Opinion | Adventures in Transgender Fertility

Over the last several months, I’ve spent evenings watching my fiancée, Lara, inject herself with smaller and smaller doses of estrogen. I’ve watched her stand in front of a mirror, singeing each hair out of her face with a secondhand electrolysis machine.

The return of her testosterone hasn’t resulted in just the resurgence of facial hair; her pants now fit differently, too. My own skin has been plagued by acne since I got off the pill six months ago, and my default states are angry, hungry or sleeping. Such are the perils of trying to have a child the way Lara and I are trying, without in vitro fertilization, or cryogenically frozen sperm. The way fertile cisgender people do: They simply couple up, and boom — a child is born.

For many young trans people, the question of having babies is likely the last thing on their minds. Who could blame them? Like all young people, they’re figuring out their future, and matters of diapers and breast-feeding seem abstract and far off. But unlike all young people, young trans people are often making choices that have long-term consequences for their fertility. Which is part of how I, a 32-year-old cisgender lesbian, and Lara, my 33-year-old trans fiancée, came to be in the situation we’re in today: trying to conceive a child, even though Lara transitioned nearly four years ago.
I didn’t even realize I wanted biological kids until my mid-20s. Before then, I’d vaguely imagined that children would simply come to me, à la Auntie Mame, or Diane Keaton in “Baby Boom”: I’d inherit them from a long-lost relative and simply slot them into my independent, modern life. Little did I know then that in just a few years, I’d be staying up late to read studies in which scientists combined the eggs of two female rats (http://www.genomenewsnetwork.org/articles/2004/04/23/fatherless.php) to make a child, hoping for 50 more years on the planet so that I’d be around when they began testing on humans.

Then I met Lara. On our first date, she made my heart swell with her kindness and her adventurousness. We bonded over a mutual enthusiasm for chocolate pecan pie. Over lukewarm pimento cheese at a diner, she showed me a picture of herself from a year beforehand, before she’d begun transitioning. We shared a lingering first kiss in the parking lot, and on the drive home, while the Bee Gees’ “How Deep Is Your Love” played on the radio, I had a realization: If things worked out, I could have a biological child with the woman I love, as long as I had eggs and she had the other half of the ingredients. And she did — sort of. But it hasn’t been straightforward.

In a recent study, a majority of trans teenagers who received fertility counseling declined to take steps to preserve their own fertility (http://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(16)30958-2/fulltext) before transitioning. Their reasons included cost, discomfort with fertility preservation measures — that is, freezing sperm or eggs — and not wanting to delay hormone therapy. Instead, 45.2 percent of the subjects said they preferred to adopt, and 21.9 percent stated they didn’t want to have children.
Perhaps they don’t. Small-scale studies (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26109170) of transgender adults have indicated that members of these communities may have different and complex attitudes when it comes to biological children and families than the broader population. But other surveys of transgender adults (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22128292) seem to point to the possibility that with age comes a shifting attitude about having children.

Not long after we met, Lara, who transitioned at the wise old age of 30, told me that with each year she takes estrogen injections, her fertility declines. Like many trans people, Lara wasn’t interested in having children when she transitioned. We got together in May 2015; last fall, she told me it was, essentially, now or never, as she wanted her transition to continue moving forward. By then, the thought of not being able to have my own biological child could make me tear up in front of my happily childless friends, who encouraged me to try if it was something I really wanted.

Here we are, over seven months later: she’s off her hormones; I’m off the pill; we’re engaged and enraged from our respective hormonal shifts. The early stages of this process make me wish for more time; we didn’t realize we wanted children together until we fell in love. If we’d been clairvoyant on our first date, we would’ve decided this over that plate of lukewarm pimento cheese. But we didn’t, and after almost three years together, this is probably our last chance.

When we started this process, Lara said she was doing this for me. I’d tell her no: I wanted us to wholeheartedly do this together or not at all. But in more private moments, she’d admit that all she wanted was to have a child together, a mixture of us two in human form, like two kinds of sand blended in a clear glass. A symbol of love who could walk around, crack jokes, do somersaults and go to college.

In my experience chatting with friends and acquaintances in the trans
community, fertility preservation doesn’t come up often or explicitly, although there are whispers: “We’re trying” is something I’ve heard from couples in which one or both members are trans. But those discussions are not as out in the open as talk about hormones and surgical procedures; compared to such topics, in fact, fertility is almost taboo.

It’s unrealistic to expect trans teenagers or even young trans adults to know whether they want to have their own children. They are eager to start transitioning, a momentous, all-consuming next step in their lives, meant to relieve what has been a painful fact of life. Making the choice at the same time to preserve their fertility seems to demand foresight beyond their years. But it’s for this reason we need to give them that foresight, in a nonjudgmental yet forthright way. Counseling is a great first step, but it’s not enough: in an ideal world, the trans community, and the L.G.B.T. community more broadly, would be as comfortable discussing babies as it is discussing gender identity itself.

The truth is, some people know from the beginning they never want kids. But some, even those who thought they were sure, can one day find themselves feeling differently, especially if they meet someone they’d love to blend genes with. These people can then find that permanent decisions, made early on, may have closed doors before they even knew they wanted to open them.

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