

Getting to Know My Baby, One Kick at a Time

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Here's the thing about fetuses: they're not very good communicators. They live with (in) you for 40-odd weeks, but what do you really know about them? Not much.

Sure, you might see a nose or a liver on the ultrasound. Chances are, though, that you know more about the guy who delivers your takeout than the baby in your belly. And pretty much the only way to learn whatever it is you do know about said baby is via his/her kicks.

My baby kicked for the first time while we were at a concert in Prague. Holding my breath, trying not to hiccup or burp or fart or vart, as knocked up women do with startlingly regularity, I felt one perfect bubble rise up from my center and pop somewhere near my belly button. I knew immediately that it wasn't gas but Baby. At long last, Baby had moved and I had known.

For the next several weeks, I waited, hand poised, ready to feel Baby again. My husband waited too. Some women liken those first flutters to the flap of butterfly wings or to the pop of popcorn, but they made me think of champagne bubbles. Perhaps I just missed alcohol.

By week 22, I knew Baby was a boy, and that he really liked Pharrell Williams, kicking like crazy whenever I heard a snippet of "Happy." I had a less positive reaction to the song, which immediately highlighted the differences between my baby and me. It was my first sense of his personhood, the way in which he might be of me, but would ultimately, and always, be he.

He liked his dad's voice too, and songs by Pearl Jam, and pretty much the entire third season of *The Walking Dead*. Whenever I slowed or stopped at crosswalks, he'd kick like mad, as if to say, "C'mon, Ma. I don't have all day." Even in utero, he was developing a New Yorker's sense of impatience.

As time went on, his wee kicks, jabs, punches, and pummels felt more like firecrackers, a series of pop-pop-pows as I moved through my day. I loved being both myself, and not. I loved going to meetings and writing copy and taking naps and eating snacks and talking on the phone and breathing all while my body grew the baby. It was like having a superpower.

Again and again, obstetricians and technicians used one word to describe him: busy. "He's pretty busy in there," they'd say, watching him flail about on screen. My husband and I talked to him about the importance of work-life balance. "Son, you can't be busy all the time," we'd say. Whomp, whomp, whomp, he'd answer.

Would he be a soccer player? Placekicker? Of course, sometimes the kicks were hip checks or blows with his butt. So, would he like hockey? Boxing? Would he be aggressive? Would he ever slow down? When he kicked so hard that a book I'd rested on my belly fell to the floor, I almost started sobbing. WHAT IF HE HATED TO READ?

About 30 weeks in, I was riding the subway on my way to work when my fetus lurched to the right. He moved so hard and so fast, I let out a loud "oof." Did he smell something? See something? Sense something? I looked around, but noticed nothing unusual. In fact, the only other passenger nearby was an elderly woman with a yoga mat. What did it all mean? That he liked yoga? Older women? The C train?

Of course, I knew it wasn't logical or reasonable to try to interpret his kicks. But, on the other hand, how could I not? Imagine spending nine months with someone and never asking them about their favorite movies or hobbies or views on who will win the Game of Thrones. You can't spend that much time with another being and not wonder what it's like to be them.

Towards the end of my pregnancy, I woke one morning with dreams of earthquakes. Then I realized it wasn't the earth that was shaking but me. More specifically, my husband was jiggling my belly. "I wanted to say good morning to the little guy," he said. As rolling over took a severe effort of will by that point, I just pulled the blankets over my head without comment.

The last time he kicked in my belly, I was laying on the couch, drinking diet Sprite and eating pretzels. My husband had come over to play one of his favorite games. "Let's teach the little guy math," he'd say. He poked my belly one, and Baby kicked one. He poked my belly one-two. Baby kicked once, then a stream of water came out. My water had broken, not with a trickle but with a great gush.

Nowadays Baby kicks as vigorously as ever, only the blows land on the outside of my tummy, rather than in it. I actually feel his kicks less, thanks to the four-inch buffer of blubber I carry around my midsection. True to his uterine nature, he prefers moving to laying about. He runs around, stomps, backs up to grab a spatula or throw a napkin over his head. He dances. He rattles the cellophane of a library book, yammers at a stuffed rabbit, rubs avocado into the couch. I don't know just yet if he'll be into boxing or hockey or yoga or older women or neo soul. I do know that, every so often, he'll glance at me, and come charging over, arms waving and legs flailing, a shape-shifting mass of fiery energy that detonates into a hug.