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## Foreword by Hannah Strege

MY ADOPTION STORY was never a secret to me. I was the first adopted frozen embryo and was made aware of it at a very early age. I knew that I was one of twenty frozen embryos adopted from my placing family and that my mom is both my birth mom and my adoptive mom, though I did not necessarily understand what that meant initially.

Explaining embryo adoption to an adult, let alone a young child, isn't easy. My mom, being the creative individual she is, used kid-appropriate analogies with me. For instance, she took two packets of seeds—carrot and pumpkin—and put them in the freezer. We took them out of the freezer during the correct planting season. She and I carefully counted out twenty seeds from the packet, representing the twenty embryos that my parents had adopted. We then planted them in an egg carton to grow. Not all the seeds sprouted, just like not all the embryos survived the thaw. We eventually transferred the remaining seedlings into the garden, and not all the plants survived. Again, this represented how not all the embryos survived once they were transferred into my mom.

My mom explained that this was how she and my dad adopted my nineteen siblings and me as frozen seeds. She also said there was no guarantee that all twenty of the embryos would survive the freeze, the thaw, and the transfer. She said, “You were adopted as a seed and put into my tummy to grow.”

As a young girl, that's how I attempted to explain my adoption story to others, though it may have been confusing and frustrating at times. I was surprised how often my friends and even adults did not know what

an embryo is. I also often received odd questions about my story. Here are a few of my answers:

- Yes, I know who my “real parents” are. They’re John and Marlene Strege. If you’re referring to my placing family, yes, I know them too.
- No, my mom was not a surrogate.
- No, this was not a donor program.
- No, my parents did not adopt sperm.
- No, my parents did not adopt eggs.
- There is no possible way I share any DNA with my adoptive family.
- Open adoption is a way to know your child’s genetic history. We enjoy an open adoption with my placing family, with no need for ancestry.com.
- No, I do not feel different being the first adopted frozen embryo. This is my life; it’s all I know.

When we went to see the film *Heaven Is for Real*, the young boy, Colton, was explaining to his mother his experience in heaven and described the encounter he had with a young girl he said was his sister. His mother was confused and noted that his sister, Cassie, was seated behind him at the dining room table. No, Colton said. He had two sisters. “You had a baby die in your tummy, didn’t you?”

His mother, stunned, asked who told him about that. Colton replied that the girl herself had told him. His mother asked what the girl looked like. “Like Cassie but a little smaller and hair like yours. In heaven this little girl came up to me and she wouldn’t stop hugging me.” His mother asked him what her name was. “She didn’t have a name,” Colton replied. “You guys didn’t name her.” His mother had had a miscarriage.

The moment was a tearjerker and immediately caused us to turn our hearts and minds to my nineteen siblings, the frozen embryos that did not survive the freeze, the thaw, and the transfer. I decided we should

name them, and we did so as a family. The rule was that we all had to agree on the names. Their names:

*Summer, Toby, Ryan, Delaney, Logan, Emma, Annika, Katiyana, Katelyn, McKenna, Gabe, Peyton, Spencer, Samuel, Megan, Leah, Levi, Hope, and Liesl.*

This task wasn't as easy as one would think. Then I suggested we should give them middle names too. Isn't that an exhausting thought!

It was not until my teenage years that I became more curious about my placing family, though my love for my parents remained unwavering. I had a family, I was safe, and I had gotten a chance at life that many other frozen embryos had not. Still, I was eager to learn more about my placing family, maybe the only "normal" aspect of my otherwise unusual adoption. During my senior year of high school, I had the opportunity to do my senior project on the meaning of family. I concluded that one family holds my biology, and the other holds my heart.

I had a beloved teacher in high school ask me whether I had survivor's guilt as the only one of the twenty embryos to survive. I replied that I never felt that way because I knew the outcome was God's plan. But it has made me appreciate my chance at life, that it is that much more special. I even plan on devoting my career to the cause of life, specifically adoption as a means of countering abortion, and I related this in the following letter I wrote early in my freshman year of college to Vice President Mike Pence:

October 14, 2017

Dear Vice President Pence,

My name is Hannah Strege. When I was about seven years old, you and I met at a press conference in 2006 to highlight Snowflake babies. I had something to tell lawmakers and the President that day: "Don't kill the Snowflakes . . . we're kids and we want to grow up."

I am the first adopted frozen embryo in the world. My parents, John and Marlene Strege, adopted me and 19 other frozen embryos from a placing family through a program later named Snowflakes Embryo Adoption through Nightlight Christian Adoptions. Snowflakes are unique and never again to be re-created, just like each baby is molded in the likeness of God. My mom, Marlene, is both the adoptive mom and the birth mom.

I stood behind President George W. Bush during his first veto, in 2006, with regards to limiting federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. President Obama lifted the veto during his presidency. I know you and President Trump are pro-life and I am hoping you would consider stopping federal funding on embryonic stem cell research. I would ask that you share my story with President Trump. I would be happy to speak with anyone regarding embryo adoption. I am now a freshman in college at Biola University studying nursing. Saving embryos is a cause dear to my heart. Each frozen embryo is a life and we should be striving for plans of adoption instead of destruction.

For the embryos yet to be born,  
Hannah Strege

Several weeks later, I received this letter from Vice President Pence:

Ms. Hannah Strege  
La Mirada, California

Dear Hannah:

Thank you for your recent heartfelt letter. It was an honor to meet you years ago, and I am grateful that you reached out to me with an update.

Congratulations on your high school graduation and your

next step of college. Your determination not only to achieve academic success but also to stand for the dignity of the unborn is deeply inspiring. Your story of embryo adoption continues to move my heart. I am grateful for the privilege to serve a President who is committed to the cause of life. Please be assured that President Trump and I will continue to uphold the sanctity of human life and seek to restore pro-life principles to the center of American law.

Thank you for being a voice for the cause of life. You have my best wishes as you continue your nursing studies at Biola.

Sincerely,  
Michael R. Pence  
Vice President of the United States

I have since changed my major and am pursuing a bachelor's degree in sociology. My goal is to work toward a master's degree in social work. With these degrees I hope to help induce social change on abortion, the overuse of in vitro fertilization, and the creation of more embryos than a couple will be able to use—and to help rescue the embryos still in frozen storage. I want to give a voice to the voiceless. I owe it to my nineteen siblings. Their lives will not be forgotten.





## Acknowledgments

THIS IS THE seventh book I've written, and simultaneously it was the hardest and easiest book for me to write. It was the easiest because we had lived it, and Marlene had kept meticulous notes as well as letters, emails, and newspaper and magazine articles. It was the hardest because it is so personal. For a sports journalist with an aversion to using the pronoun *I*, who is far more comfortable reporting the news than being a part of it, this was an awkward transition.

Easing the transition was the encouragement I received from so many over the years. I am especially indebted to Carl Catlin for his friendship and his Christian leadership in our church, and for his unceasing support for this project and others I've undertaken. Everyone should be so fortunate as to have a Carl Catlin in their lives.

Pastors Chuck Manske and Bob Dargatz have been an enormous blessing in our lives through their spiritual guidance and friendship. Everyone should be so fortunate as to have pastors such as these in their lives.

Ron Stoddart is an amazing individual whose love for children and passion for placing children with their forever families is an inspiration to all of us. There would be no story to tell had Ron viewed our request to adopt embryos as a time-consuming challenge rather than an opportunity to save lives. I spent the better part of two hours with Ron in a Loveland, Colorado, restaurant to get his recollections of the events recounted in these pages, and I thank him for that. Everyone should be so fortunate as to have a Ron Stoddart in their corner.

Fifty years in sports journalism dealing with professional athletes

and other celebrities has nearly rid me of any sense of awe, yet I confess I stand in awe of Dr. James Dobson for his tireless devotion to family and Christian values and for his dogged defense of the sanctity of human life. What he has meant to our family and the cause of embryo adoption is incalculable, and we are eternally grateful. We are blessed to call him a friend.

JoAnn (Davidson) Eiman, affectionately known as J. D., was an integral part of our embryo adoption story and was indefatigable in committing her time and talents in getting the Snowflakes Embryo Adoption Program started. I tapped into her memory bank for her recollections of that time in our lives. A simple thank-you seems inadequate for the work she did on our behalf and for so many Snowflake babies that followed.

We are so grateful to all those at Focus on the Family, past and present, who were involved in our story and supported and embraced embryo adoption. These include Sydna Massé and Carrie Gordon Earll. Sydna was the point person in connecting us with the family that chose us to adopt their frozen embryos, and she happily recounted for me her memories of those days. Carrie, the vice president of government and public policy at Focus on the Family, eagerly embraced our cause and was instrumental in organizing our Washington, DC, trips.

Paul Batura, vice president of communications at Focus on the Family, his wife, Julie, and their three adopted children have become dear friends. Paul is a gifted writer whose latest book, *Chosen for Greatness: How Adoption Changes the World*, has been an inspiration and a source of encouragement to me. It should be as well to anyone considering adoption. Thank you, Paul.

Our church family at Zion Lutheran in Fallbrook, California, has continuously and enthusiastically supported us and our efforts to promote embryo adoption and tell Hannah's story. Thanks especially to our pastor, Rev. Aaron Pingel, and his wife, Kara, for their support.

I am grateful for those from the Snowflakes Embryo Adoption Pro-

gram who shared their stories with me—Debbie Struiksmā, Doni Brinkman, Courtney Atnip, Suzanne Murray, Heather Hutchens, Elizabeth Wilson, Lucinda McKenzie, Pastor Luke and Joni Timm, and Ruth Lawson. These are among the legion of Christians who selflessly advanced the cause and helped turn it into an important pro-life movement at a time when science was in need of a moral regulator.

Enough cannot be said for the staff at Nightlight Christian Adoptions, including Daniel Nehrbass, who had a tough act to follow when he was hired to succeed Ron Stoddart and has done so impressively, and Kimberly Tyson, the director of the Snowflakes Embryo Adoption Program, who has expertly guided and grown it. Both were interviewed for this project, and I thank them for their input.

Dana Chisholm, a passionate pro-life Christian, befriended Marlene at the outset of our story and fully embraced what we were trying to do. She also assisted me in finding an agent to represent this project. I thank her and that agent, Nick Harrison of WordServe Literary Group, who believed in this project and agreed to take it on.

The team at Kregel Publications—notably Steve Barclift, Katherine Chappell, Janyre Tromp, and Sarah De Mey—is an impressive one. Professional. Enthusiastic. Supportive. Helpful. It has been a pleasure working with everyone there.

Last but not least are the two most important people in this story, also the two most important in my life: Marlene and Hannah. Each has been a blessing to me, but together they've enriched my life beyond anything I could have imagined.



# Introduction

THE EAST ROOM of the White House often has been the scene of somber occasions. This was not one of them. Early in the afternoon on July 19, 2006, twenty-four young children—many of them “little wigglers,” as President George W. Bush called them—were on the East Room riser or in the audience with their parents, who had been invited there to bear witness to a historic stand on behalf of the sanctity of human life. The mood was celebratory.

My wife, Marlene, and our daughter, Hannah, adopted as a frozen embryo eight years earlier, took their assigned seats on the riser, just to the left of the presidential podium. Hannah was holding her small stuffed dog, named Lollipop, and was fidgety, as seven-year-olds are wont to be in formal settings. She was eager to return to the hotel swimming pool, though the baby on the lap of the woman next to her helped keep her somewhat occupied.

Finally, President Bush entered the room and strode to the podium to announce the first veto of his presidency, in his sixth year in office. It involved a bill Congress had passed, H.R. 810, that would have allowed federal funding for embryonic stem cell research that destroys human embryos in the process.

“This bill,” President Bush said, “would support the taking of innocent human life in the hope of finding medical benefits for others. It crosses a moral boundary that our decent society needs to respect, so I vetoed it.”

Those in the room erupted in applause. President Bush continued.

Like all Americans, I believe our nation must vigorously pursue the tremendous possibility that science offers to cure disease and improve the lives of millions. . . . Some scientists believe that one source of these cures might be embryonic stem cell research. Embryonic stem cells have the ability to grow into specialized adult tissues, and this may give them the potential to replace damaged or defective cells or body parts and treat a variety of diseases.

Yet we must also remember that embryonic stem cells come from human embryos that are destroyed for their cells. Each of these human embryos is a unique human life with inherent dignity and matchless value. We see that value in the children who are with us today. Each of these children began his or her life as a frozen embryo that was created for in vitro fertilization, but remained unused after the fertility treatments were complete. Each of these children was adopted while still an embryo, and has been blessed with the chance to grow up in a loving family.

These boys and girls are not spare parts.<sup>1</sup>

There it was: the most powerful man on earth speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves and distilling a complex issue into a simple truth: *These boys and girls are not spare parts.*

It was a momentous statement, and one that personally was the capstone of our journey that had begun nine years earlier with a simple desire to have a baby. God answered our prayers, but he did so in a way we never could have envisioned. Our adoption of frozen embryos evolved into a cause greater than ourselves by igniting a pro-life movement of a different sort, and a necessary one as science began to outrace ethical considerations.

Less than two months before Hannah was born, the world learned that stem cells extracted from human embryos could *potentially* lead

to cures for a vast number of diseases, though the embryos would be destroyed in the process. Hannah's birth was a timely reminder of what was at stake here. She put a human face to the debate, as did those babies that followed via embryo adoption. This was never our intention, though it became a necessary step to help counter the push for research that crossed ethical and moral boundaries.

Was this God's plan? As events unfolded, we began to suspect we were not in control. There were too many coincidences, too many pieces to a difficult puzzle that had to fall into place just for us to have a baby, at precisely the same time help was required to buttress the pro-life side of a contentious controversy that would sweep President George W. Bush and Pope John Paul II into its purview.

"God calls everybody to use the gifts and the passion that they have," renowned pastor Rick Warren once wrote, "but not everyone picks up the phone."<sup>2</sup>

Marlene did answer the call, unaware where it might lead or even that it was leading anywhere. She faithfully followed the cues, and they led to the birth of Hannah and the creation of the Snowflakes Embryo Adoption Program at Nightlight Christian Adoptions in Orange County, California.

These then led us to Colorado Springs, Colorado, for a meeting with Dr. James Dobson at Focus on the Family. That meeting led us to his radio studio for the first of several radio broadcasts and resulted in an enduring friendship. Dr. Dobson, with his vast global influence, became a vitally important voice in introducing the world at large to embryo adoption, which in turn became the viable and visible alternative to the destruction of human embryos for research purposes and the proverbial slippery slope to cloning.

When embryonic stem cell research and its potential as a cure-all reached the mainstream and became a contentious political issue, it took us to Washington, DC, and the halls of Congress. In a congressional subcommittee hearing, Marlene and others argued against

taxpayers funding the research that destroys the embryos, while facing formidable opposition that included Christopher Reeve, Michael J. Fox, and Mary Tyler Moore—each of whom we sympathized with and deeply admired.

We have this phrase displayed in our home: “God doesn’t call the qualified. He qualifies the called.” This was Marlene, who immersed herself in understanding the issues and became an eloquent and passionate advocate on behalf of those frozen embryos yet to be born. She studied up on the promising alternatives to using embryonic stem cells in research, including the use of adult and umbilical cord stem cells, which does not destroy human life.

Inevitably, her advocacy and passion to do what God has commanded, to care for the least of these, led our family and other Snowflake families to the White House on two occasions, in 2005 and 2006. We remain grateful to have had a staunchly pro-life president in office at the time. His veto did not stop embryonic stem cell research, but without federal funding, it did slow down substantially, buying time that allowed research on stem cells that does not destroy embryos to accelerate.

We have in a prominent place in our home a framed leaf from the first press run of the King James Bible from the year 1611. When I acquired it as an anniversary gift, I chose the leaf on which the book of Jeremiah begins, for the verse Jeremiah 1:5: “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.”

Jeremiah 1:5 has become our family verse. We have cited it frequently over the years in helping Hannah understand her roots and to explain the embryo adoption cause that she has enthusiastically embraced as morally and ethically the only alternative to research that destroys embryos.

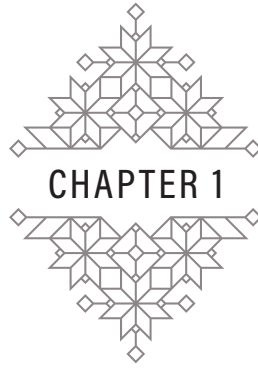
Though the cause began with Hannah, it became a movement when many other Christian couples—most, but not all, with infertility issues—also embraced the idea of embryo adoption. Thousands of



frozen embryos have thus been given a chance at life, not just through Nightlight Christian Adoptions but also through other adoption agencies and clinics around the country. In the years ahead, tens of thousands more frozen embryos are certain to be provided the same opportunity.

This is Hannah's story and our story, but it is theirs as well.





## CHAPTER 1

# What Would God Think?

LIFE GENERALLY HAD been good to Marlene and me in the eleven-plus years we had been married. We were both gainfully employed, Marlene as an occupational therapist and I as a sportswriter. We lived in a nice tract home in San Diego County. It had three bedrooms, two pets (a sheltie named Chelsea and a canary named Gordie), and one void.

We had no children.

We had put off having children for several years. Marlene had not had an opportunity to attend college following high school graduation, except for a brief stint at a community college. Together we made it a priority that she would pursue a degree and a career, so that if something happened to me, she still could comfortably support herself and our kids—once we had them. In 1991, she received her bachelor of science degree in occupational therapy from the University of Southern California and graduated magna cum laude.

Former Major League Baseball commissioner Peter Ueberroth was the USC commencement speaker that year, which interested me as a former baseball writer. Not long after witnessing Ueberroth's excellent commencement address, I needed to speak with him for a story I was working on for the *Orange County Register*. When I reached him by phone, I explained that I'd been there to hear his speech because my wife had graduated that day.

"Oh, what was her major?" Ueberroth asked.

"Occupational therapy," I said.

“She must be a caring person,” he replied.

His observation was spot-on. Her first job was with Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center in Downey, California. After our move to San Diego County she wound up at Sharp Hospital in San Diego, working in adult acute rehabilitation, often with patients who had suffered spinal cord injuries. In recent years, she has been employed by our local elementary school district, working with special needs kids.

We had our house in order, yet our house, five years after her graduation, still had two of its three bedrooms sadly unoccupied. Our next step was to find out why. We eventually went through costly, and unsuccessful, infertility treatments. We still retained hope that they might work, but our optimism was fading. Our next option: in vitro fertilization (IVF), though we weren't sold on that procedure.

“I got a lump in my throat and a pit in my stomach,” Marlene said later when our options came down to IVF. “I had a bad feeling. I knew they'd try to harvest as many eggs as possible and make embryos. I just thought, knowing me, that I would get pregnant the first time with quadruplets, and then what would I do with all these remaining embryos? I had that fear from the beginning.”

She broached the question with her friend and colleague Brenda.

“Maybe you could get another Christian couple to take them,” Brenda said.

Seeds are planted in a variety of ways.

Then came a gloomy morning in January of 1997, the gray sky reflecting our mood. Marlene and I had an appointment with our fertility doctor in San Diego. We were nearing wit's end. In vitro fertilization, we learned at that appointment, was not to become an option for us. The doctor politely explained that Marlene had premature ovarian failure, that pregnancy was not going to happen. The news was devastating. I was forty-four, Marlene thirty-seven. Time, for wannabe parents, was not on our side. What now?

Marlene, tears streaming down her face, recalled her conversation with Brenda.

“Do you have any embryos we could adopt?” she asked the doctor.

This was the first time the words *embryo* and *adopt* were mentioned together.

In vitro fertilization had allowed thousands of couples to conceive and complete their families, but in the process, far more embryos had been created than couples could use once their families were complete. Too many doctors viewed—and still view—IVF as a business transaction. You want a baby, they’ll virtually assure you one by producing as many embryos as they can to increase the odds, without considering the ethics of doing so. Hence, there were hundreds of thousands of embryos in frozen storage around the world.

Our doctor discussed with us our options, which revolved around the word *donor*. He suggested using donor eggs, but we considered that option unacceptable. Using donor eggs would represent the creation of life outside a marriage bond. He suggested frozen embryos from a donor. This was already being done, but it did not sit well with us, for several reasons. Couples anonymously donate their remaining embryos to a doctor who essentially is the ultimate authority on what is done with the embryos. We would know nothing about them other than maybe their hair and eye colors. “This is how you choose a car. This is not how we are going to grow our family,” Marlene said.

There are no screenings of the couples receiving the donated embryos, no home studies or background checks, as there would be in a traditional adoption. Moreover, these are lives, created at conception, and should not be treated as property. You donate money, food, clothing, time, but you don’t donate life.

We had officially arrived at our destination. We were now at wit’s end.

The rest of the day was a blur. We had driven in separate cars. Marlene had to report to work immediately following our appointment. I had a

pressing deadline on edits for a book I was writing on Tiger Woods and was headed home to work on them. When we reconvened at home later that day, we began discussing other options, including traditional adoption. However, Marlene's desire to experience pregnancy, a baby's first kick, and nursing a newborn was overwhelming, and she continued to return to the idea of adopting frozen embryos.

Adoption of this sort had never been done before. Was it even feasible? That was one question. Another more important one: Would doing so be acceptable in the eyes of God? Those who eventually provided the answers to both questions formed the foundation of our eventual belief that God was working in our lives and that this was his plan.



Early in our marriage, we were living in Irvine, California, where we attended Shepherd of Peace Lutheran Church. Shepherd of Peace was part of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), of which both of us had been members from birth. The church was less than two miles from Concordia University Irvine, one of several universities around the country that were part of the LCMS. Many of the faculty members at Concordia also were members at Shepherd of Peace, including Concordia's founder, the Rev. Dr. Charles Manske, and Pastor Robert Dargatz, a professor of religion. They and their wives, Barbara Manske and Mary Dargatz, soon became our good friends. We eventually moved to Diamond Bar, California, then to Vista in North San Diego County, but we kept in contact socially with the Manskes and Dargatzes, unaware that eventually they would factor into our embryo adoption story.

The first calls Marlene made in the wake of the devastating news from our fertility doctor were to Pastor Manske and Pastor Dargatz to pose the question: What would God think about our adopting frozen embryos? These men were pillars of our church body and better

equipped than anyone we knew to provide answers. Pastor Manske had earned his PhD in social ethics from the University of Southern California and later taught ethics at Concordia. Pastor Dargatz was on the Commission on Theology and Church Relations at the LCMS headquarters in St. Louis, and informed Marlene that the commission was in the process of publishing a document called *Procreative Choices: How Do God's Chosen Choose?*

The document did not discuss placing frozen embryos for adoption, simply because the subject had never before been raised. Nonetheless, Pastor Dargatz introduced Marlene to Rev. Dr. Sam Nafzger, the executive director of the commission. Marlene was in frequent contact with Rev. Nafzger, who was on board with what we wanted to do. "It is a wonderful opportunity that you have been given to lead the way in these new areas of reproductive technologies on the basis of the principles laid down in Holy Scripture," he wrote in a letter to us.

There was one more Christian source from whom Marlene wished to solicit an opinion. When she dialed the phone number, it set in motion a process that would help change not only our lives but the lives of thousands of others.

Every workday morning at seven-thirty, on her commute from Vista to San Diego, Marlene listened to Dr. James Dobson's radio show. Dr. Dobson, the son and grandson of Church of the Nazarene pastors, was the founder of the Christ-centered Focus on the Family and a psychologist with a PhD in child development from the University of Southern California. Marlene decided to reach out for help from Focus on the Family. She phoned its headquarters in Colorado Springs on Friday, January 24, 1997, three days before our twelfth anniversary.

"My husband and I want to adopt frozen embryos remaining from other couples' infertility treatments, and we want to know what God would think about that," she said to the person who answered the phone.

She was politely transferred to a counselor, to whom she repeated

her question. Marlene could hear the counselor typing on a computer, and when she was unable to find an answer, she transferred Marlene to a chaplain. She could hear him typing too, and again no answer was forthcoming. By now Marlene was in tears. Finally, almost in desperation, she asked, “Is there any way Dr. Dobson would answer this question for us?”

The chaplain put Marlene on hold while he contacted Dr. Dobson’s secretary. When he came back on the line, he said, “Dr. Dobson will be in his office on Monday. If you can get him a letter by Monday, we’ll see if he can answer it.”

In those days, Dr. Dobson—via his books, radio shows, and ministry at Focus on the Family—was at the height of his extraordinary popularity at home and abroad, and was among the preeminent Christian leaders in the nation. Focus on the Family received thousands of letters and phone calls each week from those seeking answers to difficult questions and help with any number of issues in their lives, and it employed a large trained staff to deal with them. For anyone without a prior relationship with him, the odds of reaching Dr. Dobson himself, though perhaps not on a scale of holding a winning lottery ticket, were exceedingly long.

Marlene is not a gambler, but she placed her bet anyway. She wrote the following letter, dated January 24, 1997, and sent it via FedEx on Saturday the 25th.

Dear Dr. Dobson,

My name is Marlene Strege and I have been a great fan and supporter of Focus for many years. Today, I spoke to your chaplain regarding a situation that my husband and I are involved in. Because of its complexity, we thought you could shed some light on it.

My husband and I will have been married for 12 years this Monday and have been trying to have children, but have been



unsuccessful. We started fertility treatments beginning last year. . . . We tried artificial insemination many times as well as fertility drugs for myself, including Metrodin. However, I did not respond to these as hoped with regards to increased egg production with higher doses.

After much prayerful consideration, we decided to go ahead with in vitro fertilization. . . . Last week, after completing our final tests for in vitro, our doctor informed John and me that my FSH [follicle-stimulating hormone] level was very high, which would indicate that I am no longer producing quality eggs. It was too unbearable for us to hear.

Marlene explained everything we had gone through, including options offered by our fertility doctor, among them using donor eggs. Her letter continues:

After much thought, these did not seem like viable choices. However, there is a couple the doctor knew of that had their family through in vitro and they are willing to donate the remaining frozen embryos to a couple.

John and I feel this would be similar to adopting, except at an earlier stage of development than most people adopt. I wish there was a place in the Bible I could go to look up answers to complex situations like this. I have longed to know what it's like to feel a baby's first kick, or to nurse a baby. . . .

Dr. Dobson, how do you think you would answer the questions I've raised? I listen to your program regularly and trust your judgment. To my knowledge, I don't think you've addressed this issue of possible "adoption" of embryos.

You probably don't respond to letters often; I know you are extremely busy. I hope you find it in your heart to drop me a line. Thank you so much for listening to me!

Several days passed, and it began to seem as though the letter was for naught. Then on the following Saturday, the phone rang and Marlene answered.

“Hello, is this Mrs. Streeg, Marlene Streeg?” the caller asked.

“Strege,” Marlene replied, correcting the pronunciation (STRAY-gee, hard G).

“Boy, did I mess up that name,” the caller said. “Does my voice sound familiar?”

Her immediate thought, oddly, was that someone from the University of Southern California, her alma mater, was calling to solicit a donation.

“Dr. Dobson?” she finally said, incredulously. She was surprised that he was calling, that he was doing so directly rather than having his secretary make the call, and that he was doing so on a Saturday.

They talked for several minutes, and he explained to her that he had never been asked this question and had sought counsel himself. He said he had consulted a pastor; a board member of Focus on the Family; and Dr. Joe McIlhaney, a devout Christian who was among his legion of advisers and a frequent radio guest. Dr. McIlhaney, a gynecologist and infertility specialist based in Austin, Texas, had also been an adviser on social issues to then Texas governor George W. Bush.

Dr. Dobson had initially been skeptical about what we were proposing and expressed his concerns. Dr. McIlhaney, who later became our friend (and my occasional golf partner), asked Dr. Dobson a pointed rhetorical question.

“Jim,” he said, “what will happen to those embryos if they are not adopted?”

With that, Dr. Dobson’s skepticism vanished. He was on board. He explained to Marlene during their phone conversation that, although he couldn’t speak for God, he believed it would be acceptable to adopt frozen embryos from another couple with these caveats:

- None would be selectively aborted when multiple babies resulted from an embryo transfer.
- The parties would be tested for STDs prior to any transfer.
- No more than three embryos at a time would be transferred.

Later that year, in his book *Solid Answers*, Dr. Dobson addressed the issue in greater detail, including a fourth caveat, that “an attorney should handle the relinquishing of rights” by the placing couple as well as overseeing the formal adoption process.<sup>1</sup>

“I would tend to see the option you’ve been offered as ‘adoption’ at an earlier stage of development,” he wrote. “For an infertile couple such as yourselves to participate in this type of procedure may not be a violation of God’s law. From a theological standpoint, I believe the fertilized eggs in question already have an eternal soul (which occurred at the moment of fertilization). . . . By implanting them, you would merely be rescuing embryos that have no other possibility of life.”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Dobson had echoed the conclusions we had received from Pastors Manske, Dargatz, and Nafzger that God very likely would approve of embryo adoption. The theological question answered, two more questions awaited us: How do we go about this, and how do we connect with couples willing to put their frozen embryos up for adoption rather than donation?

They were complicated questions only to us. The answers came without a great deal of difficulty, again an early indication to us that God had his own plan for us—that we needed to “walk by faith, not by sight,” as Paul noted in his second letter to the Corinthians, and that God was working in our lives.