



Do You Have Kids?

BY ANNA FRLAN

“Do you have kids?” After 17 years of marriage, my husband and I have become so used to this question that I feel like the answer comes out automatically — like when a doctor taps your knee with a little hammer to check reflexes.

“No, we don’t have our own children, because we lost the ability to have kids. However, let me share a bit of our story.”



I journeyed for years through chronic pain, with no real answers from medical professionals. I lost count of how many scans and tests were done on me — some of which were incredibly painful. Simple meals sometimes caused my body to go into a high level of inflammatory pain and shock. I cried out to God because I didn't know what else to do with the unbearable pain. One time the pain was so intense that I started convulsing and going in and out of consciousness. My husband's quick thinking — to give me an antihistamine — kept me out of the emergency room that time.

I often needed rest to let my body reset, making the pain more manageable. Some days my brain would tell my arms and legs to move, but they wouldn't cooperate; I needed help just getting out of bed. As I lay helpless, I was still peaceful, trusting that God would take care of everything, even if I never got my mobility back. Those experiences help me empathize with people going through medical conditions that limit their ability to control their pain and muscles.

What finally led to discovering what was going on in my body happened only by God's grace.

My husband and I felt led to move from where we'd lived for 11 years to a town closer to my parents. The move uprooted us from a community and life we loved — from a church family we loved. We didn't understand why we felt God nudging us to move, but we knew we needed to listen to His direction. For months, we continued to pray together about this, read God's Word, and seek wisdom from our church, friends, and family. We were in worship, blessed and nourished by receiving Christ's body and blood, and relied on our great God to direct us. Members of our church encouraged us to follow what God had laid on our hearts. My husband works in education, so when the school year ended, we moved.

After we settled, I met a new general practitioner — my 16th medical professional — and the first one to mention endometriosis. "Endo what?!" I had no idea what that was. By this time, I was in constant chronic pain. I had lost so much mobility that I had

to use a wheelchair if I wanted to go further than a block, and I had a handicap parking pass. Sometimes, my muscles wouldn't respond when I was telling my arms and legs to move. I worked with a dietician to gain weight and was on an anti-inflammatory diet, but my body was unable to fully absorb nutrition; I weighed barely 100 pounds.

As my new doctor explained endometriosis to me, the years of pain, limited mobility, tests, and medical professionals unable to come to a diagnosis finally made sense. Each medical professional had done their very best and provided amazing care to me, for which I am grateful. My new doctor connected me with additional surgeons — one of them specializing in gynecological oncology surgeries.

Two robotic surgeries followed, and my uterus, cervix, fallopian tubes, and ovaries were removed. Post-op biopsies showed that each body part that was removed had something wrong with it — multiple cysts, hemorrhaging cysts, pre-cancerous cells, a tumor, etc. In hindsight, if we hadn't moved, I probably would be either fully wheelchair-bound or no longer alive. We praise God for His goodness and direction.

One in ten women have some form of endometriosis, a condition that is caused by uterine cells growing outside of the uterus. Because there isn't a way for the rogue uterine cells to exit, they form adhesions inside the body. The adhesions are similar to a mass of sticky cobwebs, just thicker, more difficult to get rid of, and more damaging. Over time, these adhesions can build up and, typically, cause a great deal of pain. In some cases, the adhesions can hinder organs from functioning properly, and, in rare cases, can lead to death.

After I woke up from the second surgery, I remember sitting, propped upright, in the hospital bed and being able to take deep breaths. I couldn't remember the last time my abdominal cavity had been able to expand fully. Up until that point, I hadn't even realized that the endometriosis had also affected my ability to breathe deeply. There were no more adhesions pulling on my insides, causing me to hunch over. I could now feel the space inside my torso, and it felt like

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Anna and her husband, Daniel, live in Southwest Washington and attend Grace Lutheran Church in Longview, where they love to hear God's Word. They enjoy playing music together, gardening, and sharing time with friends and family. Anna invests in others through her full-time work as a program coordinator, which gives her great joy as she connects employees with training, leadership development, and coaching to help them flourish.

God had given me a new body. People — even strangers — frequently comment on how much I smile. I smile a lot because I have so much for which I am thankful.

One of my favorite verses is Mark 5:34: *And he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your affliction.'*

I understand the wave of relief that woman must have felt after Jesus healed her body and she could go on her way in complete peace.

It can be painful and personal to talk about chronic health conditions. If it were up to me, I would block all the memories of my life with endometriosis and just focus on the new life I have now — one where I'm no longer in pain and no longer have to use a wheelchair. It can also be painful to leave the comfort of one church family, but the blessing is that God's family isn't confined to one congregation. We can be blessed by others, and we can bless others wherever we live. We're called to steward our stories and share them with others. It has been five years since my last surgery. I am thankful for all the medical professionals and their incredible care in helping me. I have faith that maybe my story will help lead others to a faster diagnosis so they can get the medical care they need sooner.

I recently shared my story with a large group — how God was with me through my journey with endometriosis. A woman who lives hundreds of miles away from me reached out to me after hearing it. She was suffering from similar physical pain, and her healthcare team hadn't been able to find a solution for her. Soon after, she was able to travel the long distance to connect with my surgeon. He was able to help her. She is forever grateful that she got to hear my story, and we know that God connected us at just the right time.

God gives generously. What I have learned is that where there is pain and suffering, there is the opportunity for a greater strengthening of our faith and a deeper awareness of our complete dependance on God. Now, I'm grateful to have gone through those years of pain and suffering. I feel blessed to have my mobility back and that I'm no longer in constant pain. I'm filled with gratitude to God, because I know not everyone experiences healing like I've been given.

I wish that others did not have to face health challenges, and yet I know that God's ways are higher than my ways. My prayer for others going through chronic conditions is frequently, "Dear God, please heal them and comfort them. You see them and love them. Help them know You are with them and that You understand pain and suffering. Your will be done in Your time. I surrender this to You. Take care of it in the way that would best bring You glory. I trust You. In Jesus' name. Amen."

There is a peace and beauty that comes from leaving things in God's hands, trusting that His ways are best. While I don't have any children, I'm blessed with amazing nieces and nephews, and my husband works in education. So, when people ask us, "Do you have kids?," I share our story and tell them how God has generously given us the ability to be a blessing in the lives of many of His children. *Q*