

CHAPTER 7

WHEN THE CHILDREN GROW UP

BY KAREN,

A DONOR-CONCEIVED WOMAN AND MOTHER

At the age of 18, after the death of my father, my mother told me that I was donor conceived. That was more than 20 years ago.

Although I have had time to reflect, explore, research and embrace the nature of my conception as part of my personal narrative, I still wrestle as a grown adult with the issues I share with many of the donor conceived, who inevitably struggle to find comfort in the unknown parts of their genetic identity.

First, my background. I am the only child of parents who tried eight years to conceive before turning to infertility specialists. It was determined that a childhood illness suffered by my father rendered him infertile. They were devastated. Although they did consider adoption, they believed that extended family might have difficulty accepting an adopted child as one of their own. My mother found a local doctor who was willing to help her conceive through the use of an anonymous donor. I was born in upstate New York in 1966.

As a young adult, I attended college in Boston, then moved to Manhattan to work in advertising. I live in the Northeast with my husband, and am a stay-at-home mother to two school-aged children.

In keeping with the times, my parents were advised to keep the origins of my birth confidential, and to pretend that the insemination

never happened. But the secret was a terrible burden on them. They had no outlets, other than each other, and felt trapped and alone in keeping this secret. My mother confessed to me that it was an underlying source of tension within their marriage.

It also had created an inequality in their parenting relationship with me, which I detected in innumerable ways—through subtle clues, innuendos and vague responses that human nature couldn't disguise.

For example, whenever I attempted to find similarities with my Dad and his side of the family—which I brought up quite a few times—my parents would smile, avert their eyes, and change the subject.

My mother intensely researched her family's genealogy. When I expressed interest in my paternal family history, I was given the impression that it wasn't significant.

My mother revealed the truth after my father passed away from cancer. The emotions I felt — and continue to feel — are difficult to describe.

Mixed Emotions

I was being told that my biological father was a nameless, faceless person. All the experiences that I thought I understood about my identity, I began to second guess. I was shocked, but it answered so many unspoken questions.

At the same time, I felt illegitimate, ashamed, unrecognized and abandoned by my biological father. This might sound melodramatic to people who haven't been donor conceived, but quite honestly, the questions I pondered in my early adult years included: Why wouldn't he want to know me or be a part of my life? Didn't this mean I was a shameful secret, not only in my own family, but in my biological father's family as well? When I saw people I resembled I wondered, is that Him? Could that be my half-sister or brother?

I knew I could never ask these questions out loud. They would sound absurd. In hindsight, I can see that my self esteem was faltering, but I

never shared my feelings with anyone.

Yet I was grateful to know this truth about myself. My mother knew that it would create as many questions as it answered, but she respected and trusted my ability to decide what this meant to me.

She had given me the knowledge I needed to grow as a person. The disclosure marked the beginning of my journey in search for my full identity and, ultimately, allowed me to find greater meaning and understanding.

What I Did With the Information

After the disclosure, I felt alone but never angry. I was too busy putting all the pieces of the rest of my puzzle together. I would quiz my mother occasionally about the particulars of my conception. I was apprehensive about believing the story, but I couldn't imagine that she would have made it up.

Nonetheless, I kept asking, looking for inconsistencies in her story. Did she know for sure daddy was infertile? Why did they decide to do it? Why didn't they adopt? Who was the doctor? How was it done? How many times? Most importantly, who is my biological father?

She could answer all the questions but the last one. The only thing she could tell me about Him was the information that her doctor had given her.

In the 1960's, the donor was a doctor in the same area that we lived, of Northern European heritage, with a family 'of his own.' Other than that, it was up to my imagination.

My imagination left me with so many more questions and revelations. I might have more grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. I might even have siblings! I was excited. I couldn't wait to find these people and introduce myself. We shared a biological connection. We were family! I was sure they'd want to meet me.

My mother, who loved me more than anyone, realized that the information she had to offer was not enough for me. She contacted the doctor who inseminated her and he agreed to speak with me on the telephone.

Closed Doors

I was so nervous when the time came that I could barely speak. I didn't know how to organize all my questions. My voice was quivering. My mind went blank. He simply repeated to me what he had already told my mother. Although he was not forthcoming, as I stumbled through my questions I managed to find out that the donors he used all shared German ancestry and had no family history of inheritable diseases.

He suggested that my dad might still, in fact, be my biological father. I didn't question it. We said goodbye. I hung up the phone and cried for my two lost fathers.

I swallowed my emotions and clung to the doctor's suggestion that my Dad might still be my biological father, but intuitively I knew it wasn't so.

Time has passed quickly, as well as my hope for resolution. I am now married with children and it has become clear that the repercussions of my biological father's anonymity have extended far beyond my own personal enigmas. Our children's full genetic identities, heritage, ancestry, connections and family medical histories have been compromised as well. They are prohibited from knowing who their genetic cousins are, which brings the risk of accidental consanguinity. But regrettably the door is closed. I will never know for certain who my biological father is and I cannot take my search any further.

Belonging

Thankfully, my Dad—the man who agreed to my conception and unselfishly raised me as his own—was a beautiful person and I would never have attempted to replace him.

I wish I could have told my Dad that it doesn't matter whether he and I were biologically connected, that I could not have loved him more if he were my own genetic father.

In fact, knowing the full truth, and the unacknowledged personal sacrifices that my Dad made for the sake of his family, has only added to my adoration.

After all, I am the product of my parents' union. I was conceived of their love and intentionally brought into this world because of their commitment and desire for a child. In our particular situation, any relationship with the donor would have created further complexities and tensions within both of our families.

What Bothers Me the Most?

We know how difficult it can be to blend families, from the experiences of children (and adults) of divorce. But in my case, it was decided by the loved ones in my life, as directed by the professional advice of the era, that I should not know, for at least the first 18 years of my life, the existence of another person who enabled me to be.

Even after I was told the true nature of my conception I was encouraged to consider him as nothing more than a source of some of my DNA, a "mere sperm donor." This was considered to be in all of our best interests.

Yet no one discussed the psychological burden involved in keeping the secret. No one considered how my Dad might feel raising a child conceived by his wife and another (albeit unknown) man. No one anticipated that I might someday learn the truth and have to deal with all the years of unknowing. No one predicted how I would feel about the truth of my origins. And no one speculated about how important this missing piece would be to my children and me.

Our forebears are a part of us in a very deep and profound way. It is my strong view that it is misleading and dehumanizing to refer to my disconnected genetic father—my children's genetic grandfather—as

nothing more than a mere “donor.”

I feel that to intentionally reduce a genetic parent to nothing more than a source of sperm or egg demeans our need for genetic identity, heritage, ancestry and connections.

Especially as an adult, with children of my own, I do not like to be told how I should feel, or what I should call, the person who is one-half of my genetic make-up.

In my situation, I understand why this well intentioned “service” was contingent on anonymity. Although that does not make it any less painful to feel that the person who is a permanent part of my family’s bloodline does not know, is socially prohibited from, or is disinterested in knowing anything about us or being a part of our lives.

Even now, more than 20 years after disclosure, my origin story continues to carry with it a stigma of illegitimacy. I was never a consenting party to the anonymity agreement yet my search for truth is still considered by some as something to be ashamed of and something I should be fearful of sharing.

Perhaps my deepest regret is that my Dad felt he had to hold this secret to his death in order to protect me.

What If We Were Infertile?

I ask myself often, if my husband was infertile, what would we do? I always imagined myself as a mother. I knew that I wanted to have children ‘of my own’ someday. I wanted to have babies that shared my biology and pour myself into their nurturing and well being. I wanted to feel them kicking inside of me, inhale them and know that they were ‘mine.’ This must be a primal instinct.

The pain of infertility must be overwhelming. My mother must have had this same need...instinct....that I do. She married a man that she loved more than anything in her world. He adored her and she him.

But the two of them could not physically produce the one thing she instinctually wanted—a baby of ‘their own.’

I wonder if men have the same need and instinct as women do? I wonder how my Dad felt when he found out that the reason they hadn’t conceived was because he couldn’t produce sperm. They must have mourned deeply for the children they could not create together.

He loved my mother immensely and would have done anything for her. Together, they found a doctor who was willing to do something that no one else in the area was willing or pioneering enough to do—artificial insemination by anonymous sperm.

The advice of the day was secrecy, so that everyone, including the child, would accept each other without prejudice or discrimination.

So I question again, what would we do? If I wasn’t donor conceived myself, and didn’t have the benefit of knowing how this has affected my parents and me, my husband and I might do the most convenient thing: buy or borrow another man’s sperm.

But I know from my personal experience how difficult this choice is, not only for the child, but for the parents, the donor, the donor’s extended social family. Even open donations might create and/or lead to conflicts of loyalty, identity and belonging. Although the inability to have a genetic child of my own would create deep sadness, I know in my heart that donor conception is just not something that we could do.