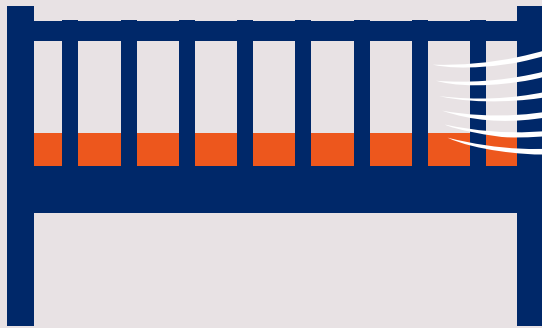


A BODY DESIGNED TO KILL



By Steph Penny

Fifty percent. That was the fateful number.

I had just calculated the risk of a pregnancy going bad for me. The risks included things like miscarriage, a flare-up of my autoimmune disease, and significant deformities of the foetus. When I say “deformities”, we’re not talking about crooked noses; we’re talking about missing limbs and lifelong high needs. We’re talking about me, with chronic illness, becoming a lifelong carer for another human dependent upon me for everything.

Fifty percent.

What Am I Going to Do?

I wanted to have kids. I wanted to give them the names my husband and I had carefully selected for them. I wanted to teach them about God and the values of

kindness, compassion, and empathy. I wanted to give my husband the gift of being a father, a role to which he would be eminently suited.

But it was not to be. I had been diagnosed with lupus, an autoimmune disease that can attack any organ in the body at any time. Lupus was attacking my blood, significantly raising the risk of miscarriage and other pregnancy complications. I had also been diagnosed with endometriosis which, besides causing pain, can make it difficult to conceive.

The odds were stacked against me. By about fifty percent, apparently.

This discovery scuttled my plans for motherhood and blew my preconceptions about femininity out of the water. I had always thought of the female body as a safe harbour for new life, a nurturing space for a little one

to grow. Women are often seen as protectors of their young, as “givers of life,” and that women are “designed to have babies.” But my body, with its faulty immune system, was “designed to kill.” Lupus misreads normal body signals as error messages and overreacts, seeking and destroying perfectly healthy parts of my body. If I were to fall pregnant, lupus would see the foetus as an intruder. My own body would attack my baby.

What does this mean for me as a woman—to have a body that is good at killing rather than creating life? To never experience the sensation of a little person growing inside of me? Am I, as a childless lady, less of a woman?

It’s not such a far leap. Many cultures around the world and many of our churches (including well-meaning ones) treat women as child-bearing machines, idolising those women who “graduate” to motherhood and isolating those who do not. It’s a product of pronatalism: Our society favours women who give birth to and raise children.

Pronatalism and my own childlessness have had a profound impact on my identity. As much as I want to say that my identity is found in Christ, as I’m sure we all do, I have an undeniable attachment to the things of this world that give me a sense of who I am: my family, job, culture, the places I have lived, friendship groups. My body also gives me a sense of identity—just as losing parts of my body and mind can untether it.

I am still a woman, even if my immune system won’t allow me to participate in bearing and raising children. Being a woman in general, and being a mother in particular, is not just about fertility. It has to do with the many ways in which I, as a childless woman, actively “mother” others, nurturing them and helping them to grow: mentoring people at work and in my church band, praying for the younger generations, caring for my pet cat.

Every time I sit with a younger colleague and encourage them in their work, I’m mothering. Every time I check in with a band member I’m mentoring, I’m mothering. Every time I lead worship, gently encouraging the congregation to draw near to God, I’m mothering. Every time I pray for my nieces and nephews, I’m mothering. Every time I connect with my cat—feeding him, cuddling him, taking him to the vet kicking and screaming—I’m mothering.

The act of mothering is not just about giving birth to a screaming lifeform. It’s about how I love others. It’s about how I give back to the world, care for the environment, belong to my community and minister to my church.

It’s also about leaving a legacy. One way I try to do that is through writing. I create books, blogs, articles (like this one), short stories, and songs. It’s a way of leaving my mark on the world that has a positive impact on others. It’s a love language for me. Even though I have not been “in labour,” I have undertaken many labours of love and given birth to book-babies, blog-babies, and song-babies, all created to encourage others.

One day this body designed to kill will resign its last breath and I will leave this gentle world. But my words and hopefully my impact will live on and spread further, like a river flowing out to sea. In a way, I am attempting to mother the whole world through my words.

God himself provides a great example of mothering. He mothers us in the way he comforts us, protects us, and provides for us. In Isaiah 66:13, God says, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you” (NIV). Jesus, in Luke 13:34, spoke of his longing to gather Jerusalem unto himself “as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.” Mothering is a part of God’s very nature, and he shows us how to do it well.

Non-mothering forms of mothering may not be a traditional approach to womanhood, but they matter. We can all embrace creative ways of mothering that do not necessarily involve having biological children, because all forms of mothering are important—and they all mirror the way in which our heavenly Father mothers us.

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Steph Penny is a blogger, author, and songwriter passionate about exploring too-hard-basket topics offaith. Steph writes about childlessness, singledom, chronic illness, and Christian living. Steph also works as a psychologist, loves chocolate and books, and lives with her husband and furbaby, a rescue cat named Boba.