PARADOXES AND PERPLEXITIES

THE KINDEST CUT OF ALL

By Marvin Rytting

It was like a scene from a surrealist play. The night before the operation, my doctor had participated in the birth of his first child and he was still filled with the wonder of it all. So we talked about the miracle of birth and how wonderful it is to have children, and we drifted from a sharing of our joy in the experience of becoming fathers to more mundane issues like the quality of the local school system and whether this community is a good place to raise children. While we talked, he severed my vas deferens and eliminated my ability to participate in those experiences again. In a way, it seemed strangely appropriate to have the opportunity to affirm how much I value fathering at the moment that I was abdicating my opportunity to affirm how much I value fathering. I was surprised at the lack of symmetry in my body. The right vas was easy to cut but the one on the left side had become intertwined with other tissue and took much more prying and pulling and pinching. And then some of my sperm turned out to be stubborn little things that refused to give up gracefully, and it seemed like forever before the nurse told me, “You may consider yourself to be sterile.” I did not much care for the tone of the voice nor the choice of words, but such moments of minor psychological distress were even milder than the physical pain which actually ended up being quite tolerable.

All in all, it was a positive experience. Even paying the bill was not overly distressing. I am not, however, interested in writing a testimonial for vasectomies. Although freeing sexual expression from the constraints of birth control methods and eliminating the worry of unwanted pregnancy are well worth the monetary, physical, and psychological costs, the joy of post-sterilization sexual pleasure is better left for another forum. What I find most intriguing is that it took me so long to make what now seems to be such a reasonable decision.

I suspect that I would not have been so slow to choose sterilization if I had recognized it as a viable alternative for me. The vasectomy option is one which Mormon men learn not even to consider. It still amazes me, however, that I could discuss the advantages of vasectomies so openly in my human sexuality courses without ever applying that knowledge to my own situation. I spent almost eight years with a variety of less satisfactory birth control methods without ever asking whether I should apply the obvious solution for someone who knows—as I knew—that the time for begetting was over. Why was sterilization so unthinkable?

The other fascinating thing is how quickly and easily the answer came. Once I asked the question, the answer was so obvious that it seemed silly not to have considered it years earlier. I am struck by how many people I know have similar experiences of going for years without asking a question and then knowing almost immediately that the answer is yes. It is almost as if we are afraid to ask the question until we know the answer—until the answer, in fact, is unequivocal. Whether the question is to marry or to divorce, to have children or to stop having children, we often have unexamined assumptions in our mind about what we like or dislike, what we want or do not want, and what we should or should not do, which keep us from even asking the questions.

I am reminded of a commentary on National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered” by a woman who decided a few years ago that she could no longer jog because she had injured her knee and was told that at her age it would never fully recover. She found herself signed up—quite unwillingly—for a five kilometer race which she intended to walk. She tried running a little just for fun, and it felt good, and she ended up jogging the entire distance without hurting her knee at all and has returned to jogging regularly. Her conclusion was that we should reexamine our assumptions at least every two years because they may no longer fit. I suspect that some of them may never have fit if they had been subject to scrutiny.

Before we can get the answers, however, we need to ask the questions. The contraception question usually comes in stages. The first is when to stop having children. Lester Bush has pointed out that many Mormons apply a variant of the Peter Principle in procreating to the level of their incompetence. Indeed, the official Church position may encourage this by allowing for birth control to preserve the physical or mental health of the mother, but strongly discouraging the invocation of this escape clause unless the straits are dire. Under such a mandate, the decision to stop having children is a tacit admission of incompetence which some parents are unwilling to make before becoming quite disabled. For most of us, it is a significant feat to acknowledge that we cannot handle more children and to go on to the second stage of doing something about it.

It is particularly difficult for Mormons to act on this awareness with the courage to make a binding move such as sterilization. Even those of us who find Saturday’s Warrior singularly unconvincing can occasionally be willing to play the odds and gamble on a long shot probability, just in case. What if the myth were true and there were other spirits waiting who were “supposed” to be born into this particular family? A birth control method which is effective 80-95 percent of the time gives God a sporting chance to let that spirit come if it is meant to be. This is a great strategy for easing queasy consciences.

To choose a 100 percent effective method, however, requires a conviction strong enough to take the decision out of God’s hands and thus give us the total responsibility for analyzing the situation and choosing for ourselves. What if the action removes forever the possibility of achieving godhood? If eternal procreation is the essence of being gods, why risk cutting off that procreative potential if, in retribution, one might never get it back? It is difficult enough to make a decision that is not reversible in this life, but the prospect of eternal irreversibility is intimidating.

Those willing to face this cosmic uncertainty must also deal with the dilemma of determining whose body gets cut. There are so many conflicting emotional pulls besides the
fear of blood that it might seem easiest to simply cast lots. One problem is that Mormon men lack a good excuse to be fixed. Women may be able to justify a tubal ligation on health reasons—surely God (and/or the bishop) would understand that. But pregnancy is not dangerous to a man’s health and so a vasectomy may be seen as a stronger statement of volition. On the other hand, the additional risk and cost of a tubal ligation make it a less reasonable choice from a medical perspective.

A couple contemplating sterilization may also have to deal with some subtle relationship questions, such as whether either or both are concerned with saving their procreative powers just in case something should happen to the current marriage. The fear of disappointing a potential future spouse becomes a background issue that is difficult to discuss because the reluctant partner’s desire to be saving sperm or eggs for someone else may seem to reflect a diminished commitment to the marriage. On the other hand, if one partner seems too eager to be the one fixed, it could generate a subtle fear that the one-sided freedom from the procreative consequences of sexual intercourse might make it easier for the sterile spouse to stray. To the extent that the couple has justified the norm of sexual exclusivity by the need to keep the procreative powers sacred or to follow the dictates of the Church, it may seem risky to take a step which has the potential to undermine such external constraints.

Religious pressures also complicate the decision. In Mormon circles there may be a sense that it would be a more serious violation of Church norms for priesthood holders because sanctions seem to be more severe for them. At the same time, the notion that motherhood is the central role for Mormon women can make it seem more serious for them to negate a core aspect of the self.

With all of these complex issues making the sterilization question particularly problematic for Mormons, perhaps it should not surprise me that it took so long to have a vasectomy. We live with such uncertainty that even crucial decisions must be made without knowing the ultimate consequences. And because there is such a strong taboo against even discussing our struggles with this dilemma, we do not benefit from the experience of others. Thus, I do not know if I am unique nor if I am an eternal eunuch. But I do know that the decision still feels good (and the side effects feel great). It has made a vas deferens in my life.

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to tell your friends and neighbors what you really think about the Mormon religion.

So have I!

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