

I find that I am battling language these days in an attempt to talk about pregnancy in a real way. The first word I bumped up against was the word “unwanted” when paired with pregnancy. On the face of it, a pregnancy that is terminated is obviously not wanted. Ah, but sit with a woman and talk about her decision and the word grows more ill-fitting by the minute. “Oh, I really do want this baby,” they say and then the “but” drops down and everything changes. Dr. George Tiller wisely notes that “until you understand the heart of a woman, nothing about abortion makes any sense at all.” That helps to explain the words of a woman who writes to her never-to-be-born child, “I love you with all my heart, and can’t wait for the time when we can be together.” Clearly, “unwanted” doesn’t tell the whole story.

The next adjective I tangled with was “unintended”. It turns out that a large percentage of pregnancies are not intended, as in “Honey, let’s make a baby tonight.” Likewise, many unintended pregnancies turn out to be babies with no ill effects due to the lack of foresight of their parents. So, the word tells us more about our relationship to birth control than to the outcome of a pregnancy. And there is a judgmental edge to the word with the implicit next sentence, “Why weren’t you using birth control?!” It goes without saying that the intentionality of the male partner is rarely on the table for discussion.

For all of the same reasons, I tangled with “unplanned”. It also seems to me to be a covert advertisement for Planned Parenthood. “Planned” and “unplanned” do conjure up contrasting worlds of neat orderly families with 2.3 children versus chaotic, crazy people with messy lives. It’s a sort of class thing that makes me want to root for the, uh, more spontaneous group.

But the real problem with both unintended and unplanned is that sometimes it’s just not true. It brings to my mind the couple that tried one last in vitro fertilization and decided three weeks later that the successful treatment was not welcome. Or the second trimester patient who was happy about having a baby until her boyfriend left her. We want to believe that our intentions matter, but the truth is, life is uncertain and sometimes where we end up doesn’t match where we wanted to go.

For a while, I favored the word “unexpected” to describe pregnancies that ended in abortion. It has the same problems as “unintended”, but it more clearly matches the incredulity women

experience when test after test turns positive. It's as if we are a pre-cognizant people who don't quite get the connection between sexual intercourse and pregnancy. Even though "unexpected" captures the element of shock, it also encourages us to selectively view women as hapless, ignorant, and most certainly, in denial. It would be equally foolish to call motorcycle accidents involving young men as "unexpected."

By now, I am wondering what these or any adjectives do for the word pregnancy. Far from enriching their nouns, as good adjectives should, these serve to distance the speaker from something quite disturbing and negative. If intentionality, good planning, awareness, and control (birth control, impulse control, etc.) are exercised, then only those OTHER women get pregnant when they don't want/ intend/ plan/ expect to. The adjectives, then, are a false reassurance that we will not end up in an abortion clinic.

These pregnancy adjectives are an illusion of protection for a population in denial about sex. As modifiers of a noun they don't help us much to understand why 43% of all women choose to end their pregnancies. The labeling of "other", the implicit "blame the victim" slant reveal volumes about a culture that is trying to create dyads of good and bad mothers, life-givers and murderers, good girls and sexually promiscuous sluts. If we continue to use these adjectives without examining this baggage, their use will perpetuate dualities that we don't agree with and obscure the fact that every woman has decisions to make when she discovers she is pregnant.

We need to take a collective step back and consider that there is just pregnancy, feelings about it, and decisions about what's the best thing to do. And there are just women, all at different times and situations in their lives; most are mothers or will become mothers at some point in their lives. And their sex lives, adherence to morality, and compliance with birth control cannot be discerned by the outcome of their pregnancies. To assume that one kind of woman chooses abortion and another a baby is simply wrong. To think that women who continue their pregnancies are always happy about it is wishful.

If we can clear the clutter of adjectives from the word pregnancy, perhaps the choices a woman faces will be clearer to us as a culture. If there are no good and bad women, wanted or unwanted pregnancies, intended or unintended results, there is pregnancy, and the significance we attach to it. From that vantage point, every pregnancy presents a decision within a particular set of circumstances. When we stop distancing ourselves from the women who choose abortion, we can appreciate that everyone touched by the state of pregnancy has the potential to understand the concept of choice.

As humans, it is our lot to create meaning for ourselves. Given the freedom and space to do so, women will weave a complex picture of their lives, the needs of their families, their own goals and hopes into good decisions--without our adjectives modifying their pregnancies.

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