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# A New Mother's Journey—Full of Hope

Oprah.com



Early in her struggles with infertility, when she was still saving old clothes that were loose enough to serve as maternity wear, Hope Firsel took an honest look at the journey ahead of her.

Quite likely there would be hormone shots to take, invasive procedures to endure and perhaps month after month of disappointments. Medical bills might deplete her savings; the stress of infertility could deplete her soul.

Soon after, she saw another path—one with the same procedures and bills, but with a different perspective. She realized she had a choice.

She could allow the emptiness of being denied a child to take over her life. She could sink into depression, withdraw from friends, lose interest in her career, jeopardize her marriage. Or, she could use her infertility struggles as a tool for personal growth. She could transform the ache she felt for a child into compassion for others experiencing the same. She could face her fears head-on and embrace the lessons concealed within them. Out of the pain, she could gain a stronger sense of self and therefore be a more confident advocate of her health and fertility.

The reality of her son's birth last year differed dramatically from her long-ago dreams of pregnancy. And yet, she wouldn't change any of it. Hope's journey not only gave her the gift of a child, but the gift of a wiser self as well.

## The Beginning

In 2005, Hope was driving home from an empowerment course she'd just attended and was thinking about her dream of becoming a mother.

She was used to attending training sessions about personal and professional growth. After earning a master's degree in organizational development, she worked with CEOs of major U.S. corporations on developing smooth transitions through major business changes.

Still, this particular course resonated with her on a more personal level. Two years earlier, she and her husband, Chad, decided to start a family. She suffered a miscarriage. Then, a doctor advised her that thin endometrium lining and uterine scar tissue greatly reduced her chances of ever carrying a child successfully.

She hadn't even turned 30.

As she drove home, Hope thought of the course leader's advice: Make goals for your life, but remain detached enough so that your happiness isn't dependent on the outcomes. Life, after all, rarely unfolds the way we'd planned it would.

Her perspective suddenly shifted. She realized that because she was so committed to having children, it would happen somehow. She released the dreams of conceiving a child naturally and with ease. The heaviness she'd been carrying deep inside evaporated, leaving a sense of optimism that rarely left her again. "I was going to achieve my goal of motherhood and let go of how it would look," Hope says.

She dove into researching every option available to childless couples, from in vitro fertilization to adoption. She embraced the latest breakthroughs in reproductive endocrinology and infertility medicine, as well as the ancient practices of acupuncture and yoga and relaxation techniques such as meditation.

Hope's personal transformation extended to her career as well. After months of visiting fertility specialists, she discovered a serious void in the care of women grappling with infertility. Their hormone levels may be carefully monitored, their follicles regularly scanned, but women's emotions and overall state of mind were largely ignored.

Such disregard for a woman's mental health is not only shortsighted, it can also dramatically reduce her chances of conceiving. In the book *Conquering Infertility: Dr. Alice Domar's Mind/Body Guide to Enhancing Fertility and Coping with Infertility*, Dr. Domar notes that infertility patients have the same rates of depression as women confronting potentially life-threatening illness.

So Hope left corporate America to earn a certificate in life coaching. She joined a holistic fertility center in Chicago and developed her own practice. She quickly grasped what an honor it was to help others through the challenging—but often revelatory—process of trying to start a family. "The most important piece is helping them find a way to keep the light of hope shining, so they're not so distraught and overcome by fear that they get stopped," Hope says.

As she helped her clients through their journey, Hope's skill at remaining positive but flexible deepened as well. She learned how to listen to what her body and soul needed. She allowed herself to mourn another failed cycle. She began to prepare herself emotionally in case a procedure didn't work and have a Plan B ready just in case.

"It was about knowing there would be avenues," she says. "Even if this one wasn't my path, there would be a new one. I would be ready after I'd done the mourning I needed to do."

But by 2007, Hope found herself mourning failures more and more. Desperation threatened to block her optimism entirely.

### **Meeting Sarah**

"We were desperate, actually," Hope says. "And then, we met Sarah."

When people hear the word "surrogacy," they may recall the highly publicized 1985 trial of Baby M, in which a traditional surrogate sued for custody of the baby she was carrying for a New Jersey couple. Most surrogates in the 1980s conceived a child using the intended father's sperm and the surrogate's egg via artificial insemination.

Today, however, surrogates are rarely genetically linked to the baby. Using in vitro fertilization, embryos created from the father's sperm and the mother's egg or a donor egg are implanted in a surrogate, who then carries the baby to term.

Though numbers are growing, the percentage of couples who choose surrogacy remains small. The legal and medical processes—not to mention individual temperaments and group dynamics—require a great deal of patience and stamina on all parts.

Fortunately for Hope, she and Sarah clicked immediately. In fact, the two blond, curly-headed women with wide smiles were often asked if they were sisters.

Sarah—already the mother of three with her husband, Jason—felt fortunate to have conceived easily and wanted to help others who couldn't. She updated Hope on her progressing pregnancy, sending text messages about how she was feeling that week, and encouraged Hope to make many decisions. Sarah would often say, "It's your baby, not mine."

Those nine months weren't always easy. Hope still felt pangs of jealousy and sadness when Sarah—not Hope—felt the surreal wonder of the baby's first kick. But mostly, both women considered themselves blessed to be part of this miracle of life.

Finally, on August 27, 2008, Hudson Milo entered the world.

"All the emotion came out and I was crying and it was all being released in that experience," Hope says of the delivery. "Here was this woman going through this tough experience just for us. She really changed all of our lives."

Once she held her baby, the details of how Hudson came to be no longer mattered. Hope understood now that this was the only journey she could have walked.

"I really do believe that it all makes sense," she said weeks after his birth. "Because this is the son I was meant to have. ... He has come from such a beautiful example of humanity."

### **A Year Later**

Hudson recently celebrated his first birthday surrounded by the people who made his life possible. His grandparents took pictures, his parents presented gifts. And the cake—which Hudson devoured with glee—was made by Sarah and Jason.

They stood in the background, happy to quietly watch this picture-perfect moment unfold before their eyes. They are there for each other now, and will be a part of each other's lives forever. Their bond is so deep, there was little question that they would try this partnership again: Sarah is now pregnant with Hope and Chad's second child.

Hope continues to counsel couples through the myriad of fertility options to find what's right for them. For those who are interested, she also helps them dig deeper. She encourages them to face their fears, let go of the details and strive to discover the courage and self-love that will not only serve them now, but once a child does enter their lives.

She wants all women to know what she's discovered: There is value in the struggle. "The bottom line is that when we have a hole in our life for a child," Hope says. "It's a very real sense of loneliness and emptiness. Now

I can really say, from my whole being, that this hole will be filled, and it will feel right."

Interested in surrogacy? What you should know—and where to start

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