Professionally Speaking…

by Denise M. Paul MA, CT, CPLC

Mona Lisa's Smile

Mona Lisa's smile has captivated viewers with its mysterious allure for centuries. The painting is visited in the Louvre Museum in Paris by an estimated 10 million people each year. Many have speculated about what lies beneath her subtle expression. Some suggest it hints at hidden sorrow – perhaps the pain of loss. Imagine if she had lost a baby. Her gentle smile might mask deep grief, reflecting a story untold behind her eyes. I once read that Mona Lisa had indeed lost a baby. Art experts and historians believe that she was pregnant when this painting was created, as suggested by the garments that she is wearing, and the placement of her hands. Let's imagine that she did lose a baby, and that she was pregnant with another baby in this photo.

This would explain her indifferent facial expression. She didn't know whether to be happy or sad. She wondered if people would judge her for being happy after having lost a baby. Conversely, would people judge her for being sad while pregnant with a new baby? I have facilitated over one hundred Subsequent Pregnancy Support groups with women who are pregnant again following a loss. These women feel both joy at being pregnant again, and sorrow from their previous loss. Managing the complex emotions that come after a baby's death is a difficult task, and this becomes even more complicated when they are expecting a Rainbow Baby. Some mothers choose not to use the term "Rainbow Baby" because it may imply that everything is now fine, or that the new child will take away the pain of their loss. The mothers I've supported emphatically state that their Rainbow Baby is <u>not</u> a replacement, despite what some outsiders might assume.

As a Certified Grief Counselor, I support bereaved mothers in recognizing both joy and sorrow. Many parents are more intentional in their grieving during subsequent pregnancies, as they honor the memory of their lost baby and ensure that they are not forgotten. I often share the expression, "God gave us two hands—one to hold our joy, and one to hold our sorrow." This is meant to help mothers balance their emotions. It's important to mourn the loss, while also finding happiness and bonding with the baby that they are expecting.

Some mothers need encouragement and permission to feel happiness during a later pregnancy. They often describe themselves as "cautiously optimistic," acknowledging their fear of not carrying a healthy baby to term. Though I empathize with their concerns, my wish is that every baby be anticipated and welcomed with genuine joy.

Mona Lisa may have been holding many feelings behind that expression. Each of us can probably relate to this photo in some way. If you have suffered a huge loss of any kind, but you still have much to be grateful for, perhaps this photo portrays your feelings. If you have lost a baby, but are blessed with other children, perhaps this photo speaks to you too!

Leonardo da Vinci may be the only one who could answer the question, "Was she happy or was she sad?" Perhaps she was both.