

Renew, Reflect, Connect

First of all, I hope I do not offend you if you are going through IVF, adoption, if you are adopted, still waiting for your turn to be pregnant, just lost a precious pregnancy or terminated one. There is no judgement on my part. This is my story.

When I was small, I was asked in Sunday School what my worst quality was so that God could help me address it. I answered, "patience. I do not have very much". As a young teenager, I remember pleading with God whilst looking heavenward to give me a 'film life'. I wish I had known then that the universe/God was listening.

Ask the younger version of me what I wanted to be when I grew up and I would have told you that I imagined myself as a successful journalist, travelling around the world, reporting from war zones and returning to a flat in Covent Garden. I grew up in Worthing in Sussex and had only visited London on school trips. The 20 year old me was somewhat disillusioned when I looked in the windows of estate agents in my area of choice and it soon became apparent that I would begin my London life neither in Covent Garden, nor as a journalist. Children were never in my game plan, that is until I became pregnant, three months before our wedding day in April 2003. Even after all of this time, I cannot talk about that pregnancy without becoming emotional. I was not planning on becoming a mother. We had discussed children and were of the opinion that if it happened, it was meant. The day after the positive test, I swapped bridal magazines for pregnancy ones. I was so overjoyed that I told everyone at work after an early scan for spotting showed the heartbeat. I wrote a simple melody on the piano for my 'bean'. 10 days before we got married, I had my first D and C or ERPC – Evacuation of the remains of the products of conception - hideous name. That was my first experience of overwhelming loss.

The following four years were spent trying everything I could to have a baby. At one point, I was paying for and attending appointments for reflexology, acupuncture, mixing and drinking Chinese herbs, something called KosMed and attending fertility appointments at Zita West Clinic. During this time, I witnessed my sister getting married in St Lucia and one evening during the celebrations, I jumped fully clothed into the swimming pool declaring "I want to live an extraordinary life". Her friends (and the photos) do not let me forget it!

After 3 miscarriages, I was seen at the recurrent miscarriage clinic at St Marys and was told 'you'll probably be fine next time'. The next time happened to be after I became a mother and it wasn't fine. Nor the time after that.

Somewhere along the way, we decided to adopt our family. I say we, but I mean me. There is not time to go into how and why but in July 2007, four amazing siblings came to live with us. They were 7, 6, 5 and 3. We never wanted to try IVF, we specifically wanted to adopt older children who might otherwise have remained in foster care, and we naively believed that because we were both teachers and could manage 60 kids between us, four would be absolutely fine.

It would be an understatement to say that if you made a film about our family over the past 16 years, people would say that I was lying or had made up incidents to 'juice' up the narrative. I would not believe my life if I hadn't lived it. Our siblings, it turned out in the High Court after two years of living with us, should not have been placed in the same home and each had a high level of need requiring two parents to one child, due to early neglect and domestic abuse. We were faced with a choice.... return some or soldier on. We were experiencing being bitten, sworn at, hair pulled, hit, soiling and smearing poo around the walls of our house. I was always the parent at school that four teachers wanted to talk to at the end of the day. It soon became apparent that my teaching career was over. My initial struggle was with imposter syndrome. Did I have a right to stand in the playground at 3.15pm and wait for these children who called me mum (but who broke my heart) to appear? I couldn't join in with the birth stories the mums all told and re-told each other. I couldn't share in their parenting joys, I was in parenting hell. If you remember one thing from this talk and you are a mum in the playground, please smile at the lonely mum. I have never felt as lonely as I did there.

We remained connected to social services long after other adopted families had been left to their own devices. I do not want to dwell on these years, particularly as my children live in our local community and should not have me discussing their lives in detail, but we had the Met police looking for a missing 7 year old who had climbed into a van and been driven off, a child escaping from school, weeing in the middle of the playground, punching other children in the face and a £200,000 family therapy package from the local authority that were responsible for it all. I have experienced a few schools in the area now and recommend Chingford Foundation as being very supportive of previously looked after children. A trauma informed teacher is worth their weight in gold.

The reason I share these things is to set the following within a context. Could the universe have taught me what I needed to know in any other way? Would it have been more or less painful?

In 2012, exactly a year after suddenly losing my dad, I was training to run the London Marathon. Thinking about it now, I was trying to find a way back to myself. I had got lost. The teenage me, the one with the hopes and dreams, was buried beneath a blanket of responsibility for a family that had arrived kind of ready-made and defined, and brought with them intervention by 'professionals' who left me feeling consistently inadequate and under skilled.

My period was late. I imagined it was the stress of all that we were constantly dealing with. I am deliberately fast forwarding to avoid causing unnecessary distress to those who hurt thinking about pregnancy. I have been there, and that pain can be crippling. I did not run the marathon then, instead 9 months later, I held a beautiful baby boy in my arms and the feelings of love for him were overwhelming. The angry and somewhat bitter woman I was turning into melted away and in her place was a woman I recognised as being a good mother. James

turned all of our lives around. He was the glue that held our family together. In his short lifetime I have had to make decisions involving his siblings that have been painful and have had potentially devastating consequences. One of our children was too violent to stay in our family home. My baby boy was on the child protection register at risk of abuse from jealous siblings. We have dealt with all sorts of things that I never wanted to experience but without my children I would not be the woman that stands in front of you.

I have been able to experience that the universe/God has always brought people along to help me. Some of them are here this evening. I have been mothered by a wonderful woman who loves me like a daughter, I have two incredible sisters who have both had to cope with very sick children yet still made time for me, good friends have listened without judgement allowing me to pour my heart out, the trees in Epping Forest know secrets they will never share. I am looked after.

I have learnt that gratitude is the key to happiness. I know people with far more complex lives than mine and I am truly grateful for my own. There have been times when I have been on my knees, but someone always comes along to help me up. I don't wish to embarrass her, but Liz and Howard came along and opened Ziggy's at the perfect time for my family, employing two of my children. She will never know what her love has done for my son. He is turning into the man he is because of her and Howard's commitment to train him, despite the length of time this has taken them. I'm sure there have also been many laughs along the way.

My children are older now and it is time to turn my attention to myself. That girl that wanted a film life decided to do an MA in Refugee Care and rediscovered her brain. She did run the London marathon in 2017 for her 40th birthday, with her 4.5 year old son waving at her at mile 22 and her older children waiting for her at the finish line. She is resilient and passionate. I am proud to be her.

I was raised in a family where achievements mattered and status was achieved. My children have offered me opportunities to demonstrate unconditional love and recognise that what counts in life is the connections we make with others. My soul soars when they are able to break through their self-imposed limitations and it is such a privilege to have been part of that. My intuition is developing. I am drawn to people who work from their heart. There is a gardener who has turned my boring back garden into an oasis of flowers. Every time I smell a rose, I am grateful for him and the moment of joy he gave me by planting the flowers. Nature teaches me so much. Plants I think have been killed by frost eventually bloom. They just sometimes need lots of time. Like my children and me.

I have recently set up a business offering support to looked after children in schools. I am trying to combine my experience as a teacher, the therapeutic techniques I learnt on my MA course, my knowledge of children in the care system and the passion I feel for those who do not have stability and nurture in their early years. I am out of my comfort zone, but this new challenge is already teaching me to trust that there is a plan for my life and that I am exactly where I need to be.

I have just read 'Elinor Oliphant is completely fine' and it is a book that resonated with me. Small acts of kindness really can change lives. Reaching out to strangers with a smile or a nod does make a difference. Remembering that everyone we meet is fighting battles that we know nothing about is essential. Forgiveness is also necessary, of ourselves and others. On my MA course, I discovered how powerful 'bearing witness' to another's story can be for transformation. We are all in charge of our own narrative and how we speak about ourselves matters.

There was a time for me, when being a woman meant becoming a biological mother. I was defined by my fertility issues for much of my twenties and early thirties. My thirties were defined by social workers and family therapists and what their reports said about me in relation to my ability to be a mother. My forties are going to be defined by me. I am an excellent mother. I do not need a report to tell me that, but I have been assessed more times than I care to recall. Being a woman can include becoming a mother (however that happens) or not. I am in a period of renewal, reflection and connection and I am so grateful to be here. There is a quote on my kitchen wall that says "Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass, but learning to dance in the rain". Some of the steps need a little work but I am getting there. As for patience, I have lots of opportunities to practise that skill and as for the film life, I hope the plot continues to be interesting.

Thank you for allowing me to share.

UPDATE – now a proud grandmother of a beautiful one year old granddaughter and foster mum to two refugee boys and still so very grateful.