

A PERSPECTIVE ON BEING DONOR CONCEIVED

I found out my biological father was a vial of frozen sperm labelled 'C11' when I was 21. Finding out so late was a huge shock. With my childhood already behind me, the neural connections identifying my dad as my dad were cemented. Emotionally I could never think of him as anything other than my dad (and I still don't), yet suddenly I was told we were genetic strangers. My identity had been splintered and the social and biological aspects of parenthood carved up. In the place where I inherited half my genes, all I could see was a vial of semen in cold storage. I mourned the human face behind that vial, somebody I had never and would never meet. A little bit like a mother might mourn the baby she could never have, I suppose.

I wonder what it would feel like to have been told earlier. Another donor conceived man I know, Damian, has always known his origins. Initially he accepted it. He even considered becoming a donor himself. On the day his daughter was born, as a father, he glimpsed the power of the biological link and what the loss of his paternal kin meant for him (and his daughter). I suppose the point I am making is that children do not have a static response to being donor conceived, it changes throughout their lives.

I couldn't relate to my story. I am a human being, yet I was conceived with a technique that had its origins in animal husbandry. Worst of all, farmers kept better records of their cattle's genealogy than assisted reproductive clinics had kept for the donor conceived people of my era. It also made me feel strange to think that my genes were spliced together from two people who were never in love, never danced together, and had never even met one another.

My reaction was never to blame my parents. I wasn't angry with them. In some ways I felt like my mother was a victim of telling me the truth that she needed me to comfort her and tell her that it was okay I didn't need to know who my donor was. I struggled to find the words to express my thoughts. The questions that I dared not ask, or even form in my head, because it seemed like a betrayal of my loyalty to my family and to society.

At the time these thoughts were incoherent, but I believe they basically boiled down to this.

"How could my own parents decide to deliberately separate me from my kin, to grow up half blinded to my own identity? If they couldn't face telling me the truth about what they had done, why did they do it?"

"How could the doctors, sworn to 'first do no harm' create the system where I now face the pain and loss of my own identity and heritage?"

“How could the government, charged with protecting the most vulnerable members of the community, its children, legislate to make it illegal for me to know the identity of my biological father? How can its institutions subject me to the psychological torture of knowing that records exist, but I am forbidden to know the contents?”\

“How could my donor help create me, and then abandon me without even leaving his name?”

The best I have come up with to answer these questions is:

“My parents were focused on the immediacy of their own infertility and would have done almost anything to relieve their suffering and get a baby.”

“The doctors were focused on publishing their next scientific journal paper, and were surrounded by images of smiling, happy babies on their clinic walls. They didn’t think about the future, when these babies would grow up.”

“The government found it messy and awkward to legislate in this area, and there were no votes in it.”

“My donor was young and focused on doing ‘a good deed’. He believed the clinics who told him that the biological link can be extinguished by signing a contract.”

For three years I hardly talked about these confusing thoughts with anybody. Our family life continued pretty much as it was before. I reached a turning point when I met Narelle (a donor conceived woman) and eventually other members of an organisation called Tangled Webs. It was a huge relief to talk to people with a similar background, who shared my view that donor conceived people have a basic right to information about their genetic identity. These people helped me articulate the things that were bothering me, and I bonded with Pauline, an adopted woman who had seen it all before with the adoption debate and eventual reforms. Being donor conceived is like being ‘half adopted’ but with the added strangeness of being raised by a blend of both the adopted and the birth family.

I became driven by a sense of injustice. I had two newspaper articles published in *The Age* and learned the power of personal stories. I stood up in a seminar and asked the Attorney General what he was doing for donor conceived people. I appeared on *Sunrise*. I faked confidence. I convinced a lawyer to engage me pro bono. I met politicians deep in the bowels of Parliament house and traded on my personal story to try to pierce their rhinoceros thick skin. When the question of unsealing all donor conception records was put to a vote, the amendment was defeated by a measly five votes (Hansard Legislative Council 4 Dec 2008 pg 50). Five strangers had decided my fate was to have my questions go unanswered forever.

Or had they? I got in touch with my mother's treating doctor and asked him to send a letter to my donor, on my behalf, asking his consent to exchange of information and/or contact. The doctor was a highly decorated expert in donor conception. I was the first donor conceived person he had ever met. Three agonising months later he emailed me to say he had done it. After this, things moved really quickly. The very next week I received a call from Kate from VARTA with big news. Firstly, I didn't need to ever refer to my biological father as my donor. His name is Ben.

After exchanging letters and talking on the phone we arranged to meet. The day before, I discovered I would be meeting his children, my half-siblings. I was nervous, especially the night before and day of the meeting. As I approached the gate, Ben's son called out "*Lauren's here!*" in an excited voice and ran to greet me. Immediately I felt more at ease. I said hello to everyone and we sat down to lunch. I had a surreal moment as I looked around and realised I was surrounded by people who all looked like me. The clinics were wrong. We are family, at least in some sense of the word.

Finally I understand why people comment that my sister looks Swedish and why I am interested in flying and space. Ben and I share an interest in reading, art, sports, napping, nature and the outdoors. After all my efforts in the media, law, and political lobbying, I was pleased to discover that my paternal grandfather was a notorious agitator of the establishment.

A few weeks later I met Ben's eldest daughter. She gave me a card that read, "Dear Lauren, what a wonderful surprise it was to learn about your presence...one can never have enough family, lots of love, xoxo"

For me, the hardest things about being donor conceived were the powerlessness and lack of choice - being constantly reminded that I must abide by decisions made long ago. Hang on a minute, I never agreed to any of this!

The other hardest thing was seeing how society had accepted and valued the biological link in endorsing my mother's need to have a child she was biologically related to, but rejected, sometimes ridiculed and at the very least constantly required me to justify why I needed to mend the broken ties of my biological link to Ben and his family.

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