



Repentance and Reproduction

In the 1970s the book and TV miniseries *Roots* captivated the nation. The story of Alex Haley's decade-long effort to trace his ancestors back to Africa inspired thousands of family reunions and established the crucial developmental importance of knowing where you come from. Biological connection *matters*. Like Alex Haley, those who know little or nothing of the past they emerged from are often consumed by a search for identity.

Yet despite our heightened sensitivity to the need for intergenerational connection, increasing numbers of children today are deliberately denied access to their ancestry. In conjunction with anonymous sperm and egg donation and surrogate parenthood, the *in vitro* fertilization industry lucratively promotes the *separation* of children from one or both of their natural parents and from their full biological heritage.

At the age of five, Alana Newman's mother told her that her biological father was an anonymous sperm donor whom her parents knew nothing about and were unable to locate. Seventeen troubled years later Alana started an online project (www.anonymousus.org) to which donor-conceived people, their parents, and sperm and egg donors contribute.

"Those whose parents die," Alana writes, "are given the time, tools, and *permission* to grieve the loss of their missing parent." Not so for people whose parents are

missing because of egg or sperm donation. No photos, videos, or letters pierce the veil of anonymity to help them grieve their loss. Instead, Alana says, "We are told that if our biological parents [had] been forced to have a relationship with us, . . . they would never have agreed to give us life." The unspoken message is harsher still: "The price of openly acknowledged biological affiliation with *you* is too high to pay; you are not worth the cost of connection to your past." Thus do donor-conceived offspring learn that their very existence is acceptable only on highly conditional terms. "It is as if there are only two options," Alana Newman writes: "life with parental abandonment or no life at all." In her experience, "Love and cooperation between parents is only available to a different class of child."

In the expensive world of *in vitro* fertilization the donor-conceived child is a *product* engineered to the specifications of the contracting parent or parents. They expect to get what they pay for. So it is hardly surprising that abortion and eugenics have been part of fertility industry practice from the beginning. For each woman who avails herself of *in vitro* fertilization it is usual to "make" fifteen embryos. Nearly half are aborted, often after screening for genetic disorders, physical features, or gender.

The logic that undergirds such transactions gives rise to serious questions of justice. "[I]f it is okay to buy and sell sperm, eggs, and wombs," Alana Newman asks, "then why is it *not* okay to sell other human tissues or organs? . . . If it is okay to pre-sell and pre-order children via third-party reproduction, what is so wrong with buying and selling children who are already born

or conceived? Why do we view fathers who abandon their children before conception as altruistic heroes, and fathers who abandon their kids after conception as irresponsible . . . ?”

Lent is the season of repentance— not only for the sins of *my* life, but also for sins that are way bigger than I am, sins of which *we* as a people have need to repent. Think back to slavery before the Civil War and racial segregation after it. Our lives too are inescapably entangled with accepted social practices that diminish or destroy our common humanity. Into the social structures of our church, city, state and nation, profound injustices work their way. We grow accustomed to their infiltration; we acquiesce in their acceptability; we become ever more reluctant to acknowledge the damage they do.

Repentance begins with recognition. You and I can repent of our part in the sinful structures of our life in common by tuning our conscience more clearly to truth—for example, to the truth of what the world of in vitro fertilization really involves.