

What a startup does to you. Or: A celebration of new life

by Jason Cohen on July 17, 2012

A startup is a crucible – a fiery place that tests your limits, not by probing them but by violently exceeding them, all of the time. It’s worth it.

What was *supposed* to happen is that a curious pair of scissors would be offered me, designed for a singular purpose: to sever the life-line of an infant.



I would then have to make a choice—a choice already pondered—on whether I had the stomach to take that critical action myself, in a modern existence where even the most precious and basic of life’s occurrences might be cause for ill-at-ease at the smell of blood or the realities of birth.

Of course I would do it; I had practiced that desire.

But I didn’t get the chance.

My introduction to my daughter began and ended with a sterile view of a sterile hallway. Mom had been put under and, in the self-styled “1st-world” country of the USA, the male component of the mated pair isn’t allowed to accompany the female component in anything termed an “operating room,” lest said male faints at said smell of said blood or at sight of said scissors and the hideous yet necessary things done to said female, and who would therefore require medical attention in his own right.

So I sat there, seeing nothing but a beige wall, more helpless than I’ve ever felt.

Mom was interred in the first place because that cord had wrapped around Abby’s neck causing an erratic heartbeat. Off she had been rushed in a cloud of en-scrubbed personnel. Off I had rushed after them, but been planted in a chair, all events invisible and out of reach.

Then I heard the cry. Abby’s first breath. A new life. And I wept.

Minutes later I was bathing our new girl.

Later came something even more miraculous than birth—they let two obvious amateurs take this infant home. Without so much as a pop quiz.

We didn’t know what to do next, but it turns out not to matter as much as you’d think.

“Abigail” is Hebrew for “Father’s Joy.” (אביגיל)

People compare building startups with having children. Could that be right?

Both spend the first two years of life trying to kill themselves, while you frantically run around doing everything possible to prevent it.

Both are a combination of your own creation and their own direction. They’re malleable in certain ways and stubborn in others. Every one is different, even when created by the same parents. Each needs the freedom to find their own way, even if aided and shaped by loving guides. They go through macro-level stages which are predictable and obvious to those who have trod the path before, but also micro-level stages unique to each creation.

How much time do they take? All of it.

How much patience do they take? All of it.

Of course they're not actually that similar, humans just like to draw comparisons. After all, a kid will grow up pretty much no matter what; a startup usually dies regardless of and often due to the actions of the founders, for myriad reasons.

I think drawing comparisons is not only unnecessary but useless. Even supposing these two endeavors were similar.... so what? What would you do differently tomorrow?

But one thing both share is not only important, it's one of those things in life which alters your being in a way that can never be undone, forever changing who you are and how you interact with the world.

Both are a crucible.

Meaning, a fiery place that will test your limits, not by probing them but by violently exceeding them, all of the time. A newborn feeds every three hours and one like ours takes an hour to fall asleep between those hours. Ours had colic, in which means she screamed for 12 hours a day, every day, for three months. Try doing that while retaining your sanity.

I distinctly remember holding Abby out at arms length, thinking, "This is why they say 'Don't shake a baby.'" Until that moment I thought that Public Service Announcement was hilarious—who would throttle an innocent 7-pound newborn? Oh, it's me. I would have.

There's only a few times in my life where I've been taken to the brink, physically and mentally. Aside from Abby's colic, all of them have been in startups. You've already read pithy Tweets about the "roller coaster o' emotions," you've wondered whether you have the fortitude to quit your job, and you've read books like *The Dip*¹.

You've read the words, now you see that they're only words. Words that don't help much, not really. *You* have to *live* it.

Just like having kids, you won't understand until you do it. But if you do it, even if you "fail," you will come out stronger than you could have ever been without it. Stronger, wiser, ready for the next thing, never able to go back to being a cog, eyes opened.

I've never met a person who tried a startup, failed, and said they wouldn't have done it all over again. Never. What does that mean?

We didn't kill her, by the way. And so (like a startup) although each day can feel like an interminable mixture of necessary drudgery and constant invention. Like sitting up, and walking, and on and on, all boring and inevitable and yet precious and impossible.

And eventually they don't need you anymore, or so they claim. Maybe they're even right.

What's your crucible? Where's your child-like combination of wonder and determination, and the thing that is so difficult, you're sure you can't do it, and yet, you do it?

Because that's how you really live a life, instead of watching life elapse.

“*Awake my little ones, and fill the cup,
before life's liquor in its cup be dry.*”

—Omar Khayyám

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¹ Know when to quit so you don't waste your time, but don't quit when it's hard because winners push through the pain.