

# Labor

**December 4, 2009:** Exactly 43 years ago tonight, Mrs. Dave came out on the enclosed porch attached to our trailer to tell me she needed to go to the hospital to have a baby. The news stunned me. I sat there huddled at the old desk in my "study," my feet in LL Bean felt-lined boots nestled up against an ancient electric space heater stuck in the knee hole. Yes, I knew she was going to have a baby, but that was supposed happen NEXT week, AFTER my semester exams, and after I had completed my term papers and submitted them. Besides, first-time mothers are supposed to go late, or so I was told in the "New Parents Seminar" we had attended at the old Memorial Hospital in Syracuse during that summer of 1966.

Suddenly feeling the burden of fatherhood for the first time, I reluctantly left off writing my paper on Design Communications and saddled up the Pontiac Tempest for the ride into the city from our lovely home behind the gas station at Fairmont Corners.

Mrs. Dave\* appeared nervous, and that rattled me a bit because this girl was not often shaken. I should know, having tried sometimes to get her blood up when I just wanted to start an argument. But of course now, as the caring and concerned father of our child, I put on my caring, concerned persona and asked her if there was anything I could do to help. She mentioned that if it were possible, she might prefer I undo something. She settled for my stopping to get her a Coke.

"Well," I said, as we continued our journey down West Genesee St., "you look pretty healthy to me. You'll do fine. Don't worry about anything. My mother had three of us and look how she turned out."

That was the last time I heard Mrs. Dave laugh for a couple of days. As it turned out, almost forty hours would pass before our son was born. He was as reluctant to enter this vale of tears as today he is reticent to enter into conversation. A quiet and thoughtful man, my son is very much like me, but a lot less likely to think out loud. And he's a better writer.

Syracuse's old Memorial Hospital was a dark and dingy place in 1966, just a few years before it closed. If you were born here in the 1960's, your parents were likely Medicaid recipients, beneficiaries of a newly minted program for the poor or studious or both. Trying to live on peanuts each week, I certainly appreciated the largess of the state's politicians' use of federal money. I always thought I should have put down "Rockefeller" as my son's middle name on the birth certificate. Before I discovered we were eligible, I lay awake nights trying to figure out where I would find the funds to pay the hospital \$275, the obstetrician \$250, and an extra \$25 for the circumcision if it were a boy. I joked about wanting a girl to save money. My night job at the Daws Drug store in the mall paid only \$1.25 per hour. I had occasional high paying work from IBM installing engineering changes on the large mainframe computers around

the Syracuse area, but it could only be done in large chunks during vacations. When Mrs. Dave became pregnant, I considered quitting school, but she made me promise I wouldn't. I settled down to the tough job of becoming a father-student.

Back to Mrs. Dave, she wasn't having very much fun, either. I don't believe the dark and dingy halls of the hospital inspired much confidence that she would be properly cared for. And as it happened, she wasn't.

She began labor Sunday night and was still in the throes of it Monday morning. By that evening, the resident in charge had moved her out in the hallway on the obstetrics floor and gone home, leaving word that if she did not deliver by midnight, a Caesarean should be performed. When he came back on Tuesday morning, the doctor was surprised and upset to see Mrs. Dave still in the hallway in labor. Finally, her dose of labor-inducing drugs was increased and our son was born on Tuesday morning, December 6, 1966.

What do two twenty-one year old kids know about having a baby? Through all of this, I sat two floors below in the father's waiting room. Around me, young fathers came and went from Sunday night to Tuesday morning, receiving news of their child's birth from a telephone over in the corner. From time to time, I'd take my attention away from my books and call upstairs to inquire about "Mrs. Griffin," and each time I used that name I felt like I was asking about my mother. Mrs. Dave lay in the hallway in labor and, having lost track of time, consoled herself that her mother had done this. So too could she.

Finally, the call came downstairs and I bagged my stuff and took the elevator up to see my wife and new son. Mrs. Dave was lightly sleeping when I was shown to her bed. She was so white I wondered if she was dead. When I remarked on my observation to the nurse, as politely as possible given the circumstances, the woman smiled and said having a baby took its toll on a woman. My God, I thought. What had I done to this poor girl?

Life restarted itself, as it usually does, and we began our life as a family, adding to our number in 1969 with the birth of our daughter. It would become apparent in the coming years that the extended labor might have had some damaging effects, but for now we just jumped into family life as does any young couple with a new baby. High chair in the kitchen, no smoking in the car, the little spare money we had from time to time now earmarked for some purpose unthought of a year ago.

Family life in America. It didn't last very long. The kids grew up faster than speeding bullets and I grew old even faster. Today they have their own households, and I have grandchildren who come down the Thruway and set up a temporary art studio of crayons and rubber stamps and stickers in my study, this one with central heat and wide windows looking out on a field of grass and trees and no gas station. Life has been good, and Mrs. Dave's labor was fruitful. So was mine.

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"Mrs. Dave" has her own identity separate from mine, both personal and professional. I use the term to preserve her anonymity, and have done so long enough for it to become familiar to friends and readers.