



Rookie Dad

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

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Prelude

Stage Fright

This week Christine stopped taking birth control. Although we'd discussed it at great length beforehand, the actual event felt like a headlong rush toward the edge of a cliff. I could be a father soon—very soon—and I'm terrified!

Terror sharpens my focus. I've thought up quite a weighty list of reasons against having a baby right now. I tick them off: I'm trying to get through grad school quickly, and a baby will slow me down; I need to focus on my studies; Christine and I are making less than we're spending right now; more years in school means more student loans to pay back later; having an American baby in Canada will be a paperwork nightmare; our parents live fifteen hundred miles away; wouldn't it be better to wait until we have more money, more space, and more stability?

Then there are the personal questions, the ones rooted deep inside me. Will my wife still love me as

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much after we have a baby? I feel like I'm finally starting to develop a solid friendship with my dad; don't I deserve more time to explore and learn from that relationship before becoming a father myself? How will my largely selfish and independent lifestyle be changed by a little person who is totally dependent on me? Will I be a good father?

So why, then, are we trying to have a baby? Why am I running on my own two legs toward the cliff's edge?

One night before Christine and I left our home in California to go to school in Vancouver, Dad and I went out to grab some pizza and beer. He had a Santa Barbara Blonde—a brew that's been the source of a few jokes—and I had a Mission Ale, choosing for myself the cloistered life. We waited for our pepperoni pizzas to arrive before talking about the future; having something to do lets us speak more easily about difficult things. I told him Christine and I wanted to start a family soon, and he asked if it might be better to wait. Struggling to justify our decision, I finally told my dad that Christine is fully alive when she is caring for a child. I told him that I want whatever makes my wife the most joyful and fulfilled, what makes her the most human. Around kids, I said, she absolutely shines.

That image of light returned to me recently. Walking down the stairway at school, I followed a young father holding his baby on his shoulder. As we descended, the

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baby made eye contact with me and a smile lit up his face. I smiled back. He blinked at each step, and after each blink, his shining eyes locked on mine. I couldn't take my eyes off of his. Maybe he liked my shirt or my hair; maybe he simply liked looking into my eyes. I imagined my own child in his face, and the contact delighted me. The rest of the day, remembering his toothless grin took the edge off my fear.

Having a baby isn't all bright eyes and smiles, though. I still find a troubling persistence in my questions about the wisdom of having a baby right now. It's true that Christine is ready to have a baby—and the sooner the better from her point of view. This is where another reason becomes clear: Christine's readiness carries me along, even though I'm not sure on my own of our destination. I trust Christine. This isn't too hard because I live with her; I watch the decisions she makes and the integrity with which she makes them. I believe that she's moving toward a place of growth and goodness, and I'm content to follow her.

This kind of trust is anything but blind. It simply takes now as its object of vision instead of then, and here in the now, things are pretty clear. In walking toward fatherhood, I am choosing a path perpendicular to selfishness. It won't, I know, be an easy path. Most of my questions can't be answered on this side of fatherhood

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anyway. While being a dad will provide some answers, I'm sure it will provide new and better questions.

Parents want to give the things they never had to their children. But giving new things seems like the easy part. The trick for me will be to give my child those things I *did* have. How will I pass on the love and care that have shaped me from birth, and shape me still? How will I continue the love story my parents are still writing? Writing is terrifying, but the writer must settle into the work of filling page after page. Soon, perhaps, I'll be ready to begin my own chapters: stories of sleepless nights and tear-filled days; stories of daily routine; stories of lying with my baby on my chest, watching my breath stir translucent hair, and tracing my finger in amazement around ears the size of buttons.

Ultrasound

Men have it rough when it comes to pregnancy. We take the whole thing on faith, without the constant confirmation of someone kicking our innards. There were times I wondered whether Christine could be making up her pregnancy, perhaps so that she could send me on late-night runs to Dairy Queen for Brownie Batter Blizzards.

Hearing the fetal heartbeat almost convinced me that this was for real. At thirteen weeks, the fetus is only the size of a jumbo shrimp and weighs just one ounce. When our doctor pointed the microphone at the precise spot, I heard a sound emerge from the background noise of Christine's abdomen: a rapid *PEE-oo PEE-oo PEE-oo* repeating at the fantastic rate of one hundred fifty beats per minute. Still, when Christine and I left the office, it was easy for me to forget that sound, to forget that there was a person inside of Christine whose heart was beating like a marathon runner's.

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It wasn't until we went for our second ultrasound that my doubt finally dissolved. Our first ultrasound revealed a baby that looked like a cross between a jelly bean and an alien. The second ultrasound, I was told, would be much different. We didn't know what to expect, but we did hope to find out whether our baby was a boy or a girl. I wanted to be able to assign the grammatically correct pronoun to our baby, and Christine was anxious to start planning the appropriate wardrobe, nursery furniture, and names. In Vancouver, though, the technicians don't reveal the sex of the baby before twenty weeks because of the high incidence of sex-based abortions, and our appointment was scheduled at nineteen and a half weeks. Would they still tell us? Could we convince them to bend the rules?

The receptionist ordered Christine to drink a ridiculous amount of water—half a gallon—in the hour before the ultrasound, and she wasn't allowed to go to the bathroom. Christine took her place in the semicircle of pained, overhydrated women who were trying simultaneously to keep drinking and keep from peeing, like contestants on a crazy Japanese game show. We hoped that this was the sort of doctor's office that would see patients at their appointment time.

Christine managed to make it into the examining room without bursting. The lights were off, but a soft, gray glow shone from the ultrasound monitor. Normally,

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doctors leave you alone in their office for twenty minutes at a time, with nothing better to do than play with the blood pressure pump and steal tongue depressors and cotton balls. Since you're in your underwear, the doctors can be confident that you won't bolt for the door with an armful of prescription samples. In this office, alone in the dark with strange glowing monitors, we moved as little as possible and spoke in whispers. The ultrasound machine, with its power to see inside of us, silently controlled the room.

Christine laid back on the examining table while the technician smeared clear gel across her stomach. The technician turned on the monitor and began to probe with the ultrasound wand, using it like an extension of her own hand and fingers, pushing and searching for just the right spot. Quite a bit of prodding goes into an ultrasound, since one's internal landscape is sometimes camera shy and the technician needs to come at certain parts from certain angles. She began to give us a guided tour of Christine's lower abdomen—*here's your uterus, and this is the placenta, right here next to the umbilical cord*—like a guide pointing out notable sights in a national park. I began to suspect that she was making things up, since the screen looked like nothing but a mass of swirling, shapeless fog. *Oh, and here's that set of car keys you lost last year!* Why had people been telling me so many good things about this ultrasound?

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I once stood in front of one of those optical illusions in which a three-dimensional shape will emerge from a chaotic background if one's eyes are crossed and focused just right. I stared and stared, seeing nothing, when all at once a sailboat rose from the surface of the poster and filled my vision. The ultrasound was something like that. Suddenly, like a shiver, a human shape materialized out of the white-and-black fuzz. It was like being in a crowded room, absentmindedly scanning the faces in the crowd, only to be startled to find the face of someone you know looking right into your eyes. Shapeless forms, and then—I caught my breath—our baby!

I was shocked to see that this person seemed to be acting much as I would in a similar situation. I know that comparing a fetus to an adult isn't very accurate—*look, dear, it's waving to us!*—but I felt like I understood what it was doing. It stretched its legs out, uncrossing and unfolding them as far as Christine's womb allowed. I saw myself sitting at a study cubicle in the college library, uncrossing my legs and stretching as far as I can after a long day of studying. Then, as if that stretch had accomplished its goal, our fetus returned to its original, well, fetal position and curled into a ball the size of a grapefruit.

The next ten minutes or so we watched as parts of our baby appeared on the screen and vanished. The gaze of

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the ultrasound saw right through its body, peering past bones and into the head and heart. It's a strange thing to look so closely and intimately at another person while remaining anonymous oneself. We could see the baby's mouth, nose, fingers, and toes, but we also stared at its brain, heart, and spine. This is a type of knowledge that is possible only before birth, before the skin matures and becomes opaque, and before a parent's knowledge of the inner workings of their child turns from photographic to empathetic.

Before the appointment, we knew that finding out the baby's sex might be problematic, given that we were a few days before the twenty-week deadline. Plan A was to act nice, keep our ears and eyes open, and hope that the technician would tell us on her own. As the appointment wrapped up without any indication of the baby's sex, we moved to Plan B.

"Do you see anything that would tell us if it's a boy or a girl?" asked Christine. The technician checked the fetal age—nineteen and a half weeks—and told us that she couldn't reveal the sex of the baby until after twenty weeks. Something in the tone of her voice suggested that we might still have a chance, though. Plan B was to convince her to bend the rules for us, mostly because we were so adorable.

"Aw, if only we'd known, we could have scheduled our appointment for next week instead!" said Christine.

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I joined in, noting that the twenty week mark was nearly upon us; maybe we could just round up the age. The technician looked at us, and then she turned her attention to the monitor as she began moving the ultrasound probe across Christine's stomach. Christine and I could guess what was happening, but we didn't want to jinx things, so we shut up, held hands, and stared at the monitor.

This was the moment when I knew that I wanted our baby to be a boy, since in my head I was rooting for the technician to *find a penis, find a penis!* I held my breath, thinking that I might recognize the image on the screen. Abruptly, she pulled her instrument away from Christine's abdomen and shut off the machine. She turned to look at us. "You know I can't officially tell you the sex of the baby," she said, "but if you're thinking about painting the baby's room this weekend, if I were you, I'd use blue." She quickly left the room, and Christine and I squeezed each other's hand while we stared at the ultrasound screen, now empty. We had just seen our son. When we left the office, it felt, for the first time, like there were three of us.

That night, as Christine and I lay in bed, we talked in the dark about our son — now we could call him that! Had we really known all along that he would be a boy? Would he be blessed with Christine's teeth or cursed with mine? As our conversation slowed, we snuggled

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closer to each other. Christine moved her feet so that they were touching my legs underneath the blankets. I thought of our baby inside Christine's womb, stretching his legs to their full, tiny length, surrounded by the touch of his mother's body. Our son was already reaching, at every moment, for what he needed most.