

Redefining the modern American family

By Andrew Solomon, Newsweek

Children used to make me sad. With the happy children in my adult life, I felt guilty, even mean, about being sad. The origin of that sadness was opaque, but I think it came most from how the absence of children in the lives of gay people had been repeatedly held up as my tragedy. When I came out, the prevailing view was that I was shortsightedly choosing sexual fantasies over producing a family. I was encouraged by my parents and the world to marry a woman and procreate. I spent years drifting between relationships with men and with women; I was mildly bisexual in a fluid era, but if children hadn't been part of the equation, I wouldn't have bothered with the other half. Even though I was in love with some of the women I dated, I felt mildly fraudulent in those intimacies. While I was becoming true to myself, the world changed. What I couldn't know then was whether I truly wanted children, or whether I just wanted to prove wrong everyone who had pitied me.

Shortly after I met John, who is now my husband, we ran into his friends Laura and Tammy and their toddler, Oliver, at the 2001 Minnesota State Fair. John and Laura had been co-workers, and Laura had observed him for years before she and Tammy had asked him to be their child's biological father. Though not especially close to them, he had agreed, signing legal documents in which he foreswore paternal rights and they foreswore claims to support. He had offered to be in the child's life to the extent he was able, if the child so wished, but in deference to Tammy's position as adoptive mother, he had so far remained uninvolved. Nevertheless, the women asked him to be a sperm donor again, and Lucy was born in 2004, by which time John was living with me in Manhattan.

The question of having biological children in unorthodox ways was familiar to me. A few years before I met John, during a trip to Texas, I attended a dinner that included my college friend Blaine. I had adored her for more than 20 years, but then, everyone adores Blaine; she is serenely beautiful and poised, and I had never felt indispensable to her as I do with more difficult friends. Blaine had divorced and shortly thereafter lost her mother, and she alluded to her yearning to become a mother herself. I said I'd be thrilled to father her child. The idea that she might actually want to have a baby with me was unimaginable; I suggested it with the rhetorical politesse with which I'd invited new acquaintances in remote countries to stop by for a drink if they ever found themselves in Greenwich Village. When I got home, however, I wrote her a letter, saying that I thought she would be a glorious mother, and that if she didn't have a child with me, I hoped she'd have one with someone.

When Blaine came to my 40th-birthday party in New York three years later, in 2003, we realized that we both wanted to have that child together. I wasn't ready to tell John, who was still living in Minneapolis. When I did tell him, he exploded. He had been a sperm donor, he argued; I would have a child who would bear my last name. I would be involved in an ongoing, profound relationship with Blaine that he feared would lethally triangulate our own. I did not know how hard it is to reinvent family, and he could not envision how fulfilling this particular reinvention might be. I nearly backed out but felt I couldn't renege on my word, based on a wish I could likewise not forsake. John, whose benevolence invariably triumphs, finally relented, and Blaine and I conceived through IVF. Blaine, meanwhile, had met her partner, Richard, putting a reasonable if unusual balance in place.

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