

Watching My Wife Give Birth Redefined My Notion of 'Sexy'

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One dad explains why getting a front-row seat to the birth of his children strengthened his bond with his wife. (Photo: Mark Ferguson)

I was 19 when I accidentally watched my sister give birth. When I found out she was in labor, I rushed to the hospital. All my childbirth knowledge came from sitcoms, so I figured she was somewhere between the dramatic water breakage and the instantaneous appearance of a baby who looked 5 months old. There was no time to waste.

As it turned out, there were about five hours to waste. At the hospital, my mom brought me into the delivery room. I don't remember questioning it, which is, perhaps, strange. For most of the labor, it was easy to avoid seeing anything. But then my sister started pushing. The sheets came off. Things got real.

There was blood, streams of it. There was poop. There was white stuff and yellow stuff, thin stuff, thick stuff, and even some chunky stuff. And then —incredibly, impossibly — there was a baby in the room.

People hate this story. The reactions I get are so extreme you'd think I was telling them the baby was mine. But here's the thing: I didn't go blind. I didn't turn to hard drugs to help me forget. I gave it remarkably little thought. The arrival of an actual human baby girl totally eclipsed the strangeness that preceded her.

This explains, in part, why I had so little anxiety about watching my wife give birth to my two sons. I knew I would be there, but I wondered what role I would play. Like many people, I worried about seeing my partner in pain and being unable to help. That fear was compounded by the fictional representations of childbirth I'd grown accustomed to: clueless husbands and boyfriends being screamed at, berated, and cursed. The pop culture dad is sometimes selfish, often oafish, and always incompetent.

Luckily, this fear has a pretty simple antidote: education. Without preparation, I might have been useless (or worse than useless, had my wife needed to manage me and my feelings), but there are plenty of resources that teach how to be an effective birth partner. Once I learned how to help my wife focus and relax, I was a lot less concerned about the pain she'd be experiencing. More importantly, I understood that dwelling on my own fears about her pain was like saying, "I'm scared you can't handle it." She didn't need that. She was already being told (repeatedly, by everyone around her) that childbirth would be *the* most painful experience, and she was going into it willingly, with a smile on her face. It was utterly badass. She deserved my confidence, and my confidence reinforced her own.

One thing I was never concerned about was a loss of sexual desire. You have to maintain an air of mystery around your partner's vagina, the argument goes, or you'll never be interested in it again. Gordon Ramsay famously justified his own fears of losing his attraction to his wife by describing childbirth as "something out of a sci-fi movie — skinned rabbits and conger eels coming at me from everywhere." I assume, based on this quote, that he's equally terrified of tampon applicators and cooties. As for conger eel and rabbit — he's killed, cleaned, and cooked both on television. Not sure what to make of that.

I understand the fear of seeing one's partner's privates in such a vastly different context, but I think it's misplaced. My wife once ate at Red Lobster, then had a package of blue sour straws at the movies. When the food poisoning kicked in later that night, I watched her eject neon-blue seafood salad into the toilet. Did I want to kiss her on the mouth that night? No. But I've kissed her plenty since.

My wife gave birth at home just last week. It wasn't a turn-on, but I wasn't horrified, either. I was focused on my role and the baby that would soon be joining our family. All the sounds, smells, and sights that I first witnessed at my sister's delivery and experienced

again at the birth of my first son, now 2-and-a-half, were repeated, but I'm not haunted by them. That doesn't make me atypical, either. Childbirth doesn't appear to affect men's or women's libidos nearly as much as everything that comes after.

In the last 10 days alone, I've seen my wife wear mesh boy shorts to hold thick pads in place, I've watched her shirt darken with leaking milk, and she's pumped her breasts in the living room using a hilariously unattractive "hands-free bustier." None of this is good for getting it on, but it would be unthinkable to stay away from the house for a few weeks just for the sake of my virility.

As for the future of our sex life, I'm not concerned. Attraction doesn't bow to grossness so easily. My wife is way sexier now than she was five years ago. Pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood are big reasons why. She's more mature, empowered, and confident than ever. Drug-free or with an epidural, vaginal or cesarean — pregnancy, childbirth, and recovery require brutal self-mastery, perseverance, and bravery. She's fearless, like a baby-birthing samurai. She takes this confidence out into the world, and she brings it into her relationship with me.

What's sexier than a grown woman who knows everything about her body and what it can do? What's sexier than total badassery? If we have more kids, I'll be there waiting to catch them. I'm looking forward to it.