Supernatural beings: Redefining faith, love and hope

by Kathleen L. Housley in the April 5, 2000 issue

Expecting Adam: A True Story of Birth, Rebirth, and Everyday Magic, by Martha Beck

When Martha Beck was a graduate student at Harvard she had a startling experience. A woman she was interviewing as part of her research suddenly declared that a message was being channeled through her to Beck: “He says that you shouldn’t be so worried. He says you’ll never be as hurt by being open as you have been by remaining closed.”

The woman said that the message came from Beck’s son. She didn’t know that three-year-old Adam had Down’s syndrome and had never spoken. “I felt the hair go up on my arms,” relates Beck. “You see, no matter how much evidence you have, over time you tend to block out the experiences that aren’t ‘normal.’”

Since Adam’s birth in 1988, Beck had tried to keep to herself the “strange and beautiful and terrible things” that had marked his coming into the world. She had tried, in her words, “to tell lies in order to be believed.” In her first attempts to write about her experiences, she had resorted to fiction in order to protect herself from ridicule. The main characters of her story were to be two Harvard academics who learn that their unborn son is retarded and who decide, in the face of heavy censure from both the academic and the medical communities, to allow the child to be born. The denouement was to be their complete surprise at finding themselves reborn into a world in which, as Beck writes, “Harvard professors are the slow learners, and retarded babies are the master teachers.”

But all of the above is true, and Beck decided she had to drop the protective shield of fiction and tell her story straight. As Adam had told her, she had to be open, even if it shattered her rationalist credibility.

Both Beck and her husband, John, were raised Mormon, a faith they had renounced long before they reached Harvard in the ’80s. They also tried to subdue any shred of

weakness. “At Harvard,” Beck explains, “the appearance of confidence is essential to social survival. Without it, you’re like the wounded animal in the herd.” For this reason, Beck had invented a persona for herself called “Fang” who was, as the name implies, voraciously aggressive and competitive. Any overt show of compassion or familial caring was unacceptable in that milieu. In fact, John had been excoriated in front of a large class at the Harvard Business School for having attended the birth of their first child, Katie. The professor had ranted that such an excuse for missing class was a disgrace and that John should drop out of graduate school—advice he refused to take.

Given this atmosphere, it was with nothing short of dismay that from the moment of conception Beck sensed the presence of benevolent spiritual beings who watched over her throughout her turbulent pregnancy, at one point even rescuing her from a serious fire in her apartment building. Beck was so suspicious of anything that could not be explained rationally that she at first refused to acknowledge them. “John was as resistant as I was,” Beck recalls. “Growing up among religious fanatics in Utah had made us both wary.” Finally, unable to ignore the presences but unwilling to call them angels, Beck resorted to a phrase gleaned from a period of time she had spent in Japan—“Bunraku puppeteers,” who stand on the stage but wear black, combining visibility and invisibility.

Skeptical readers might discount Beck’s story as the figment of the overactive, hormone-drunk mind of a person caught in a crisis-filled pregnancy. However, John Beck’s experiences were equally miraculous, as were those of the loving acquaintances who showed up with food, medical help or words of encouragement and hope, always at just the right time. In this book, benevolent beings come in all shapes and sizes, including those of an acquaintance who took Martha and her daughter into her home while John was traveling on business, and a neighbor who gave her his oxygen mask after the fire, insisting that he didn’t need it, though the quality of his breathing belied his words. Having forced herself never to ask for help, let alone admit to needing it, Beck was awed when help repeatedly was offered to her, quietly and unassumingly.

Diametrically opposed to such kindness was the cruel pressure put on both John and Martha to abort the baby, both because it was defective and because its birth would hobble their graduate work. With a sense of pride, one professor even told John that he had forced his wife to abort a normal fetus because its birth would have hindered his academic career.

A man in one of Martha's classes declared that "it is the duty of every woman to screen her pregnancies and eliminate fetuses that would be a detriment to society." In recalling this incident, Beck states, "I thought about him when I read an exposé of a Harvard-trained Latin American dictator who tortured and killed thousands of political opponents. I thought about him when we all discovered that the infamous Unabomber was a Harvard man as well—a genius, by all accounts." Relating a moment of gentle compassion toward an abused child, shown by Adam at the age of nine, Beck addresses the classmate directly: "I'd like to ask him to put Adam on one side of the 'screening' scale and the Unabomber on the other, and then tell me who is the 'detriment to society.' If the brilliant bomber wins out, I can only wonder, sir, exactly what kind of society you are trying to create."

Such moral observations, sprinkled liberally throughout this book, lift it far above the level of New Age pulp or pro-life/pro-choice polemics. A writer of lesser skill might have been tempted to harangue the medical and academic communities for their heartlessness while trumpeting her own righteous agenda. Beck avoids that pitfall. Her self-deprecating sense of humor helps, as does her ability to analyze what is happening around her. This is a book about "birth, rebirth, and everyday magic," as the subtitle states. It is about redefining faith, love and hope—and in the process discovering joy.

Beck is careful not to make Adam into a Christ figure and herself into a Mary. Though a kind of goodness streams from Adam, he is just a little boy who pulls pranks on adults, laughs at his own jokes and likes to get dressed up in suits and ties when he goes to school. Beck's experience with her pregnancy, does, however, provide an illuminating corollary to Mary's. The Gospel of Luke states that Mary "treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart." The word "ponder" is apt; its heavy, slow sound reinforces the idea of introspection. It lacks the implied resolution of words like "assess" or "analyze." To ponder is exactly what Beck does. Like Mary, she comes to accept that what has happened to her is beyond understanding and that the only appropriate response is to treasure it.

In her typical style, Beck writes, "A great deal of human energy, including mine, has been spent trying to figure out why some people get help from angels and some get lobotomized by flying debris from freak wheat-threshing accidents. Religious people always seem to have simple formulas to explain this. . . . But none of the causal connections I have heard preached by any religion fits the facts as I see them. All I can say for sure is that whatever supernatural beings are operating around us, they

are working from a priority list that is very different from mine. Strangely enough, I have learned to trust them anyway.” That trust enables Beck to raise profound ethical questions about the sanctity of life, questions that will make even the most dubious of readers ponder.