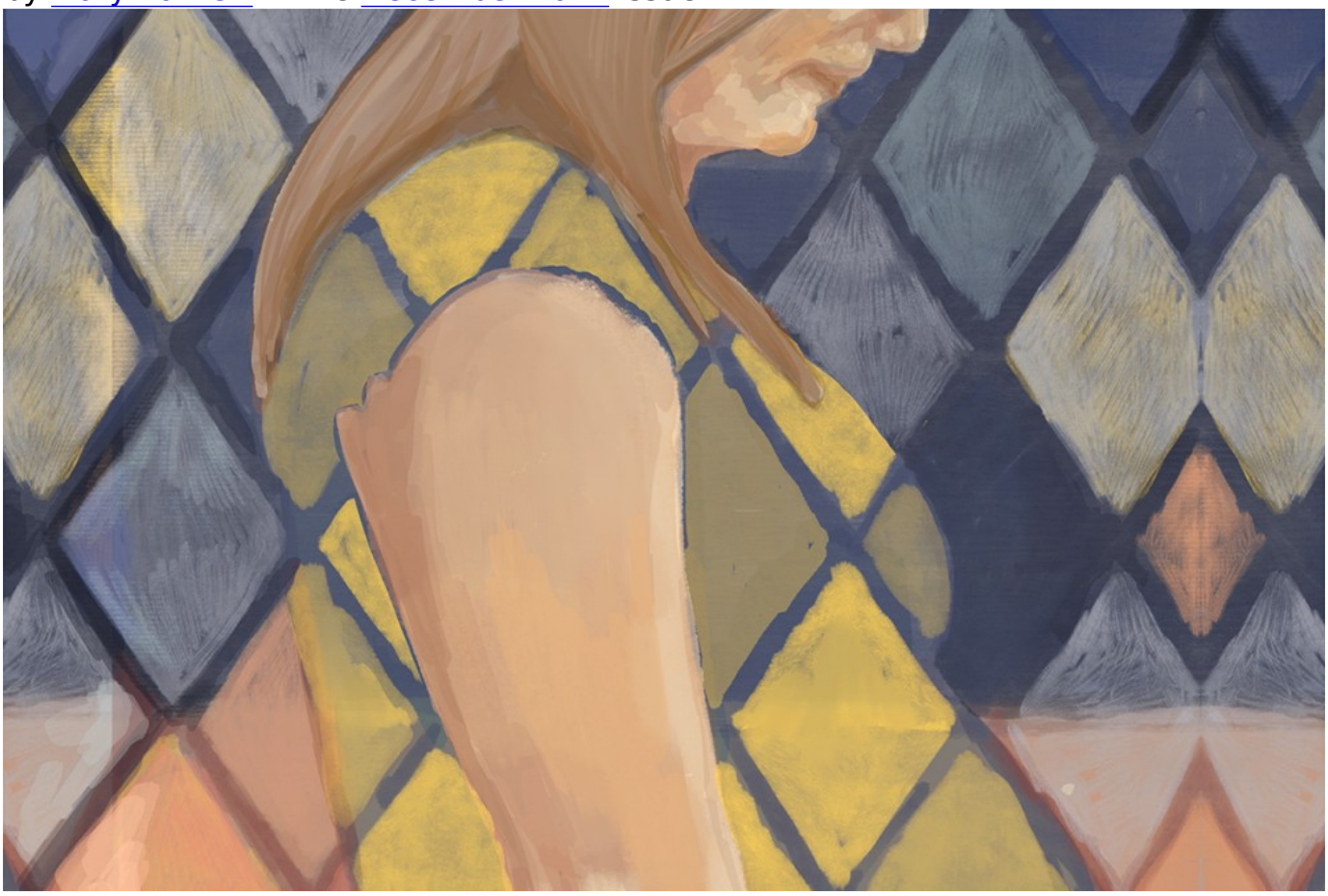
My fertility journey with Mary

Navigating agency and surrender with my namesake, the mother of God

by Mary Barnett in the December 2022 issue



(Illustration by Martha Park)

My mother didn’t like the name Mary: too Catholic. And she didn’t much like my grandmother for whom I was named: too Baptist. But she did believe in giving her children proper names after their grandparents, so in the end, tradition won out. I was named Mary after my father’s Virginian mother but called Polly “for short,” even though it’s longer.

To me Polly sounded childish, which admittedly I was but only temporarily, and user-friendly, which I was for a much longer period at great cost. Mary, on the other hand,

was the name for a queen. Mary, which I reclaimed in my 20s after an unprovoked physical attack by a stranger gave me permission to be royally pissed, was the name of someone with good boundaries and good posture. Someone who could grow two inches taller just by engaging her stomach muscles.

Mary the mother of God is depicted in most famous Western European paintings of the Annunciation with alabaster skin, usually in interior settings. We see her poised on fine furniture, bathed in a halo, a lily bending on a long stem in the background. Sometimes, slightly recoiling, she seems alarmed. At other times, entranced, she leans slightly forward. Either way, she is reacting with her whole being to the presence of the glory of the Lord, who is an angel. Yes, she says to what it is that God asks, accepting with grace a reality beyond her comprehension. I imagine her reclining, the Word expanding exponentially beneath her robe.

Hearing about this in fifth grade at the First Unitarian Church in Providence, Rhode Island, I imagined a swoosh of blue surrender and a bunching of garments, conjuring up an act that was beyond my comprehension too. A romantic at heart, I appreciated the lack of detail, but even in fifth grade a Unitarian is too sophisticated to believe that sex was not involved. I imagined a shadow sliding slowly across a hot afternoon garden, offering Mary some deep green shade and relief: *Yes, yes, yes . . . yes!* I was drawn into a certain Catholic sensibility without knowing what that was. Here was an act of wholehearted surrender, an opportunity to exchange one's pesky individuality for "that oceanic feeling" that Freud admitted he did not understand, a metaphysically tinged but oh-so-physical merger made sacrament, all sanctified and contained within the capacious arms of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. Oh womb of God!

The practical realities of sex, however, turned out to be a more complicated negotiation for me, as was having a baby. In both cases, one's own agency is involved, even when you wish it didn't have to be. Surrender is alarming too. Agency, surrender: Which is which? Mary, did you know?

FIRST, THE BACKSTORY: Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, an elderly Jewish priest on temple duty, is visited by the power and glory of God, who is an angel. This is the same angel who will visit Mary six months hence. Gabriel tells old Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, who is very, very old and ostracized for being infertile, will finally

have a baby. When Zechariah expresses doubt that his elderly wife could become pregnant the old-fashioned way, God strikes him dumb for his lack of faith.

Women without children were scorned in the ancient world, and there was zero understanding that a man might be part of the problem (or part of the solution). The oversight persists. Infertility—painful, misunderstood, overlooked—is still a woman's problem. At least in the scriptures, Zechariah is given a role to play. His enforced silence allows Mary and Elizabeth to shift briefly into the foreground.

In traditional Catholic theology, Mary's inviolate body becomes an archetype for all subsequent holding environments for God. Sanctuaries, cathedrals, nun's habits, and the mother church are all modeled on Mary. Cantatas and villanelles could be too. There she sits, so powerfully static she's electric, ballooning out with the internal pressure of the infinite. But when Mary learns she is pregnant, what does she do? Does she remain in place, her hips broadening to buttress some future cathedral? No. She straps on some walking sandals and goes with haste to a Judean hill country, where she enters the house of Zechariah and greets Elizabeth.

Imagine the determination, the long walk up into the Judean hills, the hot sun, the thirst. And when Mary finally gets there, Elizabeth's baby leaps with recognition. Because he, John the Baptist in utero, and his mother already recognize the God in Mary.

My own fertility journey had been all uphill. When I wanted babies, I couldn't have them. I hadn't found the right man. So I adjusted my search. Tried and failed. Picked differently. At 40, a gynecologist told me it was now or never. I went home and wrote down what I was looking for and placed it under my pillow. I kept it to a very short list. Smart. Kind. Two weeks later he was unavoidable. I married him.

After a year of trying and failing to conceive, we dug deeper. It turned out both of us had nigh insurmountable issues in the conceiving department. We each might have been able to have a baby with someone else. Maybe. We tried for three more years, with varying degrees of technological help. Four failed IVF cycles, three early miscarriages, then lengthy paperwork and group classes for adoption.

Once, in despair during a miscarriage, I called a lab at Yale. It was hot, mid-August. I don't know what lab it was or how I got the number. A woman answered.

“I keep miscarrying and they want me to get a D&C,” I said, without preamble. “Today!” I was sobbing, explaining, “I’m already bleeding. But I can’t. I can’t. They want to scrape out all the tissue. And throw it away. They can’t test it after a D&C. And then I’ll never know. I’ll just try again. I need to know why this is happening. So I can stop. I need to stop but I just can’t stop.”

“I am sorry,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

I leaned my head against the lacquered green kitchen cabinet and cried, the long cord from the rotary phone I’d lugged from apartment to apartment since college wrapped so tight around my waist it left marks.

“I’m so sorry,” the tech repeated. “We aren’t allowed . . . and it’s foreign tissue. There is no way even to—” And then she stopped herself. There was a long pause.

“What’s your address?” she asked. “Let the blood flow, and when it comes thick catch all the tissue in a cooler. Put it in the refrigerator. I’ll come and get it after work tonight.”

I will never know what allowed a lab technician to recognize my humanity in the space between one word and the next, but she did. That evening she rang the doorbell, and we just hovered there at the threshold. I can’t remember what she looked like. I think her car was a brown Toyota, and her hair was brownish too, this technician whose name I will never know. For some reason it seemed impertinent to ask, like asking an angel for their return address.

I handed over the small red-and-white Igloo cooler that I’d squatted over all afternoon, hidden behind a pine tree in our shaded backyard. I had to be outside. I couldn’t bear to think of this sloughed-off tissue as a waste product. It was nature working in me. A piece of God, even. Maybe.

The next morning the technician told me there was not just one but several chromosomal abnormalities in the tissue. This information is what allowed us, finally, to make space for another sort of miracle. My own agency was born in that moment with my ability to surrender the dream of having my own genes inside my children. We moved on from IVF to domestic and international adoption and then, finally, to egg donation.

Eventually we harvested one healthy wiggling sperm from Dave and injected it into a spry young egg harvested from an anonymous donor. I knew what she'd been through to do this, because I'd already done it several painful times myself, preparing for IVF treatments by first shutting down and then artificially plumbing up my womb with hormones, a ricocheting process that made me feel inert and labile at the same time. Whatever we paid the donor, it couldn't have been enough. Grace had to make up the difference.

MY FIRST BABY was finally delivered at 45. I was afraid of what people would think. I was so damn old. Was it embarrassing to want something so much? And then to want it again. And again. Nine years later, when my best friend was dying, I catapulted myself, at 54 years old, into a triple toe loop of a pregnancy, twisting and turning like some Olympic skater in the air to get my reluctant husband to agree to the final outlier. In the face of death, life. In the face of death, life.

I was determined, but what would people think to see my old belly pushing out again? There would be a cost. A friend of mine told me how much she admired her dear friend, Olga, who had the courage to accept God's plan for her instead of forcing the issue by using technology to have children. I ducked but it landed anyway.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth and her silent husband for three whole months. I think she must have liked it there, cooking iron-rich meals with her cousin, administering home remedies for swollen ankles and morning sickness, looking after the animals, gently needling the taciturn Zechariah. And Elizabeth must have appreciated having someone to talk to, someone who could say something back. Mary stayed until Elizabeth was nine months pregnant and no doubt helped deliver Elizabeth's baby.

And I believe it was Elizabeth's recognition that allowed Mary to celebrate her condition as good news and to open her mouth and sing about it with all the power of an Old Testament prophet, her song ringing round the hills of Judea: *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. For he has done great things for me. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things*.

And then Mary walked the long road back to the town of Nazareth.

I AM 66 now and have three kids, 21, 18, and 12. Like Elizabeth, I'm old and can't clearly trace how these pregnancies happened. Like Mary, conception was a bit of an out-of-body experience. Mine took place in a dish.

I would argue that each was a case of fierce human initiative *and* the overshadowing of a holy and capricious spirit. And surrender. Walking hand in hand in the hills surrounding our separate territories.

There are those miracles we are blessed to experience and we know are happening as they are happening. That human agency played a part in these miracles does not make them less miraculous. For one thing, they *weren't* just chance or just divine intervention. We were there, and we noticed, and we didn't screw them up. And that changed something.

Every step we take is an interplay of effort and release. I push off the ground with my left foot, catapulting myself forward, my hamstring taut. I hover momentarily, suspended on an invisible threshold, and then I fall. My agency and my surrender leave only one imprint, the mark of my right heel on the ground.

That I am here at all, this oddball me, is a miracle, born on this bit of earth in this moment among all the eons of time, a combination of just these strands of DNA and not those, so similar and yet so different from my closest relatives. That I am here with *my children* is astounding: three complete strangers stopped at three completely different clinics and went through a laborious and painful process to donate their eggs for different reasons that I will never fully know. A bigger mix of chance encounters and choices and near-extinction experiences and improbabilities and genetic whiplashes and moments of divine surrender than could ever fit in my living room, even if we all bowed down. And now my family *is*.

It seems a modern miracle of biblical proportions, human initiative and divine intervention walking hand in hand in the hills around Judea and sliding down the polished floors of hospital corridors and infertility clinics, DNA dancing in the wings. Which is why I don't think about it very much. I'd have to bow so low all the time, every day. So low I might have missed the whole thing. Instead, I look into the faces of my kids, when they let me, and it seems like the most normal thing of all.