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What's in a name? The importance of identity

Quite a lot is contained in 'a name.' Names give a person an identity. Surnames place a child within a family; most first names (but by no means all) indicate gender; some names can be a source of embarrassment to the child, who, if he or she is lucky enough to have one, will insist on using their second name. In my church, a wall plaque commemorates a woman called Admonition; poor Inspector Morse's first name was Endeavour, which is why he never used it. Some children suffer horribly at school because of their names; Christopher Robin Milne was a case in point, and my father, who was a schoolmaster, taught a boy whose initials were G.O.D. You can imagine the mockery he received!

Sometimes identifying people by name becomes unclear. In certain societies, boys are named for their fathers. In Cyprus, for instance, after the Turkish invasion when many people were missing, the Tracing Agency had the greatest difficulty in hunting down the whereabouts of people whose names (for instance) were Georgios Andreou, son of Andreas Georgiou, even if the birthplace and birthday of the person were known (frequently not the case). But everyone in the village knew exactly who Georgios Andreou was by his occupation; George the baker!

Most parents whose babies die at or shortly after birth are anxious that they should first be given a name, thereby in their eyes becoming a person and part of the family, if only for a short time. It is insensitive to refer to the unborn baby as 'a fetus' – 'fetus' is a medical term, not a name. Nor is it good only to be able to refer to the newborn baby as 'he' or 'she' or even (shamefully) as 'it'. At the very least, the baby should have a recognisable gender! That is why many people, even if not particularly devout, ask for their babies to be baptised before they die. The name can be carried on in memory – 'remember baby Peter' or 'remember baby Helen', not a sexless thing hastily hidden from view. The baby and the parents deserve better than this.

The baby as a person

A name represents an identity; we need to consider newborn human babies as persons. If 'being a person' means the ability to respond to one's surroundings, as some think, then at eight weeks the baby is a person; certainly preterm babies show signs of individuality. According to Carmel Bagness' the general consensus seems to be that, even as the exact moment of passage from youth to middle age to old age cannot be identified, the progress to personhood cannot be

given a beginning or an end but is an on-going process, and probably most happily pregnant mothers would agree with that. But if the baby should die, it is to a person the parents will want to say goodbye.

Many people who are not actively religious yet feel deep within themselves the presence of a God of some kind, feel reassured and assuaged if their lost baby can be 'laid to rest' as a living human being, rather than disposed of as a piece of trash. A woman whose one and only view of her dead 24 week-old baby was the sight of him whipped away from her in a kidney dish was bitterly angry with the unfeeling medical staff who did this thing². Fortunately, neonatal nurses and doctors have more insight than was once the case, and most neonatal deaths are treated with sensitivity, although sadly, incidents of thoughtlessness still occur.

Whatever is done to help parents identify their dying baby, their own wishes should be respected. Every small thing they can do for their baby should be suggested; siblings, even the smallest, should be encouraged to visit, otherwise they may feel left out, even guilty. Some little children love to bring toys and drawings they have made for their sick brother or sister. Staff on neonatal units are only too well accustomed to the sad occasions when parents have to be comforted and supported through the final days and death of their baby. Memory Boxes containing such mementos as hand and foot prints, clothes, little toys and drawings by siblings, can be taken home and kept until, with time, they are no longer needed. Photographs can be taken; they may not be wanted at first, but can be kept in case parents need them later, when the first shock and anger of grief are less overwhelming².

Giving a name

World religions have recognised that giving a name to a person gives identity, though all do not agree as to when this should be done. But all religions are supportive of grieving parents, and have different ways in which help is given. For parents, the support and understanding of their own family, friends, and community seems to be the main stay, and insensitivity at this time is not forgotten.

Within the Christian churches, a name is given at baptism; for Christian parents, baptism gives reassurance. A priest usually performs baptism, but any man or woman can perform it in urgent cases if they are themselves baptised Christians

References

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and if the parents wish. If a baby dies unbaptised or is stillborn, a chaplain may offer a naming and blessing ceremony after death.

It is unwise, however, to assume that the parents wish for baptism. On one occasion in Greece we arranged the baptism by an Orthodox priest of a little girl who was dying, only to find that her Greek Orthodox father had not wished to undergo the cost of a funeral, which the baptism made necessary. He took the body of his daughter away with him in a shoe box, and was subsequently found guilty of burying her beside the Isthmus road, on his way home. I often wondered what his wife felt about all this; was she even aware of what he had done?

According to Muslim tradition, a baby who dies at or just after birth must be given a name³. In Islam, a newborn baby, having no awareness of self, is born in innocence, and a baby who dies returns to the God from whom he so recently came⁴.

The particular grief of parents who lose a baby

Parents who lose a baby before, during or soon after birth do not grieve for a loved one whose history and character is well known to them; they are grieving for someone who has never lived. This is a longed-for person of whose presence the parents are aware, but of whom they

have no image; there are no pictures, no memories of happy times and sad, nothing but a longing for something that, eventually, seems never to have existed. It is not only grief for a lost child that distresses them, but the reality of a lost future.

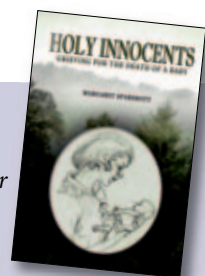
Mothers who have enjoyed (or sometimes endured) a long pregnancy, are well aware of somebody growing within them, and cannot accept that this growth has ceased before it has hardly begun. They ask for some recognition of their pain, and if they are made to feel that the pregnancy is best forgotten, and the best thing they can do is to look forward to the next pregnancy, they can be left with resentment that may literally last a lifetime. Old ladies sometimes still show anger when they remember lost pregnancies the results of which were 'swept under the carpet', and the fruits of which were hastily removed and disposed of, who knows where?

But parents need to consider carefully if, following the death of a baby, they give the next child the same name. This can cause heartache if the new child feels that he or she is there just as a 'replacement' for the other. Children can be badly damaged if they feel themselves obliged to double for the lost child. J.M Barrie tried to take over the identity of his dead brother to the extent of wearing his

clothes and calling himself 'David', in order to attain his mother's love. Perhaps that is why he grew up to be obsessed by the idea of Lost Boys, and Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up: 'Because his mother's memory of the dead boy kept him arrested in adolescence, growing up for Barrie came to signify a betrayal – a threat to his efforts to console his mother'⁵.

Nothing but the passage of time will assuage the grief parents feel for their lost child; but he or she may be mourned within the family as a person who has been called by name, and was a member of the family, even if for such a short time – after all, the baby will have been a presence for his mother for many months. So grief for the dead child, and continuing love for the existing and subsequent children, can sustain the fundamental unity of family life.

Margaret Sparshott's latest book, *Holy Innocents: Grieving for the Death of a Baby* is available priced £5.00 including p&p from the author at 120 Lake View Close, Tamerton Foliot, Plymouth PL5 4LX Tel: 01752 788 524 mmsparshott@talktalk.net



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