Maybe Baby

Shawn Decker and his wife rethink a childless future.

July 1, 2009 By Shawn Decker

Among my first concerns when I was diagnosed with HIV was whether I could have kids. I was 11 years old and worried I wouldn't be able to pass on my immense wisdom of Nintendo Cheat Codes to my unborn offspring. Even as a child, the notion of having kids seemed like a birthright—one that was being threatened by HIV. "You could always adopt," my mother offered.

By the time I got to my early 20s, I'd laid to rest the interest in being a parent. Having survived a decade as a positoid (my term for someone living with HIV), I understood that living with HIV offered an unintended benefit: a life without the societal pressure of having kids. When my negatoid big brother was welcoming his first child into the world, I was on one of my first dinner dates with Gwenn, whom I would eventually marry. "I have no maternal instincts whatsoever," she said. My heart melted. I'd met a beautiful, attractive and caring girl who was not looking for a sperm donor. Check, please!

As a couple, we started to educate about HIV on college campuses. One probing question was asked more than any other: "What about kids?" We'd explain the scientific breakthrough of sperm washing and how when used in combination with in vitro fertilization it can almost eliminate the chances of transmission. Then we'd end with a joke: "But we can't even keep a plant alive!" We've done that talk hundreds of times, and we've answered that question the same way—until our most recent speaking engagement.

"Babies are cute," I said, explaining the procreation wave that has reached epidemic proportions among our friends, including my brother, who came out of a 10-year retirement to bring another new, cute, cuddly life into this world. "I think Gwenn would make an excellent mother," I cooed. Gwenn stared back, a look of absolute, chilling horror on her face.

Is my biological clock ticking? Or am I just open to the idea—and the complete picture of what it means to be a parent—for the first time in my life? I'm not thinking right now, but perhaps someday.

Even Gwenn, while not harboring Angelina Jolie tendencies to mother, has warmed to the concept of Future Maybe Baby. But sperm washing and in vitro fertilization are so expensive. Maybe we could get the cable TV channel TLC to sponsor the whole experiment? *Shawn and Gwenn Plus Ten*?

Would I be able to share the spotlight? I've always been the center of attention, from my birth with hemophilia up to my HIV diagnosis. My life story, my funny-guy AIDS shtick and my best zingers would be overshadowed by an 18-month-old repeating the word "poop." Could my ego take a backseat to the child seat?

But it's not the cost of pregnancy or my addiction to attention that keeps us from pursuing parenthood. It's gut-wrenching fear. I love my life—the late nights at home doing nothing, the ability to travel for work and play when we want to. I've survived long odds to get here, having gone from those early days of no hope to today's prospect of a normal lifespan spent with the coolest of partners, Gwenn.

All jokes aside, my most important role in life is being a good husband to Gwenn. My HIV status and the medications that control the virus cause my energy levels to shift on a dime. Having lived a third of my life as a positoid, I am absolutely sure that if we had a child, then a lion's share of the responsibilities would fall in her lap (making us just like most hetero parents).

What's good is that, biologically speaking, we have a few years to sit on these feelings. But what if Gwenn and I decide not to have kids, and one night in our 60s, while watching late night television, we wonder aloud if we made a huge mistake in our youth? Well, then we'd just have to adopt, wouldn't we?

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