

## Finally Ready to Be a Dad

I was worried that waiting until late in life to have kids was a mistake. It turned out to be the best decision I ever made.

**WEB-EXCLUSIVE COMMENTARY**

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Aug. 3, 2006 - When faced with first-time fatherhood at the age of 49, I wasn't sure whether to celebrate with champagne or hemlock. I was scared. Did I have the stamina? Would I live long enough to see my child through college? Would I be mistaken for grandpa? Would I drool, stumble and mumble to myself about Woodstock at Little League games?

All these fears turned out to be unfounded. I discovered with great surprise—and even greater relief—that as a mature man, I could tap into my accumulated reservoir of life experiences and skills to help me be an effective father of two thriving children. For me, fatherhood is better late than younger.

The best thing I did in my youth was to avoid having kids. I hitchhiked around the country for years, lived on a commune, worked in presidential politics and on Capitol Hill. I helped make a low-budget horror B movie called "Fear No Evil" and drove my '72 Dodge Dart west from Washington, D.C., to Northern California. My priorities were selfish. I sought adventure, career advancement, financial stability, travel and fun. It was not a mind-set conducive to the duties of parenthood.

Now that I've gotten my ya-ya's out (most of them, anyway), I'm no longer driven by youthful passions. I'm more patient, empathetic, compassionate and wise. I've already been there and done most of that. And because I've seen more death and am closer to its inevitability, my appreciation for life is keen. I deeply value this opportunity to nurture and enjoy my children.

Career longevity allows me greater flexibility to manage both work and family. When my son was 2, I was able to step off the Silicon Valley tech circuit to work as a consultant and spend more time at home as an aware, participatory dad. My daughter soon followed, and I remain a constant, integral part of their play in the park, preschool classes, birthday parties, sports activities and emotional-quotient growth during these formative years.

Now that the hair grows better from my ears than on my scalp, I've developed my ability to seek and find the humor in otherwise trying situations, a life-saving skill for parents of any age. I abandoned all hope of maintaining dignified order and wholeheartedly subscribed to laughter as a magic elixir when my son perfectly arched his urine stream directly into my ear as I changed his diaper. I would not have found that earful so funny in my 20s.

Lack of money is one of the single greatest causes of familial stress and divorce, creating toxic conditions for parents and children alike. I'm a bit more financially comfortable now, and can afford some of the expenses that help my wife and me stay focused on important child rearing activities. We have help with gardening, maid service, small chores, daycare and babysitting. Believe me, there were times in my 20s and even 30s when I was rolling up pennies to buy a week's supply of eggs. My slightly fatter wallet, which unfortunately expands more slowly than my waistline, enhances the parental process for all concerned.

Age has made me a more wily coyote. I've lived through enough office politics, social shenanigans and the strife of life to know that the game does not always go to the best or the brightest. I'm glad to have a trace of treachery, a card sharp's sleight of hand and the persuasiveness of a con man to help keep the kids occupied. My version of hide-and-seek sends the kids running to hide while I call out all the places in the house I pretend to search ... from my comfortable position stretched out on the couch. My bigger bag of tricks helps keep me ahead of the game, even when I'm way out of bounds.

It's ironic that most children are born to fathers between the ages of 20 and 34, precisely the period in men's lives when I believe they are least equipped emotionally, financially and psychologically to deal with the extra responsibilities. I'm profoundly happy and appreciative to be an older dad, and this positive attitude directly benefits my children's quality of life.

As we age, many of us increasingly require more meaning in life. I met my greater meanings in the maternity ward as they inhaled their first breaths. As Plato once said, "The spiritual eyesight improves as the physical eyesight declines." These days, even the body's decay isn't as rapid as it used to be. Today's 60 is yesterday's 50. As my kids grow, they will help me stay active, healthy and vibrant. I'll rock in retirement, but not in a chair.

*Filppu lives in Palo Alto, Calif.*

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