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Being dada at 50

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Turning 50 was a momentous occasion for me. Other people celebrate by doing something out of the norm. One friend made a pilgrimage from Vancouver to Seattle to see his favourite high-school band, Rush. Another travelled to Italy with his partner to sip red wine and walk cobblestone streets. Someone else bought his dream motorcycle to cruise the back roads of Alberta.

Not me. My wife and I decided to have a baby. Yup, a baby for my 50th. Suddenly, Freedom 55 became Freedom 75.

Actually, it was far from sudden. Getting pregnant is supposed to be easy, but it wasn't. I already had three teenage children from a previous marriage and assumed a quick vasectomy reversal would set us on our way.

Wrong. Not that simple. It didn't work. Shattered, we moved to the next option.

The waiting room of an infertility clinic is an anxious place to sit. I found myself wondering what the other couples' struggles had been. At our appointment, a doctor told my wife that at her age, the chances were slim. "You are 40," he pointed out.

I could see my wife's frustration mounting. Three times in 20 minutes, he gently reminded her how old she

was. I thought that if he said that one more time, he was the one who would need a doctor.

We proceeded to follow the recommended path and rejoiced at the news of the retrieval of 33 eggs, more than a 40-year-old should produce.

To our shock and surprise, the first implant failed. "What? How hard can this be?" The second attempt also failed and our spirits sank.

We were getting a lesson in just how difficult it is to get pregnant. Everywhere we went there were babies in strollers and carriers. We felt like losers. We wondered, "What's the matter with us?" We became aware of the pain many couples experience in waiting for and worrying about pregnancy. It crushes many a couple.

As we waited for the pregnancy test results from our final round of in vitro fertilization, I was silently preparing for negative news. I busied myself with hanging a new shower curtain. Suddenly, I heard a gasp. I was prepared to hold my wife in grief, but instead I held her in joy as we gazed at the plus sign shining from the stick.

Pregnancy birthed hurdles we hadn't expected. Six months along, Anna was ordered to spend her days on bed rest. An active woman on bed rest isn't a good combination. The inactivity brought a new hurdle in the form of a blood clot and twice-daily shots. She hobbled from room to room on crutches and in pain. We nursed this new detour in quiet hopefulness. How much harder can this be?

For six weeks we attended prenatal classes. It was hilarious – my wife would hobble in on crutches and I would read the handouts with reading glasses perched on my nose. As I looked around the room at the 20-year-old wearing a backward baseball cap, the woman with an ankle tattoo and the gum-chewing teenager my own son's age, I wondered if I really was ready to do it all again.

One of the funniest days of our pregnancy journey was when we took our 18-year-old son to the airport for his gap-year travels to Australia. We said our farewells with tears, photos and hugs. Instead of a celebratory beer, we drove home and sat with a prenatal nurse as she explained the birthing process one last time. I burst out laughing when she demonstrated how a fetus slides through the birth canal. An hour earlier our son had slid out the door, backpack in hand, into the world that awaited.

Finally, the big day came last December and we held our beautiful, six-pound miracle daughter, Charlotte, in our arms. All our worry, pain and grief disappeared. The first few weeks we were spoiled and cared for as people showered us with food and gifts. We truly felt blessed.

What has surprised me the most about the birth of our child was the reaction of our teenagers and their friends. It was breathtaking to watch our kids cradle their sister at the hospital. Their reverence, tenderness and joy was beautiful. And it's given them an opportunity to ask about their own early years: "Did I keep you up all night too?" "When did I crawl?" "Ugh, did you force vegetables on me too?"

One introverted friend of our son called from university to congratulate us. Another friend arrived with slightly crumpled carnations he had left in the car overnight. A 13-year-old wrote a first Christmas letter to our baby. Many kids visited us over the holidays with smiles, open arms and a tentative curiosity as they reached out to greet our newborn. Their openness rekindled my hope in the future.

We laughed a few weeks ago when Charlotte learned to crawl. It was the same week our eldest attended his first university pub crawl.

So often I find myself doing the math. When she is 5 and in the play zone, I will be sipping free coffee at McDonald's. When she is 15, I will cash my old-age pension cheque to pay for her driver's education. When she is being fitted for braces, I might be trying out a new set of dentures. When she is 20 and I am in a

retirement home, she will call me for money for university.

But through all the math, I can honestly say that numbers and age don't matter. My 50th birthday child was the best way to celebrate half a century.

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