

In His Own Time

This is a story about one woman's unwavering desire to have a baby in spite of predictable and daunting obstacles. It's my story.

I want a baby.

I've been thinking about this for a long time. Now I can't seem to think about anything except having a baby.

But I'm worried. Maybe 35 is too old. And how does a lesbian get pregnant anyway?

Maybe there's a way, I just don't know what it is. It seems like one of those things that is probably impossible. But maybe it isn't.

There has to be someone I can talk to who can help me figure this out.

What did we have to do to make a baby for ourselves and the lesbian couples that followed us? In 1983 when my partner, Janet, and I decided to try to get pregnant we discovered that options for lesbians and single heterosexual women were practically non-existent. We would have to create what we were looking for. We decided to try the impossible; to convince the administration of the Fenway Health Center to consider establishing an artificial insemination program for lesbians.

In 1983, the AIDS crisis was ravaging the gay community. Holly Ladd, a member of the Fenway Board, understood that the staff was overwhelmed and exhausted from facing so much grief and death. Maybe focusing on creating life would add a much needed counterpoint.

After a great deal of negotiating the administration agreed to create a task force to explore legal, medical and psychological issues related to artificial insemination. The members of the task force were a lesbian couple, a lawyer familiar with gay/lesbian issues, a psychotherapist, an ethicist and a member of the Fenway's medical staff. We researched available services and made contact with the TSB, the only medical center in the country that offered services for lesbians who wanted to conceive. The task force met for nine months and drafted a proposal which was submitted to the Board. Approved! The Artificial Insemination (AI) program was born.

In 1983 we weren't aware of any of the the risks the Fenway Community Health Center was taking by agreeing to sponsor the AI program. A history of the program describes the reality the Center was facing during that time:

“Tons of people were firebombing reproductive rights organizations, and the AIDS crisis, which was just starting, required most of the Health Center’s resources though AI provided a hopeful counterpoint. The lawyer Holly Ladd, who was Chair of the Board in 1983, said ‘Thank God The Fenway was birthing babies at the same time it was burying brothers...it’s a significant statement for the community about the continuum of life’”¹.

I’ve wanted to tell this story for a long time because our work all those years ago was at the cutting edge of the “gayby boom” and has played out in so many unique, unanticipated and fascinating ways. And continues to do so.

Since that first birth in 1985:

“Over 600 babies have been conceived through The Fenways’s Alternative Insemination Program (name changed from artificial insemination) ... It is believed to be the first of its kind in the United States. In fiscal year 2019, the AI program saw 39 new pregnancies and 32 births. In addition to insemination, the AI Program offers social and emotional support for LGBTQIA+ parents and prospective parents through a variety of workshops and groups”².

This is an important piece of history, both culturally and personally, that should be told. If we don’t tell it, who will? Initially when I’d considered writing about founding the AI program and the many babies who The Fenway Health Center helped come into being, I couldn’t see my way through its complexity and multiple actors. I knew I couldn’t begin to represent every couple and their child’s unique story. Each one of us would have to tell our individual story that, while different, when stitched together would become a whole. This is not just one story, it’s a patchwork quilt, pieced together with different shapes and patterns that, woven together, become a different and new narrative.

What I remember most about trying to become pregnant was learning to determine when I was ovulating. Janet and I learned to inseminate on Days 10, 12 and 14 to increase the likelihood of conceiving. We learned that the donor’s semen,

¹ Giaimo, Cara. “A Brief History of Artificial Insemination”. Scope, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. December 18, 2014.

² Fenway Health. *Fenway at a Glance*. Fenway Health. 2021.

which arrived from California packed in dry ice, had to be kept warm. I squeezed the vial into my armpit as I steered through Boston traffic.

When we shared our news with family and friends people were happy for us. Except Janet's mother, Rica. She came to visit us when I was enormously pregnant. After dinner she joined me in the kitchen while I was washing the dishes. Normally Rica and I didn't have much to say to each other. But today she had a question. "What will you do to ensure that this baby has a Jewish upbringing." I stared into the soapy dish water, hoping to find an answer there. "We'll take him or her to synagogue and when they are 13 they'll have a B'nei Mitzvah."

Silence.

Followed by, "No synagogue in the world will accept you as a family."

Birth plan discussed, suitcase packed, our decision had been made about whether to use pain medications. We'd done our homework. We were ready. As we were getting into the car Janet had a request. Just one.

"You can have this baby whenever you want, just not on April 1st."

"Why?"

"Because it's the first game of the NCAA men's Basketball Finals. Georgetown vs Villanova, you know."

My due date was March 24th. We eagerly anticipated that date but it came and went as did the next several days. Frustrated by a week of Braxton Hicks false alarms we each decided to take matters into our own hands. Janet went back to her university teaching job, I cleaned every corner of our 200-year-old farmhouse.

I couldn't do anything but haul our old vacuum from room to room, up and down the stairs. So many stairs.
Nothing. Nobody yet.

Twenty

Twenty years ago,
sick of sitting around waiting
I decided to vacuum all the floors

in the 200-year-old farmhouse.

Too many false alarms,
no more just waiting,
back to life as usual, facing the fact
that you would arrive according
to your own schedule
in your own sweet time.

Your other mother drove off to work
an hour and a half north,
leaving me with the floors
and a baby who wouldn't be rushed.

Who could blame her?
If you weren't going to come
may as well get some work done.

There were lots of floors, lots of rugs,
but it was the stairs that did it,
up and down, hefting the old vacuum cleaner
on my hip,
a place you would soon occupy.

And twelve hours later you did come.
You were greeted
by our ecstatic cry of welcome,
"Joshua!" every single person in the room
cheered as you emerged
from your passage

taking up your rightful place
right in the center
of our love.

Baby Boy
Born 4/1/85
Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital
Hanover, New Hampshire

Blood type: A Positive

But something was wrong. Pediatricians came and whisked you away before I even saw you. Janet followed them down the hall to an exam room where she hovered at the open doorway. When everything had quieted down she poked her head into the room and asked, “Are you finished? Can I have that baby?”

Which is how Janet was the first person in our family of friends to hold Joshua. She carried him into the birthing room like a precious package and delivered him into my eager arms.

What’s in a name?

When Josh was 10 weeks old we invited all our friends to a naming party. True to the times, we hosted a backyard ceremony held around a potluck table. Everyone held Joshua and offered a toast. One friend sang an original song: “May you feel like hugging the world every day of your life”. Our fervent wish.

After all the toasts had been made, it was our turn. Which is when we discovered that we each had our own private names for our baby along with our own private dreams for his future.

All new parents have dreams of who their child will become. We were no different. Judith’s name for Josh was Big Ben after a famous baseball player. In my mind he was Joshua, world renowned pianist.

Obviously, this baby was freighted. So many hopes and expectations. And, just as obviously, he would grow into his own person.

The next day was Gay Pride. We packed J into his stroller and took him to his first Gay Pride march.

On Josh’s first birthday I wrote him a poem:

First Birthday

The sky
on your first

birthday,
like your eyes
clear to forever
luminescent
depth
invitation to believe.

I tried to create a new tradition. I'd write him a poem every birthday but I have to admit I missed some years. I replaced them with memories.

Memories come, as they do, bursting or murmuring,
Each clamoring for the telling
Each and every one,
which is why it's (you are) so hard
To write about.
What words could possibly
Capture you, pin you down, color your contours?

When Josh was two I took him for his yearly check up with our pediatrician. After answering some general questions, I added, "We read an alphabet book, he can recognize each letter and the word that it corresponds with."
The doctor stared at me. "That's not possible". I understood then that I'd just been diagnosed as a pushy Jewish mother.

For Josh at Two

What color
 are your eyes?
Still brown at sunrise.
 During breakfast
turning green with greeting,
 embracing the day.

You are
 every day so completely
yourself,
 loving me, touchstone
then going off in pleasure
 into your own world of two.

When Josh was three-and-a-half he surprised me. I knew he'd begun to recognize words: hot, off, taxi, stop, school, peep, cold. He already had his own thoughts that he put into words. One day staring out the car window he announced, "Mommy, you and I are really very different." He didn't elaborate so I'm still not sure exactly what he meant.

Two Poems for Josh at Three

When did you grow up?
Was it the day you learned the alphabet
 and a word or two to go with every letter?
Was it when you stepped out of diapers
into big boy underwear
or the moment you decided to put them on
yourself (or maybe the moment
you decided you didn't have to wear
underwear under sweatpants)?
I know
I got the message
the day you said:
 "Mommy, I want privacy."
 "Mommy, don't kiss me."
and
 "Mommy, you can't catch me."
(and waited for me to try).

Know for sure, my big boy
that while I may not catch you outside,
in the inner game of tag

for me
you are always it.

Two poems for Josh at Three

And this year
 you began to run instead of walk.
Running in circles, singing,
reciting poems, rhyming,
making magic in the moment

and like in the beginning
you have become
my teacher.

We're fighting (about something
ridiculous) in exasperation, I said
"Well, what do you think
we should do about it?"
You turned toward me, "I think you should come over here
 and snuggle me and we'll talk".
I did and we did
 and let's always,
always hold each other
in the best possible light.

A Poem for Four

How to capture the year of four
 on paper?
 Impossible, like trying to capture
 your energy, pure and simple.
For this is the year you went to school
 bravely, struggling not to cry (and succeeding).
 (I cried on a park bench after, having had to

let you go).
And learned to read,
And learned to play British Bulldog,
And learned to add.
Coming home from your first day of school
confused, turning to me,

“Mommy, they forgot to give me homework.
They didn’t teach me what holds up the planets.”

Sharing plans for your baby brother or sister
picking out a tiny lavender
tie-dyed tee shirt.

Later the crushing loss, grasping for words.
People told me not to cry when I told you,
you the hardest of all to tell.

In your 4 1/2 years of wisdom you said

“I’m really sad
this baby didn’t get born.
I was really looking forward
to having a little brother
to play with.”

Saying, always, your version of the truth:

“Please don’t call me Josh like that
it makes me feel like you don’t like me.”
and

“Mommy, that solves the whole mystery, I’m hungry.”
and

“I was so excited, I couldn’t think of anything to do
but smile.”

And with a sly sideways look at me,
adding,

“he or she”

after I’d said the kid, *he*
and laughing.

Confused I asked, “Why are you laughing?”
and laughing you answered

“The same reason you are.”

What a year mixed
together with joys and and worries, watching
you go off into the world.
Like life itself
filled with pleasures
and mysteries welcoming your new grown-up self.

I woke up, in a drenching sweat. Terrified. It took a couple of minutes to shake the nightmare loose, to remember that Josh was safe asleep in his room next to mine. I got up to look at him, to make sure the nightmare, a capsizing boat, Josh flailing in the water, crying to me while the current pulled him out of reach.

Just a bad dream. Reassured, I went back to bed. But as I drifted off to sleep I heard him cry and opened my eyes to see him running into my room.

“Mommy, Mommy, I had a terrible dream. I was out in a small boat with Bones. The water was rough and he got swept out of the boat and I couldn’t reach him. My arms weren’t long enough.”

We clung to each other then and tried to go back to sleep, praying that the solid warmth of each other would help us withstand the storm.

Five

Pregnant again,
tired all the time.

It was hard that
I couldn’t pick you up
the way I used to.

You must’ve wondered
why all the bother?

And then
the moment you first saw her
bewilderment mixed with
fear and pride.

We drove home the next day, your day-old sister strapped into a car seat behind you.

You were already climbing into your role,
“You know it’s hard to figure out
how to be a big brother
in the hospital.”

And then there were two.

Hannah
June 12, 1990

Hannah came into our lives “like squeezed toothpaste” the midwife laughed as she caught her. She was born cold. At 3:30 in the morning the midwife placed Hannah on my chest under a warming blanket and swaddled us together.

From the beginning Hannah had an innate need to communicate. Before she could talk she found ways to express herself. Emphatically. After communicating all day long in the evening she’d start to whimper softly, then louder until it was a full-throated howl. Time-honored techniques for soothing a colicky baby didn’t seem to work. There was nothing to do to comfort her and so I rocked and sang to my crying baby for hours until she exhausted herself.

Experienced mothers tell you that it will help to put your baby in the car and go for a drive. After a particularly loud evening desperate for a solution “Josh, get in the car, we’re going for a drive.” We took off on one of the country roads that wind through Vermont, accompanied by a howling Hannah. Josh was in the front seat, covering his ears, moaning in desperation, “Make her stop!”

I pulled over to the side of the dirt road then. “Josh, come with me.” We got out and walked away from the car. “Josh” I said “let’s play a game.” He brightened. “The game’s called Baby Soup. We start with a baby and add whatever you like in soup. No spinach? Okay.” Giggling, Josh listed all the vegetables he could think of. Now that we were laughing the howling didn’t seem so bad.

But he was still a good big brother. When I moved Hannah’s cradle out of my room hoping to get some sleep, he was definitive, “Don’t put her in another room, she’ll be lonely.”

Wise boy.

Your pleasure in
her accomplishments
as well as your own.
Learning to read well enough

for it to be a comfort
(my mother's voice coming out
of my mothering mouth
"Go read a good book").
Joy
boy, how you've grown
big brother
love.

When Josh was six, his first grade teacher asked the class to introduce themselves by making a family tree. There were magnetic stick figures with skirts and others with pants. There were small figures for children.

One by one, each student chose figures that described their family and put them on the white board. The families looked like this: one skirt, one pants, two small pants. One skirt, one pants, one small skirt, one baby with pants.

When it was Josh's turn he chose two skirts, one pair of pants, and one tiny skirt and placed them standing next to one another. He added one small figure in pants. Then he left a big space between them and put up the figures for his other family:

two skirts, one small pants, one baby skirt.
Then he sat down.

"Where's your dad?" one of the students asked.

"Oh, he's not in the picture," Josh replied.

"But you have to have a dad" the student persisted. "Everyone has a dad."

Another student chimed in, "Yeah, how'd you even get here?"

Josh paused before he answered, "Advanced technology."

Josh at Six

A year of reading
and running.

A year of newness:
a new house,
new school, new friends,
our new family.

A year of fun:
learning to swim,
learning to ski,
sledding before school.
Introducing your sister during “sharing”.
Starting to lose your little boy body,
becoming more boy than little.
Moving into worlds of your own creation
becoming and becoming and becoming.

For Josh at Eight

This year you grew
from boychild, stretching
towards boyman, face elongating
legs lengthening, colt-like, defining you,
carrying you
more than ever before.
We traveled together this year
To Italy, love of my youth.

We struck a deal:
for every church I must see,
You let me drag you there come though you weren't all that interested
but you were excited for the reward of
Italian gelato after.
The perfect agreement, nourishment
for the soul and the sweet tooth.

Returning home with you, love of my middle years.
You came into your own, separate and capable.
 making your own lunch,
 dressing your sister,
 sledding before breakfast,
 writing poetry.
And always
the poetry of you.
Yearning, striding

towards your own future self.

Parts of this next poem call for an explanation. When Josh was younger I had contacted the local Big Brother program to find him a “Big Brother”. We didn’t find a match so when he was nine I decided to try again. A friend lived on a farm with her 15-year-old son. She thought the boys would enjoy playing with the animals. Her son was living with cancer and was often tired. The boys did have fun until the big brother had a recurrence and died.

One final try. The Big Brother program at the university matched Josh with 19 year old, Dan, one of those young people who seemed to have everything going for them. He was charismatic, warm, athletic, and bright. He and Josh immediately formed a bond that seemed like a perfect fit. Josh looked forward to their time together. Then, without any sign of trouble, Dan died by suicide.

For Josh at 9

It was a wonderful year with a heavy dose of sadness
mixed in.
Hard for me, too,
watching you suffer so.

Learning Hebrew, that language of the ancients.
You took to it like it had always been yours
and I believe it has.

Backpacking into the high country
reveling in nature
in silence and in wordy joy.
“Am I talking too much?”
at Lonesome Lake
the mountains another ancient journey of the spirit.

Traveling to England and Scotland,
hiding your face in embarrassment
at the airport while your sister proclaimed
her travel plans at full volume.

Touring the Jewish ghetto in London, marveling in the Sephardic
synagogue, eating and petting animals at the herb farm-

—and Stonehenge—

Your first sleepover:

Your teacher, Mr. Cross, telling me with tears, “Thanks for Josh”.

Then both of your Big Brothers dying, one by his own hand.
How could anyone, 8 or any age understand?

After the memorial service, after meeting Dan’s mother
you said
“I think I’m going to go to my room
and have a good cry.”
Your wisdom sustaining you
and me both.

Memories from Josh’s 11th year

Learning and loving to rock climb.
Playing Hermes in the 6th grade play.
In the middle of changing costumes you turned to Hannah and me, “Do you know
how hard it is to get out of a wedding dress?”

Trip to California. My friend’s 5-year-old son fell in love with you, while you’re in
love with your computer.
Skiing at Mad River Glen and loving it so much you wanted to buy into the Mad
River Coop.
Learning to ski freestyle and afterwards, “I trashed my body”.
Dancing to Ella Fitzgerald, trying to teach your sister to tango.

Then one bright morning you said to me, “We need to have some in-home
counseling.”

What?
Followed by “You’re not parenting with the vigor you usually do.”
I teased you about having “too many hormones” you teased me back
about too few.
We dubbed ourselves residents of “The House of Hormones”.

Then unexpectedly your Grandma died and your trip to Arches National Park was replaced by a funeral in Pittsburgh.

Later, hiking together to Lakes of the Clouds hut in the Whites.

And driving to Boston to celebrate your name on a plaque in the Fenway Health Center.

We saw photos of the first “Fenway baby”. You!

Bar Mitzvah, April 4, 1998

Nisan 8, 5758

On their B’Nai Mitzvah every student chants a portion of the Torah in Hebrew and gives a d’var, a short talk based on their Torah portion. Josh’s topic was sacrifice. He said:

“When people give up something as a form of sacrifice, they make the world a better place because sacrifice leads to the performance of *mitzvot* (good deeds). While thinking about today’s Torah portion, a number of personal examples of sacrifice come to mind...One example was one that Mom and Hannah made for me. They did not want a dog, and I did. They sacrificed a clean house, lots of time and their peace and quiet so I could have a dog. Laika has been my friend and she will continue to be for many years. Their sacrifice has brought a great deal of love into my life and theirs. Even though they originally thought it would be a sacrifice, in the end it was a gift for all of us.

When someone sacrifices something for you, it shows that that person really cares about you. I lost a very close friend about three years ago. Ann had a sailboat that she loved for thirty years. Ann’s partner knew I wanted to buy a sailboat, and she gave me Ann’s boat. I am not a very good sailor, I tip over a lot, but when I am in that boat, I always think of Ann. I am very grateful that Ann’s partner sacrificed that boat so that I could use it and have a piece of Ann with me.

One summer, Janet and I left on a trip to Utah, somewhere I have always wanted to go. Janet and I drove six hours to Arches National Park. When we got to the hotel we called home and learned that my grandmother had died. So Janet and I packed the car, drove back those six hours and flew out the next morning to be with our family. The trip was sacrificed because we needed to be with our family. I

really wanted to stay longer and see the scenery, but I also knew I wanted to go to the funeral and mourn my grandmother. Grandma Rica's passing brought me closer to my family. While I sacrificed that trip, I gained an important closeness with my family.

As a Bar Mitzvah I leave childhood and enter the beginnings of adulthood. I must make personal sacrifices when they are required, I must try to be a good person and a conscientious Jew. Standing here chanting pages of Hebrew, I am connected to the millions of Jews who have come before me and read the same words, from the same scrolls for millennia. That is an incredible feeling, and I am very proud that on this day I take one more step forward on my way to becoming an adult with the added responsibilities and freedoms that it entails."

All of Janet's family came. Everyone in my family came. It was a glorious day.

And then you were grown. Not fully a man, but no longer the little boy who wanted me to read him a bedtime story.

For Josh at 17

Stretched out the entire length
of the couch
your long, narrow feet--now size 11 1/2--
Touching the end of the couch.
You're sleeping off another all night
LAN party with friends.
Last year at this time
I remember you as boyman.
Now one week from 17
you are more
man than boy.

Just back from doing something
we've never done before.
Your first college visit,
a cold, snowy day at Williams.
We had fun talking in the car,
commiserating, cajoling, encouraging.

We each drove,
me the windy roads,
you the highway.
We're navigating this bumpy journey
filled with potholes and pitfalls
we could not imagine what we'd find.
It's our first time.

I stand here now
one week from seventeen, admiring
who you are,
remembering who you were.
Boy no longer.
Seventeen, stepping out into the brightness
of your own day.

Who am I now that you are not the little boy who needed me to read you a bedtime
story, who needed me to drive you to school, who needed me to cajole you into
wearing a tux?

Today, college.

Are there words
For saying goodbye
To a wonderful son?

Just this:
You are a beautiful
Young man
With a beautiful soul.

Don't hold back.
Reach out into the world,
It's worth the risk.
You'll find special people to love,
Who will love you back.

Be kind to other people.
They're new too.
And be gentle with yourself.

Think hard. Be passionate.

Know that you will always,
No matter how old you are,
You will always
Have a home in my heart.

Love.

Your Own Sweet Time. For Josh at 21.

This day in late March,
this is the day you were supposed
to be born,
calculations made, everyone anticipating.
But, you, you weren't ready,
or you were thinking it over,
or something, because you came
one week later,
in your own sweet time.

Your pediatrician insisted,
"Impossible, he can't be reading yet"
but you were,
in your own time.

"Josh, it's time to get up," or
"Josh, don't you think it's time to do your homework?"
or, most embarrassing of all, "Josh, it's time to try on your tux."

Now, we look at each other,
bewildered, almost like old people,
"Where did the time go?"
We shake our heads and agree,
we have no idea.

Here, finally, after these 21 years

I remind myself daily of the wisdom
of you,
Who came and talked and asked about the planets,
Following your inner metronome,
Keeping your own sweet time.

And today, looking back
At miles of milestones:
College, graduation.
Meeting your donor father.
First job.
Masters degree.

Moving to California.
Marrying the love of your life.
Making a life for yourselves in Oakland.

You started going to services on the High Holidays and invited me to come to California to go with you. I'm standing next to a tall, handsome Jewish man who's chanting the prayers in Hebrew. Perfect circle.

The Board of The Sperm Bank of California called. They invited you to join the Board and you did. One more perfect circle.

Our stories and the way we tell them, the words we choose, are unique to each of us as individuals. You've read my story about me and my son, Josh, even before there was a Josh. You've followed him from birth, through childhood, college and love.

And, though he is not a professional baseball player nor a world renowned concert pianist, he is perfectly Josh Levinger.