

GUEST ESSAY

He Lives in the Double Helix of My Cells, but I Do Not Know Him

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I heard my father's voice for the first time three years ago when I was 14 years old. For years, a CD had been sitting in a clear plastic case in my desk drawer, but I had never been able to get myself to play it. I would pick up the shiny disc, stare at the faded black ink that said "Donor interview," notice my distorted reflection in the silver circle, then put the CD back down.

I've always known that I didn't have a dad, but the story of why came from a picture book. In preschool, my mom read me a book about donor-conceived children, where a woman who dreams of having a baby gets some "magic seeds" from a nice man. I remember confusing this story with "Jack and the Beanstalk" — magic seeds. The book ended with a happy surprise: Guess what? You're the baby!

Still, I dreaded Father's Day, especially at school, when my teacher would have the class make cards for their dads. Each time, the teacher would turn to me and say in a too-loud whisper, "And you can make one for a special person in your life."

I can't explain why after so many years of putting the CD away, I picked the Father's Day when I was 14 to finally pop it in and press play. But I did, and a few seconds later, the room filled with the music of my identity. I couldn't believe what I was hearing; the voice sounded exactly like mine. This man I don't know but who lives in the double helix of my cells was just a medical student when he recorded these words at the sperm bank for some kid who was his biological child.

"What's the funniest thing that's ever happened to you?" a woman at the sperm bank asked my donor on the CD, and he told a story about a hot dog fiasco that made me laugh out loud. We had the same sense of humor. "What's your favorite food?" she asked, and before my donor even answered, I guessed what he would say.

"A good steak," he replied. I smiled. Mine, too.

It's a strange thing to feel the absence of someone you can't picture, an ache you can't name. After all, it's not as if I missed a particular dad — just the idea of one. But what I didn't understand until I heard that CD is that it wasn't just a father I was missing; it was also a piece of my identity.

"What activities do you enjoy in your free time?" the woman at the sperm bank asked. When he named the same sports I play and talked about his love of poetry, I felt as if he were describing me.

Soon I would learn from a Facebook group that I had more than 20 half-siblings, all of us conceived from the same donor. One of these half-siblings would find the name of our donor, which led to the discovery of a yearbook photo. There he was, my biological father, and he looked exactly like me.

"What kind of values did your parents instill in you that you'd like to pass on to your own children?" the woman at the sperm bank asked, and my donor talked about resilience, self-confidence and following your passions. But then he said something that made me stop the CD and play that part again. "I want them to feel whole," he said.

Before listening to the CD, I worried that hearing my donor's voice might make me feel the loss of a father even more, and at first it did. It was easier to convince myself that I had no dad until I heard his voice and saw his photo. I remember thinking, "I guess I do have a dad," and I began fantasizing about everything we could have done together — and maybe still could.

After all, he was out there, with his email address a quick Google search away. I wondered if he would be proud of me, find me smart or funny or interesting, enjoy my company. I imagined talking about sports and books and life with him and what it would be like to walk through the world with a man who would make people think the second they saw us together, "They're definitely father and son."

But the more I contemplated contacting him, the more I thought about what he had said on the CD about wanting his offspring to feel whole.

We all have a need to know where we come from and what shapes us into the people we are. Genetics mold us in some ways, but no matter how much I learned about my donor, he still felt like a stranger. All those things I imagined doing with my biological father? I was already doing those things with people who shaped who I am in far more meaningful ways.

I decided not to contact my donor because I realized that I'd had fathers all along — dozens of them. There were teachers, coaches, other people's dads, family friends, my beloved grandfather.

For me, these father figures are a collage of wildly diverse personalities and perspectives giving me more fathering combined than an individual dad could possibly provide. Biology is strong, but it's also easy. The people who father me do it for no other reason than that they choose to.

Some of these men coached my teams, talked to me about relationships and taught me how to shave and tie a tie. Others took me to museums and Lakers games, made bad dad jokes, watched every "Star Wars" and Marvel movie with me, asked about the books I was reading, swam far out in the ocean with me, helped me make big life decisions and gave me undivided attention. All of them valued my opinions and taught me to value others', modeled personal accountability and showed me that it's important as a guy to express your emotions — to view vulnerability as a sign of strength.

I never imagined that Father's Day would become one of my favorite holidays, but in the three years since I played that CD, it has. The word "father" has also evolved for me, from a noun to a verb.

If I could go back to elementary school and make a Father's Day card today, here's what it would say: "Happy Fathers' Day (plural), to all the men in this world who father."

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