



Dedicated to helping LGBT people build and strengthen their families.

Sometimes Ya Just Need A Good Cry: At Least I Do

We're all familiar with the expression, "The only thing that likes change is a wet baby." Well I've never considered myself to be one who has difficulty with change. In fact, until recently, I liked it. Typically, I grow restless with routine. As a teacher, I rarely recycled lesson plans. When asked by a peer, "Aren't you going to teach that again? It went so well." My response was usually something like, "No. I've already learned it." Most teachers' lessons improve with repetition; mine tended to mold. Even as a parent, I've been fine with Mona growing from infant, to toddler, to little girl. I've welcomed and enjoyed every new stage. So why am I such a basket case now? Why do I feel that the maxim about the wet baby was written for me?

Several weeks ago Jack, Mona, her friend Clare and I went to see *Cheaper By The Dozen 2* - a cute movie, silly and sentimental. I used to consider taking Mona to the movies as naptime for me, joining the ranks of so many snoring fathers who have come before, but more recently we're seeing shows that hold my interest - well sometimes. I do, however, remember enjoying a movie called *George Of The Jungle*, but I don't think it was the plot that moved me.

For those of you who have seen *Cheaper By The Dozen* (the Steve Martin version not the Clifton Web version - now I'm really dating myself), but have not seen *Cheaper By The Dozen 2*, it's basically more of the same except the kids are older, and much of the plot is built around children growing away from their parents: dating, leaving home for college, marriage and pregnancy (in that order). Unfortunately, none of the Baker dozen "come-out" - maybe that will happen in *Cheaper By The Dozen 3*. I teared up during a couple of scenes - identifying with Steve Martin, as the overly sappy father. He reminded me of the father in John Irving's *The World According To Garp*, another character who I so totally get. You have to love a man who buys a house because a plane just crashed into it, therefore he figures now it's the safest place in the world to raise his kids. After all, what's the chance of a plane crashing into the same house a second time? I know that I would have made a purchase offer.

After the movie, ice cream cones at Ala Mode's and dropping Clare off at home, it was time for Mona to take a quick shower and call it a night. While Mona undressed, she looked down at her body. "I'm getting too big," she fussed. I was reminded of the time, maybe a year ago; Mona was eight, and Jack was reading with her in her room. He came downstairs to tell me that Mona complained about a lump near one of her nipples. The two of us went back up to her room to console her and to check the lump. What do we know from breasts? I searched my grey matter, remembering television public service announcements and posters in doctors' offices. We do have American Girl Library's *The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book of Girls*, but I felt that this was not the moment for Jack and I to thumb through the pages of a book.

I asked Mona to extend her arm over her head and I proceeded to act like I knew what I was doing. I discovered a tiny swollen nodule next to her right nipple. My heart sank, but I remained calm and said something that fortunately proved to be true, "Oh it's nothing honey. Your body is just going through little changes."

After kissing Mona good night, I called Mary: friend, family practitioner, lesbian and mother of two daughters. Fortunately she was home. Mona was fine. What she had is called a breast bud and is perfectly normal early development. I didn't feel so stupid when several months later a lesbian friend confided that she had rushed her daughter to a doctor for the same complaints. She had also never heard of breast buds before. I explained to Jack what Mary said, and the two of us went back up to Mona's room to make a mountain out of a mole hill, literally. Mona was horrified, "Oh no, I don't want those big breasts like the women in *Carousel Mall*," referring to the underwear models' photo displays in the front windows of Frederick's. We explained that breast buds are not necessarily precursors to large breasts and not to worry. I sat on the edge of Mona's bed thinking it was time for some kind of meaningful parent child conversation. Mona sat on my lap and I started to bawl, so much for our meaningful conversation.

The night of *Cheaper By The Dozen 2*, it was Mona's turn to fall apart, but I followed suit. Initially, when Mona complained about getting too big, I tried to alleviate her concern, "Isn't it great to grow so big and strong," but Mona hugged me and sobbed. "I'm changing too fast," she cried. "I don't want to leave you." She had articulated what I was feeling since we saw that silly movie and probably carried at some unconscious level for the past several months. Things are changing too fast! Can't we slow down just a bit! We hugged and sobbed. I tried to comfort her (and myself) with, "Now honey, no one is leaving. You're just reacting to the movie we saw today." It worked, albeit temporarily.

While Mona showered, Jack came home from grocery shopping. I was still a mess; he thought someone had died. I explained what happened. After Mona showered and got ready for bed, we all sat in her room. Mona and I were still weepy, while Jack tried to make light of things, "Mona you know how silly Poppy gets." Eventually I chilled. Mona asked to look through her photograph album of first year pictures and to read *Runaway Bunny*. She knows how to milk a situation. She also asked to sleep in our bed. I agreed reluctantly because I don't sleep well when she's with us; I have to listen all night to make sure that she's still breathing. It's an exhausting responsibility.

Later, Jack suggested I get a grip and that Mona and I were feeding off of each other's hysteria. I guess he expected me to act like the parent. I immediately took offense and interpreted our varied responses and his criticism of my behavior as a cultural disconnect. He's a WASP. How could he understand the emotions of an Italian father? Of course this wasn't it. Jack is a very caring and emotional man. He's frequently brought to tears much easier than I am. It was just his turn to be the "man".

In the somber but enlightening book *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher writes, "adolescent girls are saplings in a hurricane." She attributes their vulnerability to their physical changes, girl-hurting "isms" and American cultural expectations for adolescent girls to distance themselves from their parents. She further writes, "Involved fathers bemoan their sudden banishment from their daughter's lives." Having been a teacher for thirty years, I don't wholly embrace "expert" opinion as unalterable truth, but I do take Pipher's insights seriously. I know that, if nothing else, adolescence is all about extraordinary change. I may have done well with letting go of the infant and the toddler in Mona; I'm not quite ready to let go of the little girl. But, in time I will. Sometimes ya just need to have a good cry.