

OPINION

The Okanagan Sunday, August 12, 2012



A day that changed our lives

Aug. 10, 1988, changed our lives forever.

Before that, we had what we look back on as a shallow life. We were a happily married couple, both on exciting career paths, had two children from my husband's first relationship, two of our own, had just purchased a home. Then, we found out we were pregnant again.

We were those people who got pregnant on every type of birth control, and this pregnancy was no different. We just accepted that once again, this baby just wanted to be born.

Most of the pregnancy was pretty typical, until the last few months. At that point 24 years ago, we weren't offered any pre-screening and didn't feel we needed to know anything about our baby-to-be. Although we did have some ultrasound during the pregnancy, the only thing I remember was the statement of "normal" for size and growth.

When the baby really started to move around, I felt a difference from my other pregnancies. My first rolled a lot and was gentle in her kicks, while the second was destined to be a soccer player. This time, there wasn't much movement. Just as people are different, I felt the baby had a different personality.

The last month before our due date, I started to dream that the baby died in birth. I knew it was ridiculous and attributed it to the stress of leaving work, taking on another child, the financial pressure, my lack of weight gain - 10 pounds - and anything else that would make the thought go away.

I didn't tell anyone.

As I tended to produce rather large babies, and my first labour was over 50 hours, we had a planned C-section organized.

The operation went on without incident, and pretty soon I heard the voice of our new baby girl. I realized that my dream had been ridiculous and smiled as I welcomed her.

It was when they whisked her away quickly that I realized something was different.

My husband was asked to go up to the maternity ward, and I was sent to recovery. It was excruciating to not be together. We were scared. Although no one had told us anything was wrong, we both felt it.

I will never forget the sound of three doctors' shoes on the tile coming down the aisle to see me in recovery. They told me they "believed" our daughter might have Trisomy 21, Down syndrome.

My dream came back to me about the baby dying because, in my mind, my perfect baby had died.

As my mind wandered in shock, I wondered what I did "wrong" and came up empty-handed. I went through my mind's files on what to do when confronted with a situation like this and realized we were not prepared.

Why did this happen to us?

The attendant wheeled me upstairs and took me to a private room where my husband waited. Upon seeing him, I broke down. We both cried. I don't remember how long we held each other, but I do remember a lovely nurse asking if we were ready to meet our new daughter.

To be honest, I wasn't sure if we were ready, but we agreed. As they brought in this lovely baby, I remember not feeling anything at all. I was asked to nurse her, which I did. It was disturbing, as with the other two I immediately felt that amazing bond of mother and child. Still nothing.

Over the next few days, I went through the motions of doing what was best for the baby. I spoke to a lot of professionals at the hospital, family and friends, trying to figure out how to best plan for this special baby's life.

I came up with the idea that giving her up for adoption might be the best thing. Give her to family who actually asked for a baby with Down syndrome, and very quickly I found out there were people willing to do just that.

On Day 5, I came home from the hospital. Our kids hadn't yet met baby, while hospital staff went through their battery of tests.

I packed up her nursery and put all the clothes except for the booties and socks in the storage. As we went through the books of potential parents with the social worker, I began to read the books the counsellors had given us.

As if the baby had died, word got out, and people came to give us their support, bring food, tell us we were doing the right thing. We wondered if we really were.

Every day, after I dropped the other kids at school, I would visit our baby at the hospital, bringing a new pair of socks or booties, and nurse her hoping that I would feel an attachment. I went home with a heavy heart.

As her first month progressed and we selected the perfect family for our baby, we tried to go on as we had before.

The adoptive parents were over the moon; they had been waiting for a healthy Down syndrome babe for several years. They were both professionals, he a concert pianist and she a professor. They wanted this baby very badly. Perfect parents, right?

The night before they were to pick her up, we went out for a business dinner with clients of my husband. One of them had a child with spina bifida who required many operations so she could walk. They were speaking about how the latest surgery went and how happy they were for their daughter.

All of a sudden, I was asking questions and wondering how these people who did not have much in the scheme of North American success, had so very much.

I was silent on the drive home. When we went to bed, I read my book on planning for the life of a person with developmental disability. At 3 in the morning, I finished the book. At 3:01, I woke up my husband and said, "I can't sign the adoption papers today."

When asked why I said, "Because I want our baby to come home!"

And there we were, sitting in our bed and crying and laughing and wanting to go to the hospital right then to pick up our bundle of joy.

It was like I woke up that moment. I felt alive again. I realized then that my dream had come true, our typical baby had died, but was replaced with our baby who was different, but was going to fit right in just fine.

The next few hours were spent putting the nursery back together, finding the diapers and so on. We were like drunken teenagers, flying around the house preparing for our baby coming home.

When morning came, we dropped off the other kids at school saying that we had a surprise for them when we picked them up at noon.

We called the social worker to let her know we couldn't go through with the adoption, and she was marvelous in relieving our sadness to the potential adoptive parents. I found out that happens quite a bit.

As we arrived at the hospital, we announced to the maternity nurses that our baby, who they had named Mary, was actually called Emma and was coming home with us. Enthusiastic tears, hugs and happiness followed.

For us, it was a happy beginning, the right decision for us, and I think for Emma.

I share my story not because I am proud of how I felt about giving up our baby, but so you realize there are many choices in our lives. Whether it is to terminate a pregnancy, give up a baby for adoption or keep it, they are all very personal decisions that we have to live with for the rest of our lives.

When I am asked to speak to people who have had a baby with a different ability, I share this story so they realize that we considered our options and, for us, this was the beginning of a new and very different life.

The other thing to consider is what could have happened if we had done some screening while pregnant. Over the past 24 years, I have been asked that a lot, and now all of our children are having children, it is more common.

My answer is simply this. Although you think you can plan for a challenged baby by knowing ahead of the birth, you can't. You have to live it to plan it. It's not like trying on a dress and it not fitting.

It is a life, your baby's. You can jump off the cliff and accept whatever the fall is, as we did - or not.

Did I mention that it changed our lives for the better?

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Whose Challenge Is It Anyway?