

Non-Biological Perspective

I don't think there was ever a conversation between my wife and I about whether or not we'd have kids. It was a given. I can't remember asking Teri if she wanted children; though I'm sure we talked about it and realized we both wanted them at some point and it was never going to be a debate.

During the times that one of us would mention off-hand our future as a family with children, friends and family members often were curious as to how we'd accomplish that. Inevitably, someone would laugh and say, "Oh, there's always a turkey baster!" And that became the standing joke when the question of how we would achieve a pregnancy arose. As a young lesbian, I didn't give it much further thought.

A few years back, I found myself flooded in intense pregnancy-and-baby-wanting hormones. It was all I could think about, talk about, dream about. My wife was not in that place, and was daunted by my **need** for babies **now**.

One of my most trusted coping mechanisms became research. I researched anything and everything that could possibly be related to fertility, conception, pregnancy, birth, and most particularly, how to get pregnant when you don't have a male partner to bring the sperm. It was in this way that I discovered the wide world of sperm banks and "assisted reproduction". Whoa - did I suddenly have a lot to consider, or what?

I'd kept Teri up to date on all my findings, and we knew we wanted our children to one day have the option to contact their donor, so no problems there. We chose a sperm bank, we chose a donor (painstakingly, might I add), we chose a prenatal provider/birthing location. We chose to have the sperm shipped directly to our home so we could attempt to conceive our child without a doctor or meds. We chose to inseminate Teri first - she had better benefits and maternity leave options!

At first, I struggled with the idea of not getting to be pregnant after months of yearning. Then, I struggled with knowing that she would be first, and somehow, the two things were very separate from each other. Teri was going to have morning sickness, and her belly was going to swell, and she was going to feel that baby inside her. I had a short but intense bout of serious jealousy.

Sometimes when things don't go as I imagine, I punish myself with negativity. I think at times I'm really trying to cause myself pain by envisioning the worst and most hurtful things I can think of about the situation.

*"Teri is going to get all the attention because her pregnancy will be first. Someday when it's my turn, pregnancy will be old news because we'll also have a toddler running around and people won't be as excited about **me** and **my** baby. Teri is more special than I am, this baby will be more special than any babies who follow."*

In the midst of countless conversations about adding to our family, I managed only to think that my darling wife was subtracting something. How wrong of me. And yet, at our cores, desire and jealousy are very human emotions. I think it only would be legitimately wrong if I still felt those hurtful and negative things were true. Time and experience are the greatest of healers.

Once Teri became pregnant, we were unfathomably elated; full of so much joy it seemed we would burst. Finally, I was going to become a Mama.

Months into the pregnancy, my fears and doubts had been slowly rising to the surface and percolating until I began feeling some anxiety about parenting a child who wasn't related to me nor birthed by me. In my years of helping care for my foster brothers and sisters, babysitting countless children, and even loving our own foster children, never before had I doubted myself so much.

I felt like I drew the short straw. It devastated me to think that Teri got all the advantage when it came to this baby. She already was going to know this child when it was born, and I would be a stranger. She got to feel every time the baby bumped around, every hiccup and startle. She knew where the baby was lying, if she was asleep or awake. Once the baby was born, Teri was going to be able to breastfeed her and soothe her while nobody else could. I started feeling worthless, doomed to fail before our daughter even opened her eyes or took her first breath.

Slowly, our daughter started feeling more like Teri's daughter. The longer I fixated on all the things I wasn't going to be able to do, to help with, the worse it became. Soon, the baby Teri had been so carefully growing was further from me than ever before. The chasm was simply too wide to make the leap across.

I tentatively reached out to other queer families, other parents whom I thought would understand and be helpful. But all anybody had to say was to stop worrying. "You'll be fine, you'll see." It was incredibly isolating. I stopped telling people I was worried about being a mom; I didn't want to be perceived as weak or scared, even though I was.

As our daughter's due date loomed, I simply accepted that I couldn't tell the future. I didn't know what I didn't know, so I might as well just wait and see what happened after she got here. Despite my strongly-rooted concerns, I was really excited to finally meet her.

Teri went into labor right on time and our daughter was born on her due date. During the birth, I lay next to my wife and held her leg and sponged off her arms and legs and face with a cool cloth. I watched with mounting happiness as our daughter Everleigh made her way into the world and was laid atop Teri. The midwife and the nurse rubbed the baby vigorously to get her to cry, and while they cleaned her up I noticed a disconnect within myself. That baby couldn't be mine. Teri looked at her, studied her face, touched all her little features, crooned

soothingly to her. I didn't feel jealous that she was holding her. I had waited for so long for this baby, this moment, and all I felt was a disconcerting lack of desire to hold the baby.

Teri looked up at me and asked, "Do you want to hold her?" I could only manage to nod my head yes, and she passed me Everleigh, bundled in a blanket.

I cradled her up against my body, as I've held countless babies before her, and I looked down into her dark blue eyes. She saw my face; she saw me. I think in that tiny thread of time when her gaze captured mine, she saw everything. I was on display to her, and she changed me. Something inside my daughter is stronger than the demons I had flooding my better instincts. She told me that she needed me, and that more importantly, she **wanted** me.

The dam burst.

The wall fell.

The mask shattered.

All the barriers I'd been unconsciously erecting between me and our baby disappeared the night she was born. I can see now, in retrospect, that I was trying to protect myself from the perceived threat of rejection. Distance myself so that I might recover if this baby didn't claim me as one of her mothers.

Suddenly, I found I was caught in a torrent of hope and joy and longing and relief. Overwhelming gratitude. I was swept away by the strength of what my heart had been waiting for my mind to finally see - that this child doesn't know anything different than having two mothers. She only knows that she's got two moms who adore her. One mom grew her and birthed her, and one mom waited for her and loved her all the while.

Our daughter is going to be 3 months old tomorrow. In that time, all she's really done is prove to me over and over again that I can do this. That she loves me for me. Every time I see her after getting home from work and I get a huge gummy grin, my heart melts all over again. Every time I pick her up when she's upset and she stops crying, I feel proud and I feel validated.

Now, that all having been said, I would be lying if I told you that there weren't still some things that bothered me about being her non-biological parent.

It's unfortunate, but every time someone mentions how much she is like Teri, or her genetic relationship with Teri, it stings me. I've tried to convince myself that a celebration of the person she **is** related to is not automatically a slam on the person she is **not** related to. The pang of regret I feel every time Teri's supportive and loving family claims one of Ever's traits as their own is lessening with time, but it's still there. It's not their fault that it hurts me, and I hope they realize that. I believe that as Everleigh ages, she'll start exhibiting traits that she learned from me. A quirked eyebrow, a certain phrase or way of standing on one leg. Those

things will undoubtedly make my heart sing and help in continuing to validate me, and I hope that the pain of not being genetically related will abate with more time.

I've wondered about the day that Everleigh finally does get to meet her donor. Will I feel inadequate? Irrelevant? Unimportant? Somehow, I just don't worry about that part. I don't feel threatened by the man who lives on inside our daughter. I feel grateful. I feel happy that someday Ever will have the opportunity to know him, if she wants. I will have been given the pleasure and privilege to raise our beautiful daughter for eighteen years, and she's going to know the depth of my love for her. Wanting to know her biological father can't take away my love for her, or her love for me.

I think the most important thing I've come to realize is that I am a work in progress. As Everleigh is learning new things all the time, I am also learning new things about myself. I cannot know what's around the next corner, but I can control how quickly or slowly I walk, and how carefully or recklessly I decide to proceed. My biggest challenge is getting out of my own way!

Every single day, I get to watch this little life grow and change. She is a gift, a person and a relationship I treasure and hold close. Despite my many fears before her birth, she is every ounce my daughter and every day she shows me that I am every bit her Mama. I am a better and a stronger person because of our Ev.