maintained throughout, and, a search for optimal cohesion rather than an eclectic approach was always uppermost. Sometimes there was a similar or even identical finding across the different disciplines, but it would be described in a different language. Sometimes differences diverged so widely on the theme of infertility that it was hardly credible that the same theme was being addressed. For instance, childlessness in the context of conservative Christian theology and then in the discipline of Sociology where gay parenthood is researched rather than judged, is a case in point. However, the challenge is to show that it is often on the borders between disciplines that new discoveries take place (Van Huyssteen 2006:9).

Part of the value of this thesis research resides in the fact that alternative interpretations extended further than the local context. Although the research is not intended to be representative of similar infertile or childless groups, the fact that the stories were told, listened to by the reflecting team and others, and documented, presented the opportunity for them to be aired and circulated. This adds in some way to the voices and concerns of those standing between infertility and childlessness, trying to find a way to live with its pain and challenges.

The nature of this research allowed for the subjectivity of the researcher, to such an extent that her personal story was woven into the research story. She shared some of her experiences of infertility as far as comfort allowed, and as far as she thought it would assist in telling the research story with integrity. Using the layered approach in Chapter 2, and making particular use of poetic representation, facilitated her sharing aspects of her personal relationship with infertility. The researcher was in no way attempting to hide her subjective stance, as, true to the

nature of social constructionist, narrative research, one's own story must be integrated into the larger developing narrative. However, not only was she subjective, but was very much aware of her subjectivity in that she entered into dialogue with it, reflected on it and employed it to consider her multiple identities in multiple situations in the research process. Throughout the thesis, the researcher took the liberty of speaking in both the first and third persons, depending on her relative positioning in a specific context.

9.4 The co-researchers

While carrying out this research, I experienced the complex character of my identity as narrator. At times, it was difficult to live with this self and to negotiate its different meanings. It seemed that I was moving both towards and away from the research in these differing identities. I was both the researcher of stories, and someone whose motives, assumptions and experiences were, indirectly, being called into question by her involvement as researcher. I was part of the process in the same way that at least the rest of the co-researchers were: I was experiencing the process as it was happening. I was reflecting with them what we thought was taking place. I was engulfed in this course of events; it took hold of me and, as if with a life of its own, challenged me, gave direction, questioned my beliefs and offered new possibilities in tired understandings and set emotional expressions of what infertility means to these co-researchers and to me.

My understanding of the research process and those of my co-researchers seem to differ in certain respects, not merely because we were living through different experiences, but because I bore, *inter alia*, the identity of The Researcher. It was challenging to apply appropriate language to the actions that permeated the research. I often asked myself: What on earth is going on here? In other words: in trying to describe the experience of the experience I was aware of its strangeness. I was reminded of Ricoeur's (1966) explanation on experiencing one's life, within the examination of life as the moments of structure, growth and birth. He says that, in the first place, life has the essential characteristic of being enjoyed rather than known. There is a sense and being of affectivity at play. Although we can observe things, (including other people), we cannot observe our lives. 'At every moment, I grasp as much of it as I can ever grasp of it' (Ricoeur 1966:411). Although I

realised that the research process was influencing us, perhaps even shaping or changing the way we thought about each other, it would be impossible to say what exactly 'happened', what precisely was different. In some way, this process is a great mystery to me. It is as if a little magic was cast, an enchantment that 'happened' beyond any planned design, which had a very specific character and could never be repeated exactly.

Secondly, Ricoeur (1966:412) describes this 'affective consciousness' of the person's 'myself-body', as presenting life as indivisible. Humans experience themselves as a 'living totality', he says. We can experience different levels and tonalities, but not different parts. That, in fact, would mean the death of life, the end. Thirdly, he discusses the fact that we find we exist. To experience life is to experience a paradox and a mystery. Linking life to the metaphor of support, he explains it thus: 'Because I do not posit my life, I am posed on it, I stand on it as a foundation' and also: 'I not only basically am life, I also rest on it as on my foundation (Ricoeur 1966:412).

It didn't seem so tricky in theory when I was doing the initial planning, and was still only imagining the process. My experience of conducting some earlier research from a positivistic point of view, where the methodology not only favours, but demands objectivity from the researcher, was in some ways a lot easier. The researcher can keep herself out of the subjects' way to a certain extent. In fact, she can also keep both the real and social worlds at bay, study the universe as an independent entity and view knowledge as an image of this world (Steier 1991:2). I think that, at a certain level, the rules of maintaining an objective stance, distant from the subjects, are in the personal sense more comfortable and certainly less complex. For example, it is far easier to only take your own experiences and interpretations into consideration. Less time and emotional energy are expended in incorporating the input of (many) others than if they were on a par with your own views.

Certainly a great deal of time and energy went into inviting the co-researchers to participate in a continuous manner with interpretations and feedback. Some found it difficult to grasp the rationale of the participating process, and to find the time, energy and commitment to give feedback as fully as the researcher would have

preferred. Others found it hard to believe that, as researcher, I was serious in expecting them to take an active role, as true co-researchers. This was completely beyond their frames of reference.

Mary Law (1997) expresses her experience as a participatory action researcher in working with parents of disabled children. She said she found it difficult not to operate as a technician, but as a facilitator, using the stories of the participants 'accurately as the basis for further discussion' (1997:53). This, for her involved a non-directive approach. In my research experience, taking a social constructionist, narrative stance, meant constantly reminding myself that it was not about my perceptions but mainly about the thoughts and intentions of the co-researchers, and that I was not to force anything in a certain direction.

I was intrigued and often surprised by what the co-researchers in certain instances demonstrated in terms of their decisions on and responses to childlessness and infertility. I was again reminded that people are so very unique despite the many parallel similarities in their experiences. It was refreshing and interesting to be drawn into the diverse thinking and acting of the four groups: looking at a single issue, but encountering a myriad interpretations and responses. Each one of their stories affected my thinking on my own story with infertility. This was something I had not expected, and had consequently completely underestimated.

Law also mentions how hard it was for her to live with the uncertainties of doing research when the co-researchers had such a large say in the pace and direction of the action. 'Not knowing where the research process would lead was difficult, as was avoiding the temptation to push things too quickly before the intentions of the participants became clear' (1997:53). She also found she had to make a conscious effort not to be judgmental, and not to be biased towards her own thoughts. In my case, I became quite despondent after receiving feedback from a member of my reflecting team questioning the apparent lack of structure and direction in the conversations. He felt that the process was going around in circles and, that some themes repeated themselves, again and again. He felt that there should be a 'moving on'. For a while I had my doubts about the effectiveness of narrative research. I took his comments very seriously, and I felt like a directionless fake: as if I was throwing a stone into a lake, and daring to call it

research. I panicked. Was I not simply wasting everyone's time by playing at listening to stories? Eventually I recovered from my angst, because I rediscovered the rationale behind narrative research, and reminded myself that I had to trust the process. The particular concerns of this member of the reflecting team thus forced me once more to take a hard look at why I thought the research I was doing was meaningful, why I thought the narrative approach was a helpful way of going about it and why it was so hard to accept and live with vagueness and uncertainty. I concluded that this was not so much about getting answers according to a pre-planned plan, but to get some kind of insight into a perplexing situation.

The narrative research method can be reflected in the metaphor of scouting (Law 1997:58), scouting in such a way that the pathfinder makes herself known to those on whom she is spying, where she forces herself not to take anything and any thinking for granted, and where she realises she will never see the full complexities of what she is looking at (not even with the help of those being watched, and, who watch her in return). The poet Danie Marais says he only writes about the things that bother him, the things that are difficult for him to put into words. In the end, the writing does not bring solutions, but gives him a grip on an overwhelming situation (Van der Merwe 2007:8). I can testify that the research experience has given me a new hold on the issues that intrigued me. It has also taken hold of me.

The researcher did not feel compelled to present 'findings' and 'recommendations' because of the spiralling, reflexive approach and process of this research thesis.

The four different groups (couples) had their own private ideas on my reasons for doing the research (which they let slip now and then) and for choosing the context of infertility (despite what I explicitly told them at the beginning, and continued to mention at times during the research). This never became a major point of discussion, but they gave signals of their thinking by inquiring: How will this research help me (the researcher)? How will it help others? There were also questions and suggestions about my own childless situation. Often, the most interesting part of the conversation took place after the audio recorder had been switched off. It was as if there was at that point, at which the 'research roleplaying'

was over, a sense that previously unspoken things could now be mentioned while standing in the 'real world'. One such example of this was during my second meeting with the gay couple. I had packed the recorder away and we were having a last cup of coffee, after they had shown me their daughters' beautiful clothes and rooms. One of them attended to some business, while the other earnestly inquired why I hadn't yet adopted. He took on the role of researcher (Have you thought about adoption?), prophet (It would make a world of difference to you, like it did to me) and friend/counsellor (I can support you with all the arrangements).

Some co-researchers would use the opportunity when the tape recorder had been switched off, to add to what they had said on record in order to tell the 'whole' story. However, this added information was too sensitive to be written into the research document. They shared it spontaneously, purely for my benefit, so that I could understand them and their situations better. In this instance, the tape recorder was seen as an eaves-dropper, someone who had to leave the conversation before more could be revealed.

9.5 Conversations and themes

Looking back at the conversations with my co-researchers, I am amazed at how much they shared of themselves about the sensitive issues of sexuality, infertility and parenting. On the one hand, it seems almost impossible not to give away a lot about one self, one's beliefs and one's dreams. But in just being willing to take part in the research, they communicated their intention of disclosing and re-experiencing their lives. On the other hand, it certainly wasn't easy to ignite the conversations or to keep the relationship between us going for the duration of the research conversations. It is also true that it is difficult, time-consuming and frustrating to try and understand, to try and negotiate about what was being said and how it should be understood.

I had at least three formal conversations with each of the four groups, and four with James and Helga. These took place over a period of more than a year. I wasn't interested in using a fixed time schedule to plan the conversations, and the consecutive meetings were arranged with a certain kind of flexibility in mind. When and how they would take place was to some extent dependent on how ready they felt to have the next meeting, not only on when I needed to have the next

conversation. It depended much more on our emotional timetables than on our availability after reading and digesting the verbatim reports, or the deadline(s) of the research thesis. (I had, in fact, many deadlines for handing the thesis in.) For example, after the second conversation with James and Helga, I sensed that they wanted to be left alone, that they wanted a break from the research. I had the feeling that bringing the issue of their miscarriages into the open had had slight repercussions on their relationship. These were probably not earth-shattering, but enough to surprise and slightly unsettle them, and they had mainly to do with how the miscarriages had affected them differently. They withdrew a little. I also felt it wasn't appropriate to carry on amidst their emotional imbalance. I thought it would make them feel too vulnerable, and I decided to just leave them in peace for a while. It was only much later during the last conversation that it was possible for them to admit to, and talk about the fact that discussing the miscarriages had resulted in anger on Helga's side. She herself was surprised by her reaction, while James was surprised that she hadn't realised she was coming across in a forceful way. When the issue was eventually put on the table, I was certain that I had not forced it. I do believe if I had pursued this issue of feeling angry, hurt and confused during that particular conversation or afterwards, I could have possibly lost them as co-researchers.

The research took a great deal of time and involvement. The fact that the research conversations were stretched over such a long period was, in my opinion, helpful. Time gave us the advantage of re-thinking and re-living what had been discussed. In our relationship as researcher and co-researchers, a certain amount of ripening and developing took place. We had come a long way from the uncomfortable tensions of the first conversations to the last one. However, I am not saying one should become comfortable and placid in this kind of research process. In fact, it seems that we are all constantly influenced by ideas (and each other), and challenged by the social constructionist/narrative notion that things must be questioned and not propagated, which places us permanently in a position where feelings of uncertainty are a given. By feelings of uncertainty, I mean that one should never be tempted to say this is the last word, the ultimate interpretation of the research that has been carried out.

There was also a fair amount of informal communication between us during the research process, in addition to the reflecting that took place between the consecutive conversations. When we parted at the end (as if we were strangers on the same European tour bus journey, I thought) I experienced it as a loss. We have kept contact with each other, and everyone felt the undertaking had enriched their lives, except Stan, perhaps. He increasingly withdrew after the first conversation. He was not upset or completely inaccessible, but rather amicably aloof. In contrast, the gay couple in particular took a lot of trouble to invite me as researcher (and new acquaintance) into their social milieu.

During the research process I was aware of keeping the practice of narrative research and narrative therapy in mind, and separate from each other. I continually reminded myself that I was doing research, interacting with the process and writing about it. However, I feel that at least once I probably crossed that line. With hindsight, I realise I 'sinned' in the conversation I had with Hester and Florence. Although Hester translated to Florence, and she understood and took part as far as she felt she wanted, there was a communication problem, which, I think stemmed not only from the language difficulty, but also from her feeling rather uncomfortable. Florence's shyness and the strangeness of the situation, as well as the perceived unequal power relations had a debilitating effect. I felt helpless and frustrated about her life in general, in particular the fact that she apparently didn't see the value of re-writing grade 11. (It got to me that she was unsure of what school subjects she had taken the previous year. Also, she had a young baby with no support from the father, no job, little money and hardly any willpower.) I then unfortunately abandoned my identity as researcher and embraced my identity as narrative counsellor, a role I am used to in my professional life. It was only later, when I received feedback from the reflecting team, that, I realised I had been unaware of crossing the line between narrative counsellor and narrative researcher.

I think it is safe to say that both narrative therapists and narrative researchers are interested in change, and therefore in questioning of ideas. In the mere acts of listening, telling, pondering and re-telling, change is likely to take place. It seems

that nothing will stay the same in the continual complex influencing that takes place amongst all concerned, including their ideas and languages.

The unequal power relation between Hester and Florence and me brought ethical issues to the fore. Riane Eisler (in Weingarten 1998:36) uses the term 'cultural transformation' to describe the shift from domination to partnership. A challenging of cultural beliefs took place between the three of us. Just after the research concluded, Hester and I discussed the issue of her calling me 'miesies'. The reason I didn't just tell her to stop calling me that, a term with which she was comfortable with, and even preferred, was because of the more powerful position I had. If I had just told her to use my first name, it could have been perceived as just another order. Also, timing had to be considered. I didn't want to force the issue (or any other issue) artificially, just because we were doing research together. Hester's story of secondary infertility lies embedded in a story of historical political discrimination.

Antjie Krog says that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that started its first hearings in April 1996, despite its mistakes and incompetence, has 'painstakingly chiselled a way beyond racism and made space for all of our voices' (Krog 1998:278). She proclaims the following to all voices and all victims in this country, and the researcher dedicate this poem of Krog (1998:278) to Hester and Florence:

because of you
this country no longer lies
between us but within
it breathes becalmed
after being wounded
in its wondrous throat

in the cradle of my skull
it sings, it ignites
my tongue, my inner ear, the cavity of heart
shudders towards the outline

new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals

of my soul the retina learns to expand

daily because by a thousand stories

I was scorched

a new skin.

I am changed forever. I want to say:

forgive me

forgive me

forgive me

You whom I have wronged, please

take me

with you.

Using an open structure for listening to the narratives helped the co-researchers to tell their stories in the way they wanted. That refers not only to the specific methodology employed, but also to the ethical stance. At the start of the project, I introduced the core ideas of narrative research to each group, as a way of explaining what could be expected. It was important to convey that clearly, because, without their dedicated participation, this research would not have been possible. Issues like confidentiality and the possibility of recusing themselves from the research at any time was agreed upon. Smythe and Murray (2000:22) describe it as the 'process of consent': a mutually negotiated, ongoing process between research participants, and not 'a one time agreement'. However, in spite of my explaining as best I could what narrative research, and in particular, this specific exercise, would ask of them as co-researchers, it was only when the process started that they realised what it really entailed. Some of the co-researchers were less enthusiastic than others to become true co-researchers. It was often a bit of a battle to keep them in the reflecting process.

The 'multiple layers of meaning involved' (Alvesson 2003:31) in terms of the research context (social scene), the meaning making individuality of all the research participants, and the 'double-edged nature of language', made the research interesting. Such a 'thicker understanding' of meaning, makes for a socially, linguistically, and subjectively rich and complex situation' (Alvesson 2003:31) between researcher and co-researchers.

I made use of a few semi-structured questions in the first interview, because I wanted to focus specifically on their experience of children (or lack of children) in their lives. I wanted to know how they had reached that place, and how they foresaw the journey forward. I went for the most part with the flow of different thoughts, issues and concerns as they were presented by the co-researchers. However, my responses, questions and mere presence coloured and influenced the research. For instance, the fact that I am childless created a certain assumed understanding between us, that would have been different had I had children. These narratives are so diverse and complex that I can happily say, that I didn't hear 'the' story of people struggling with infertility, but interesting, even contradictory stories of people who live with infertility. But, part of the understanding between us, a kind of knowing what is at stake, issued from the fact that I am without children and that some of them, at one point, were also without children. That, of course, holds certain dangers, because it may be tempting to understand only too well, and assume things too readily, just because someone is in a similar life situation.

I enjoyed the diversity of the groups, but at the same time I was reminded of the localism of peoples' stories. Of the thirteen conversations, only four were conducted with a single person at a time. The rest took place between me and two other people. It was interesting to observe the negotiating that went on between a couple, trying to tell their story or trying to explain who or where they are as a couple.

We also agreed not to make use of their real names. Some of the information given to me was off the record, some was shared with me to be used in the research, but after some thought, retracted.

At the start of the research, when I was dreaming about how it could eventually turn out, I envisaged a large meeting at the end where all the co-researchers and reflecting team would take part in a ‘family gathering’, sharing their experiences and interpretations. That never saw the light of day. When I mentioned ‘my dream of a finale’ I found, instead, that those who had participated were not interested. They valued their privacy to such an extent that something like that would be tantamount to prostituting themselves. Furthermore, there was very little interest from one group of co-researchers about the narratives or circumstances of another group. They were all informed at the beginning of the research that there were four groups of which they were one, with a broad outline of the particular context of the others. However, there was not one single question from any couple about another couple. It reinforced my awareness that I am standing on holy ground, and that I have a responsibility to do research in an ethical way.

Quite understandably, the themes introduced by the four groups differed considerably. I had expected some of the preferred themes to be aired, for example, the indignation of the gay couple in not being regarded as worthy enough parents for adopted children. They felt that both the adoption agency and the public at large send them that message. They felt judged, misunderstood and sidelined. Interestingly, more or less the same feelings were forthcoming from Stan and Sena, the couple who had undergone fourteen in vitro treatments. Eventually they had triplets with the aid of a surrogate mother. They felt that many people judged their conduct to be unethical, from both a biomedical and a theological viewpoint.

Although many different themes came to the fore that concerned the groups separately, some themes were common to all. This does not mean that everyone in similar circumstances experiences these themes in their lives.

The following themes were apparent:

- experiencing their situation as perplexing and unfair, to a greater or lesser extent
- being in dialogue with God about why they were in that position and wondering what to do about it

- feeling powerless and frustrated about not having the choices they would like to have
- experiencing loss, grieving for someone or searching for some way of achieving parenthood, that turns out to be difficult or impossible relating to life creatively, adapting, accepting and being inventive.

I believe that the use of a postfoundationalist social constructionist narrative approach allowed for the opportunity to tell their marginalised stories. The approach gave direction to the assumption that they were shaping their own life stories. The questions they asked issued mainly from their preferences and the meaning they ascribed to their stories, and was respected and documented. As researcher, I believe I encouraged them to use the forms and language they were comfortable with in telling their stories, and the way in which I wrote those stories reflected that. For example, Hester spoke in short sentences, using very specific Afrikaans words to express her situation. One of the reasons why I told her story in the form of a poem was that it captured the nature and rhythm of her conversation best.

There were times during and after the conversations that I felt lost in the movement of the dialogue. At times I felt I was doing too little, or too much. At other times I felt nothing was happening in the process, and that no kind of 'development' had taken place. I became despondent. One of the people from the reflecting team commented on how it seem as if the conversations with the group she was reflecting on, seemed to be going in circles. I panicked about that. Did it mean everything had been said? Was I boring the group in question? Then I realised that the onus was not on me to introduce fresh topics. In fact, the mere telling and re-telling of the stories gave rise to the potential of a different story. There were things that I wanted to know, things that I was curious and concerned about, but I do not believe I was forcing the research to move in a specific, pre-planned direction.

The process of transcribing the audio recording was painstaking, but extremely helpful in hearing every conversation in a new way. Standing 'outside' of the conversation, I was often surprised by my own reactions to what was being said

on the tape. In the slow and laborious process of transcription, I had the opportunity to relive the conversation and listen 'between the lines'. I was confronted with a certain emotional quality of which I had not been quite aware when present in person, probably because there were too many things happening at the time when the conversations was taking place. I had to concentrate on 'being there', on taking in what was being said, on thinking about what was happening and how I was going to respond. Or else I was doing my best not to miss something in the conversation that I would regret later on.

The above-mentioned emotional quality that I picked up in a new way by listening to the tapes, added to the story of meaning. The tone of voice, the way in which the co-researchers would interrupt each other, the silences that they struggled to overcome, the poignant words they chose to express themselves, touched me. For fear of sounding dramatic, let me say it awakened me to their stories. I heard them for the second time, as if I was hearing them anew, in reality for the first time. It was like a superimposition on the conversations we had had. At times I became so affected by their 'emotional language' in the audio recordings, that it made me cry.

The fact that I knew Helga and James made a difference to the initial ease with which we conversed. Interestingly, it was easier to listen to the stories of the couples I didn't know at all. It took a while for me to build up trust between myself and all the groups, and to develop more openness.

I was comfortable doing narrative research, because it matched my approach on the personal and professional level. However, even though I am naturally at ease with respecting different people's viewpoints, there were moments when I felt the research was not achieving anything worthwhile. Where were the climactic highpoints we should be experiencing?

I sometimes saw interesting patterns developing, for example, Hester and Florence showed signs of appreciating each other in a new light as mother and daughter. There were moments when I thought they understood that they firmly belonged to each other, even beyond what blood ties could have offered them.

9.6 Gifts of fruitfulness

Initially, before I started conducting the conversations and writing the research document, I planned to keep my personal story out of the picture as far as possible. In fact, in one of the drafts of the first chapter I once wrote: 'As narrative researcher, my own story of not having children will be firmly in the background'. In the end, despite the fact that I had planned to reveal only the absolute minimum to both co-researchers and reader, my story managed to get free. Perhaps, after the many years of being disciplined to keep its voice down and not make a song and dance about children, it was finally determined to have its say.

After I had started to document the research, I realised it would be unfair and dishonest to purposefully hide my experience of childlessness as a loss in many ways. I reminded myself how very hard it had been – precisely because of the emotional voltage the topic held for me - to get started with the research (it took me a long, long time to get past my own evasion tactics), and to see it through to where I am now typing this sentence. I was thinking of how many tears I cried while listening to the conversations on tape, and how touched I was by the similar experiences of a circle of people who loved and wanted children. I also remembered how pleased and surprised I was that people are so ingeniously, wonderfully creative at finding ways out of a labyrinth that could have made them feel left out and sad. Thinking about all those things made it more acceptable to share more.

I had the expectation, right from the start, that I would find something in experiencing this research process, something I didn't have before. After meeting the co-researchers, I anticipated receiving something from them, too. From Sena and Stan, I received an indication of determination, and insight into how adaptable the human spirit can be. From Hester and Florence, I received the gift of a more integrated outlook on life: seeing the whole, not just the parts. Tienie and Samuel gave me their friendship, as well as their story, while Helga and James, demonstrated creativity and courage in the face of a potentially debilitating childless situation. By ultimately choosing childlessness, they turned the unwanted, the fearsome, on its head.

My gift to the co-researchers, the reflecting team, and the reader is the following dream. Jung underscored the importance of archetypes, which are simply common dream symbols and the meanings they tend to have most often among people whose associations with those symbols are fairly impartial (Browne & Harrison 2002:44). However, he also stressed an approach called ‘taking up the context’ (2002:44), that means that in order to fully understand the meaning of the symbols in our dreams, we have to take our own ‘context’, or personal associations with those symbols, into account. Jung (1963:131) says: ‘What counts, after all, is not whether a theory is corroborated, but whether the patient grasps himself as an individual.’ As dreams are by nature personal, and filled with symbolic meaning, the dream will speak for itself, and is not interested in being analysed as the researcher’s dream. However, the researcher will say this much: this dream was constructed out of a number of different dreams and visions that had, indeed, been dreamt. The main theme of the dream is a search for a child who is absolutely real, but always out of reach. Trying to reach the plane that the child occupies, the researcher learned to extend her boundaries, sharpen her senses. She can hear through her pores and see with closed eyes. The researcher knows the child’s smile smells like freckled apricots, and she knows her name. But that is the researcher’s delicious secret.

But, the idea of the dream as gift is not to hear the researcher’s dream as she understands it. It is for the reader to interpret the dream in his/her preferred way, and allow it to speak to the heart.

9.6.1 The dream

I know I’m dreaming, because once again I’m in this house that I’ve been dreaming about so often. Imagine a Victorian house, with spacious rooms full of dark, opulent furniture, giving evidence of skilled workmanship. There are expensive carpets, wall hangings and mirrors. Wide wooden staircases swirl up and up to the fifth storey. (My personal preference is for the Colonial style.)

I’m not surprised to find myself in this imposing house once more, because, without a doubt, I belong here, although I’m not

presumptuous enough to think that it is all mine. However, let me give an example of why I feel so wonderfully at ease here. When I entered the green bedroom in one of my previous dreams (and up to that point I hadn't taken much notice of it at all), I was shocked to see that someone had decorated the place in such a recognisable fashion that it seemed to be a true reflection of myself. I identified closely with the colour combinations of the greens, the details of the ornaments, the small box inlaid with amethyst on the dressing table, as well as the aristocratic drapery of the long, heavy curtains. That was how I would have furnished the place if only I had known myself better. And I stood there crying because the moment was just so painful and delicate.

The words that came to me at that point were a clear confirmation of what I knew already: I must try once more to find the powerful Animal that was going to speak to me. I had heard that he had three heads: the first head would deliver the question and the next would give the answer, while the third head would not share its secrets.

Again I was going to leave the house behind. Nobody was living there, except me, who was allowed there from time to time. I would genuinely have liked to live there for eternity on my own. It would take a lifetime to explore only one of the many spacious rooms, but there were two things standing in my way. First, sinister things were taking place on the two top storeys. So ominous and unwholesome were they that, when I had ascended the stairs in one of my previous dreams, I had completely lacked the strength or nerve to go any further. I had been petrified with anxiety and frightened by my own hand that was holding onto the balustrade. I had heard someone say: 'I could strangle you with your own hand, did you know?' Secondly, there was the powerful Animal that I had to find.

I decided to rest before I started hiking to find the powerful Animal. I lay down amongst the fruit and candelabra on the dining room table, and drifted off. I dreamt then that I was standing outside the house looking through the window at a woman amidst the candelabra and fruit, and bright yellow sunbeams. I wondered how she was managing to sleep surrounded by all the light.

When I woke up, I took a handful of berries and flowers, as well as a small bag of wine with me, because I felt it was the right thing to do. I must have walked quite a distance before I realised I was in a deep, cool valley conversing with a lion that had joined me along the way. 'Do you realise I'm quite scared of you?' I asked. I think I suffered a blow from a lion as a child, but my parents deny that. After a long silence he eventually said something like: 'Don't ever try to run from fate, because it will stalk you. Or else, when you decide to stop running from fate and turn around to catch up with it, it will play a game of cat and mouse with you. Isn't that what has happened?'

Although he had helped me, I tried to shake off the lion after that. He was right. I felt guilty about all the things that I'd judged incorrectly. But, because of him, I also knew that I'd come closer to the possibility of meeting the powerful Animal.

I was on the mountain when the drops started falling, lightly at first, and in such a way that I could scarcely hear the singing of the leaves. But, too late, I realised that this was a mighty cloudburst and it was going to drench everything in its path. Right where I was standing, I dropped down in the pouring rain and drank half my wine, and then I joined in the crying, because I'm living in a mystery and dream too much about things that I think are pointing to the future, but that seem merely to be going round in circles.

The Alsatian sitting at the roadside the following morning, in the manner of an owl refusing to take to the sky, didn't really exist. It was just an image that reminded me of how tired I was feeling. A little further along the road I again heard words: 'Fetch the dappled one'. So dead tired was I that I could hardly move. Besides, all I could see was a lone brown stallion grazing on the other side of the stone house. I was tempted to give up and turn away from it all, but feared that whatever was marked out for me would sooner or later start pursuing me once again, back to the same spot, forcing me to start all over again.

I prayed that the horse would stand still while I approached it. Luckily it didn't, because, in its haste to get away, a swarm of bees matted on its body on account of the honeycomb it carried on its head, lifted. As the horse trotted away, I saw it was indeed the dappled one, but also the brown stallion and I knew I should hold the handful of berries to its lips so it could eat. Then it calmly walked me to the stone house.

The woman sitting on the veranda of the house amongst a table laden with food and drink told me her name was 'Wisdom', and that some people laughed about that. They thought she was simple and foolish, and refused the food she prepared. She was young, and certainly more than attractive, but I suspected she had seen much of many past generations. She told me she and the horse were together, and, because the aroma of the honeycomb had whetted my appetite, we could eat.

I was thankful for her good-heartedness, the cheese, fish and bread. She told me there was another guest present who knew me well, but that I wouldn't be able to actually see him right then. In fact, he was the one who had brought the flowers along all the way from the house. He knew all the questions (like a powerful Animal), as well as the answers, but some things are great mysteries and

weigh as much as a sleeping child whom you carry all day long, a child who would never wake up and whom you could never put down. But he also shared something important with me: the house, with its elegant rooms, was within me, and he and the child I was looking, for were living in it.

9.7 Conclusion: narrative without an end

It is both a challenge and an opportunity to heed the call of involving yourself in a life-giving theology as promulgated by Mercy Oduyoye, says Njoroge (2006:63), because it seems as if its elucidation in all its potential is hard to grasp among the imperfections of life. The birth of the Christ-Child can be interpreted as God saying that He is sending a life-changing gift, and that all who partake of that gift will become bearers of gifts themselves. The Christ-Child is to live amongst us as Emmanuel, 'God with us'. Christ's continuing presence in this world is the story of God's mission to display and invite grace, justice and righteousness in order to mend his creation (Russell 2006:47). God offers Himself to us as an unremitting force of Life that gives birth to emotional, spiritual and biological being, encompassing all possible situations, times and spaces. He proposes to humankind: become a gift to others by allowing yourself to be a birth channel by which the fruit of the Holy Spirit can be born and increased on earth and in heaven. Both men and women, created equally as human beings in the image of God are called to be such magi bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). By wisely following the star, in celebration of the Child that was born, the magi fell down and worshipped him.

We cannot be happy and unashamed in each other's company if we are hiding behind our gender (or any other excuse) to shirk responsibility. As baptized people, our suffering is salvific when taken on voluntarily and our sharing of the gifts of others gives us the ability to thank God who made us male and female. Happy and responsible in my being human and female, I shall be able to live a life of doxology in the human community, glorifying God for the gifts I receive in others and for the possibility I have of giving myself freely for the well-being of the community while remaining responsible and responsive to God.

(Oduyoye in Russell 2006:47)

Christianity's narrative also tells us that God sent his son to hang on a cross, alone and forsaken. This is the story of God's violence against evil and death, in order to free us from committing violence in word and deed, against each other (Van Niekerk 2008:16). In this research thesis, some parts of all the stories that were shared spoke about the 'violence' that the participants experienced at the hands of those who are not like them, and therefore, often, do not like them. In each one of the cases it was different: Hester was shunned because she couldn't have biological children, something that is beyond her control. Stan and Sena were blamed because they used biomedical technology to produce children. Tienie and Samuel were often regarded as 'a little disgusting' because of their homosexuality, and their parenthood is seen as 'a little sick' in a society, that despite the reality of diverse families still clings to a traditional norm, as the only acceptable standard. Ironically, James and Helga were first pitied and labelled by some because they didn't have children, and then when they consciously decided to live childfree, reproached because it is 'unnatural'.

In seeking and experiencing the presence of God in our lives, the fruitlessness and losses we endure, can be re-imagined and constructed in a different way in order to counteract the silence, passivity and inadequate life-diminishing descriptions within which our lives are often contained and restricted. The researcher and co-researchers have acknowledged their infertility and childlessness. For some it was the first time they had spoken about it openly. In the process of trying to name their barrenness they found new language constructs that helped to reclaim their identities as persons who are fruitful and daring, not limited and stunted.

Ackermann (2006:231) posits that story telling is inherent to professing one's identity, and, subsequently, to finding impulses of hope. One characteristic of story telling is that it attempts to make sense. It helps the narrator to understand a little better: Why?, What is happening? Hoffman (1992:20) says the therapist (and researcher) should encourage a plurality of stories, and associative formats, for example stories, ideas, images, and dreams in order to keep meanings unfixed. The value of a reflecting team's reflexive questioning enhances a mutually influenced process between all research participants (1992:17).

Telling your own story can be risky in terms of yourself and others, and in terms of the journey you are on. It can reveal things about you that you don't want to know, things, that would change forever who you are, or who you would prefer to be. Your tale not only lies on your tongue in the idioms you choose to highlight, but it takes on the contours of those ears that listen. There is power in narrative. Authority and influence are positioned not only in the voice of the narrator, but also in the hearts and minds of those who listen. Even if the listener grants opportunity and space to the narrator for speech, there is no guarantee that an understanding or life-giving response will be offered by those who hear. What happens to the narrative after it has been told?

Ackermann (2006:231) extends an invitation to the listener/reader to apply caution and 'respect for the complexity of the life of the narrator, knowing that what is revealed is but a fragment of life'. Within this fragment of life, is a world full of stories with different dimensions of understandings. The researcher's interaction with the present text, as social constructionist, narrative researcher, has had an impact on how the text was constructed. The meanings and interpretations presented in this thesis were greatly affected by the researcher's co-constructions of her conversations with the co-researchers, her own story, the time span of the research, what texts she read, the broader societal discourses that informed her, and the rest of the research participants' perceptions.

The stories have been told. The same themes in different guises appeared at different places in the text. The theme of infertility and childlessness showed different faces, but all shared the same shape. The presence of the other, the one who is different and possibly excluded, was palpable. Alongside those who were socially marginalised, shadowed in the subtext of the thesis, was also the presence of God. His understanding of and even preference for the excluded ones is a beacon of hope for them. Because humans are made in the image of God, and dignified by such knowledge, those who are infertile or childless do not have to fear that they are defined by their so-called barren selves, barren marriages or barren lives (Gabobonwe 2004:61).

From a social constructionist, narrative point of view, this chapter signifies a time for pasturing, and reflecting and presents the opportunity to give rest to the land.

However, it is not meant to be the end, but is rather a narrative without an end. This text is not complete because the narratives of these couple's affected by infertility are not complete. It is reflected in the title that partly says: 'Narratives of couples affected by infertility...' and not, '*The* narratives of couples affected by infertility...' Not only do the stories of their lives continue, but, the meanings of this text could differ every time it is read, even by the same reader more than once. Within this fragment of life, is a world full of stories with different dimensions of understandings.

With twists and turns, the stories about infertility and fruitfulness have been told, but the story has not ended.
