

The 27-Year-Old Infant

I've been watching *The Mandalorian* lately. It's not my favorite Western and I am not a Star Wars fanboy, but I admit that it is entertaining.

The best character is Baby Yoda, an infant of an alien species with big ears, which, I am told, has no name. The interesting factoid, for the purposes of *MercatorNet*, is that Baby Yoda, who appears to be about six months old and gurgles accordingly, is actually 50.

All this happens, of course, in a galaxy far, far away. Here on Planet Earth the closest being to Baby Yoda is a smiling infant named Molly Gibson. When Molly celebrates her first birthday on October 26 next year, she will be 28 years old. That's nearly the age of her mother, Tina.

This sounds like one of those mediaeval riddles that the Anglo-Saxons loved. But it has a very modern answer.

Molly was adopted as an embryo by her parents, Tina and Ben, through the National Embryo Donation Center (NEDC), in Knoxville, Tennessee. Her genetic sibling Emma was born three years ago.

Molly now holds the record for the longest life as a frozen embryo, 27 years. Her sister was the previous record-holder, at 24 years.

There is a handful of embryo adoption agencies in the U.S. Founded in 2003, the NEDC has organized about 1,000 embryo adoptions and births. It conducts around 200 transfers each year. As in traditional adoption, couples can decide if they would like a "closed" or "open" adoption. The latter allows some form of contact with the donor family. This ranges from an occasional email to a cousin-like relationship, [the NEDC](#)

[told the BBC](#).

The NEDC has a strongly Christian ethos and “firmly believes in the sanctity of life beginning at conception and recognizes marriage as a sacred union between man and woman as defined by scriptures of the Holy Bible.” It has received more than U.S. \$3.9 million in federal funding.

The concept of embryo adoption poses thorny ethical problems, especially for Christians. The Vatican published a document which discussed the issue, [Dignitatis Personae](#), in 2008. It took a dim view of initiatives like the NEDC. Embryo adoption, like surrogate motherhood, though “praiseworthy with regard to the intention of respecting and defending human life” would lead to “other problems of a medical, psychological and legal nature.”

But the Vatican recognized that the existence of millions of frozen embryos is also a perplexing challenge to human rights.

All things considered, it needs to be recognized that the thousands of abandoned embryos represent a situation of injustice which in fact cannot be resolved. Therefore John Paul II made an ‘appeal to the conscience of the world’s scientific authorities and in particular to doctors, that the production of human embryos be halted, taking into account that there seems to be no morally licit solution regarding the human destiny of the thousands and thousands of “frozen” embryos which are and remain the subjects of essential rights and should therefore be protected by law as human persons.’

But not only Christians find this troubling. It is a matter of great interest to the fertility industry and a lot of research has been done into how people think about their frozen embryos.

Often after an IVF procedure, there are “surplus” frozen embryos. According to the NEDC, one million human embryos are

in cold storage in the United States at the moment. If that's true, there could be as many as two million across the globe. They basically have four options: donate them to another couple, donate them to science, destroy them, or do nothing.

What striking is the ambivalence that most people show about their embryos – which are specks of nothing, according to abortion activists.

In fact, the IVF industry dislikes the term “embryo adoption.” “The issue in the medical community is that by calling it ‘adoption,’ we give too much personhood to the embryo,” Kimberly Tyson, of Snowflakes Embryo Adoption, a Colorado agency, told [The New York Times](#). “As Christians, of course we believe they're persons. But for the reproductive medical community, if you bestow humanity to the nascent human embryo, you're interfering with other services that they like very much.”

But people instinctively think of “their” embryos as human beings. In a study which has been repeatedly confirmed, [American researchers found](#) that “only 6% of participating families favored donating their embryos to others.” Despite sentimental rhetoric about “helping others” and “giving back,” they could not bear to think of another couple raising their child. “I could never donate my embryos because I'd be certain that I'd spend the rest of my life looking for what I would still consider my child,” [wrote CNN journalist Elissa Strauss](#).

People are more inclined to donate their embryos to science because it's less tangled emotionally. “Re-conceptualizing embryos as a socially beneficial, ‘valuable,’ and ‘precious’ resource allowed participants to both ‘close the chapter’ on both their infertility and their associated emotional attachment to the embryos and satisfy altruistic personal values without having to confront entangling kinship ambiguities and responsibilities,” wrote the American researchers.

However, even this option is painful. Clara Pirani, a journalist at *The Australian*, [confessed that](#) she could not bear the thought of her embryos being used as raw materials for experiments.”

As a former health editor I'd spent years covering the phenomenal benefits of medical research but when it came time to decide, I just couldn't donate our embryos to science. While I'm not at all religious, I also couldn't allow them to succumb, the potential for life evaporating as they defrosted to nothingness. What I kept coming back to was this fact: we had a rare, life-changing gift to give.

So the embryos stay frozen. And their numbers keep increasing. They're not human enough to refrain from creating them in a Petri dish; they're too human to dispose of. It's “a situation of injustice which in fact cannot be resolved.” Molly was one of the lucky ones.

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