



SHIFT

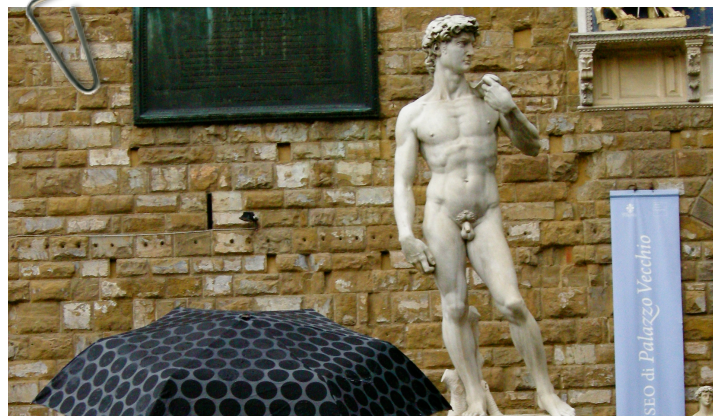


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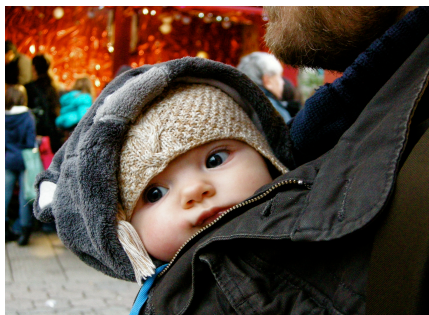
Or, *How Sperm Donation Changed My Life*

The doctor led me into the sample room. Bright, fluorescent tubes flicked on, the sharp light complementing the hygienically sterile smell. A small pleather sofa and laminate flat-pack construction coffee table graced the main part of the room, while a gleaming white toilet and sink hid tucked behind a small partition. He handed me a small specimen cup, the unbroken sticker seal indicating the date it was UV-sterilised. Motioning to the sink, the doctor instructed me to wash my hands before and after. "When you've finished, just ring the bell outside the room." He stood in the doorway and indicated the small buzzer. Before leaving, he gestured to an unlabelled ring-binder on the coffee table. "There's some reading material in there if it helps. But take your time. It produces a better sample." The door closed behind him, and I was left standing in this hygienically sterile room with a plastic cup in my hand and a folder of Playboy centrefolds on the table.

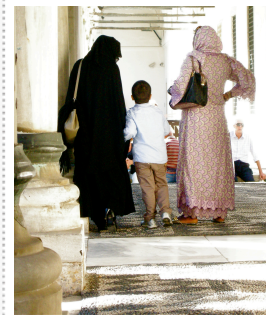
Flash backward a few months to the moment when the seed of this idea for donating my sperm was planted. One winter evening I sat comfortably in my kitchen, feet kicked up under the table and propped on the chair opposite me. The village was quiet on the street below my window, and I sipped a glass of wine with one hand while holding my phone to my ear with the other. On the other end of the line, my brother coolly recounted his latest news against a backdrop of barking dogs and crying children.



I bet David never worried about sperm donation...



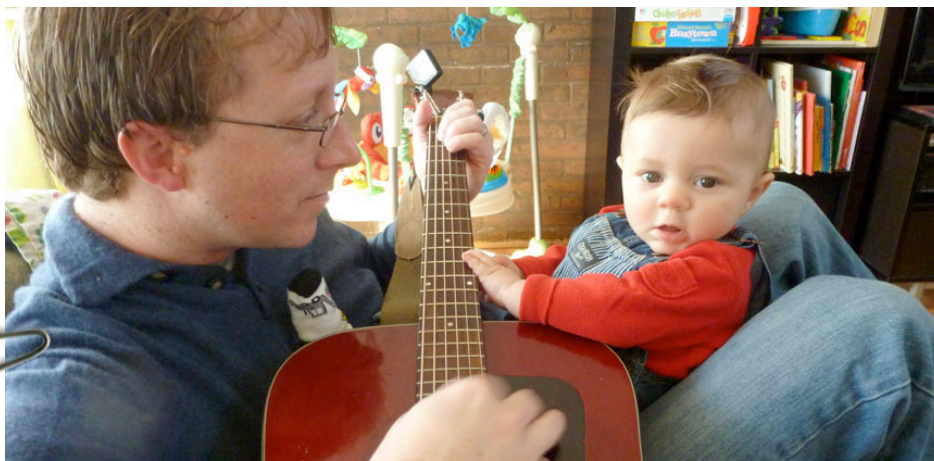
A newborn, bright-eyed baby in France



A child and family in Istanbul

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Brother Andrew and baby Elio



Celebrating the Revolution in Egypt

“Elio’s a firecracker of a baby. He’s got a set of lungs, for sure. We’ve just about got him sleeping through the night, now.” His tone was almost flatline.

“That’s gotta be some rough nights for you,” I condoled.

“It’s not bad. We take it in turns.”

“Still, I wouldn’t want to do it.”

My brother’s tone perked up. “It’s different when they’re your own, you know? You’ve got a lot of love — dirty diapers and all.” I gave a grunt of acknowledgement. He continued, “I just never thought I’d be a father of three. Seems like the rabbits in the backyard don’t procreate half as fast as I do.”

The conversation moved on, but my mind stayed on the topic of kids. By the time I hung up the phone, I was deep in the kind of fuzzy-brained, contemplative thought that only comes with 2 or 3 glasses of wine. *Why not have children?*

Truth is, I’ve never really wanted kids. Sure, if you hand me a baby, I can *ooh* and *ahh* with the best of them. Pour out a box of lego on the floor, and I’ll be in there with the toddlers building castles and cars and crocodiles. Stand me in front of a group of 10-year-olds, and I can entertain. But after a couple of minutes I’m like a dog with ADHD: I abandon whatever I was doing in search of something more interesting. And the hapless kids are either promptly returned to the parents or left to their own devices. Kids just don’t hold my attention.

Yet some people actually thrive on being around children. God bless them, but I’m just not one of those people. I’ve never understood why great-aunt Gertrude expresses genuine surprise at the natural process of your growth spurt, or why moms in the blogosphere post countless, supposedly funny quotes from their 3-year-olds. I simply don’t share in that fascination for child development; but precisely because I lack it, I have a certain envy for people who do enjoy watching children grow up.

In light of that, I also recognise that some of these people who delight in being around children simply don’t have the capacity to have them. My eldest brother and his wife found themselves in that position a few years back; and, after much deliberation and thought, decided to adopt. Their child has been a source of constant joy for them — a fact that both pleases and perplexes me. Children are a blessing, my child-rearing friends tell me. “Well, bless you,” I respond internally, as if they had sneezed instead of sharing the joys of parenthood.

And why not bless others? If children can bring people so much joy, and if those people are unable to have them, then why not help them out? I’m a healthy, adult male with nary a hint or desire for children or a family on the horizon, but the plumbing seems to be working all right. Call me a confirmed bachelor if you will, but family and kids is a mental picture of a future that I just don’t have. My future dreams include things like living on every inhabited continent, accruing millions of frequent flyer miles and never owning anything that requires more commitment or care than a houseplant. I’ve preferred my

single, globe-trotting lifestyle to the more conventional job-marriage-children-retirement line. But that's not to say that I couldn't help someone who does want that kind of life.

By the time my wine-fuzz wore off, I had already read eight blogs on the subject, found 3 local services and one national sperm bank, and left a message to schedule an appointment the following week. Immediate family and close friends were notified of my plans, and I anxiously awaited their feedback and opinions. Discussing my plans over lunch with a trusted work colleague the following day, she simply stared in amazement and said, "You know, Joel, when you decide to do something, you do it. No half-measures for you!"

My apparent resolve belied an internal conflict. My actions would change lives — potentially create lives — to which I would have no connection. A simultaneous emotional investment and divestment would have to be made: I would have to be at once altruistic in helping others and steel-hearted in never

knowing who I helped. For an independent man, this might seem like the ideal situation: to give and forget, so to speak. In the end, I was simultaneously joyful and disheartened when I heard the news on Valentine's Day that, at least for now, I could not be a father by proxy. My donation, though healthy, failed to survive the testing process — a common issue even in our medical age. The doctor kindly invited me back in three months' time to try again, an offer which I declined.

Suddenly staring into the microscope of my life brought into sharp focus the expectations I had set for myself, though. Is this what I really wanted my own life to be like? The 30-something sperm donor working a middle-management desk job in rural England?

During the pre-testing interview, I was faced with a series of questions that required snap judgments on my part. "Do you consent to your genetic material being stored for up to 10 years?" the doctor asked, and I started thinking about where I might be a decade from now. "Do you

consent to your genetic material being used for testing and scientific research purposes?" and my brain started searching through a host of possible alternatives to my current lifestyle. "Do you consent to your genetic material being used in the event that you become mentally incapacitated or die in the interim?" and the sharp focus of mortality cut to the marrow of my soul and I started bleeding unfulfilled dreams.

The human will can become unrelentingly obstinate when seized with a desire; and I suddenly desired a change. The routine of life had finally gotten to me, I claimed. I am young, single and unattached; I've always loved to explore new cultures and new places; there's no time like the present and all that.

The truth was a bit more complicated. Yes, boredom with routine and the need for a challenge played a part, but so did a certain shift in character. People talk about these sudden changes of life course as an 'epiphany' or the 'a-ha moment' when they just *knew* they needed to quit their job / marry their spouse /

You have no idea where you are?



If only my life came with a map like this one, found in Croatia



Prayer in a mosque in Urfa, Turkey

sell the farm / etc... and I suppose in many ways, it feels like that because we often fail to see the accumulated drift of circumstances building up to those life-summit decisions. I sensed the winds of change two years ago. My father passed away, I spent time grieving with the aid of a counsellor, and a friend planted the idea of taking a Sabbatical year. The imperceptible momentum of these events led to a Sabbatical of faith, a smouldering burn-out with my pastoral responsibilities at work, and a desire to change environments before *rigor mortis* settled in my soul. The exploration of the real world paralleled the exploration of my inner world. And suddenly, my inner world felt cluttered.

So in the run-up to summer, I spent months downsizing my life. I sold off or donated everything I owned: car, furniture, books, clothes, potential future children. I was ruthless in my downsizing. I whittled everything down to a few boxes of photos and memorabilia and a single carry-on bag. By the time August and my British passport came around, I tearfully walked away from my job with nothing but the bag on my shoulders and 7 years of positive memories.

I've taken to the road with my usual travel panache of cobbled experiences and classic self-reflection. The thread of these past few months weaves its way through road trips in Western Turkey to grape harvests in Tuscany; from ascetic prayer in Kurdish mosques to indulgent pizzas in Naples; from streetcars in Lisbon to street parties in Cairo.

But if I could characterise this year in a single word, it might be *shift*. I've downshifted my personal possessions to almost nothing; I've shifted out of my job; I've shifted from destination to destination;

I've shifted away from convention. Much of my shiftings are as much internal as external, seismic as much as imperceptible.

One thing has resisted this upheaval, and that is the practice of prayer. While I've had to do some serious re-organising in the personal faith department, I still find myself lighting a candle in every church I visit, reciting the *Shema* in every synagogue or saying a prayer in every mosque my soul encounters on the road. The planet is full of monuments to faith, now serving mostly as tourist attractions, but their original purpose of fostering self-reflection and contemplation has not been lost on me. In spite of my soul-searching — or perhaps because of it — I make time in every place of worship to whisper a plea to the Almighty that I might better understand the shifting sands of my life.

People sometimes use the metaphor of God as a father; and by extension, we are God's children. I'm not sure what the original conception was for my life, but I do hope God's parenting skills are up to the challenge of watching me grow up. I'm searching for God-knows-what as I shift around the globe; I just pray God helps me find my way. 🍷

--Joel Bond

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Working the grape harvest in Tuscany, Italy

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