



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

The deep end of love

I should have been exhausted, but I wasn't.

I needed to sleep, but I couldn't.

Instead, I only wanted to look at my new baby girl, an eight-pound miracle we named Ella. After an 18-hour labor, she arrived around midnight. As we settled in a hospital room, our surroundings dark and quiet due to the time, I savored a moment alone with her. The nurse had left to gather supplies. My husband was getting food. And I...well, I was undergoing a major transformation.

With adoring eyes I studied Ella's face, memorizing features and wishing I could watch her all night, every night. When our eyes met, she held my gaze, never once wavering. It felt like a reunion, not an introduction, two long-lost friends who already knew and understood each other. If ever I'd questioned my existence, wondered what good I added to this world, I now had an answer.

This angel from heaven was here because of me. God had chosen me to raise her. As a tidal wave of love swelled inside me, so powerful and intense I could hardly breathe, I realized something: for this tiny creature to evoke so many life-changing emotions, she had to be special.

Then and there, my life split into two: Before and After.

Before I became a mom, I'd experienced



Photo by Heather Swanner Photography

love, love in many sizes and forms. I'd given it and taken it, doling out more when someone treated me right, less when they hurt me. But what I felt for Ella was completely one-sided and unmeasured. Gone was any instinct to protect my heart, replaced by a drive to protect her. She'd never love me the way I loved her, but I didn't care. In fact, that was the beauty of the situation.

At 30 years old, I *wanted* to be saved from my selfishness. I wanted motherhood to help me grow up and mature. As I cradled Ella in my arms, the concept of unconditional love sank in. In mere

moments she'd stolen my heart like no one ever had. I loved her not because of what she'd done, or might do down the road, but because she existed. That was enough.

Ella turns 10 this month, and for me that marks a decade of motherhood. Her birth day was the best day of my life, not because I love Ella more than her sisters, but because she's the one who made me a mom. She was the game-changer, the one who took me out of floaties and launched me into the deep end of love.

I was nervous and scared, but somehow I knew how to tread water. Somehow I understood the connection

among everyone in the deep end, where staying afloat was the common battle. My life felt out-of-control...and yet so free. I'd traded in security for a danger zone, a place where my feet would never touch bottom again. Why would I do that? Why would I take on the risk of drowning?

I'll tell you why: Because life begins in the deep end. And for me, it took a child to make me jump in. Ella's birth was a rebirth for me, a second chance to embrace life with less inhibition. Ella exposed me raw, cranking my heart wide-open, and unleashing emotions like fireworks. Never again would I be able to harness my feelings, for I'd joined the ranks of women who feel the joys and pains of this world on a deeper, more spiritual level.

And while I liked to reminisce about my days in the shallow end, remembering how carefree life used to be, I didn't wish to go back. In the deep end I came *alive*; I wanted to soak it up. Maybe life was easier before Ella, but it wasn't as full, or anywhere near complete. Going back could never satisfy me as it had before, because once you experience the deep end, shallow waters aren't the same.

So I thank my beautiful, kind, quick-witted firstborn for granting me this opportunity. I thank her for bearing with me as I learn new strokes in each stage of parenting. Most of all, I thank Ella for her compassion toward others. With her in the universe, I have faith in the future, for I know she'll make it better.

I love you, sweet Ella, not because of what you've done or might do down the road with your many talents, but because you exist. It was enough at your birth, and it's enough now. To watch you blossom on this intricate level, as your proud and ever-amazed mother, is a gift for which I am so grateful.

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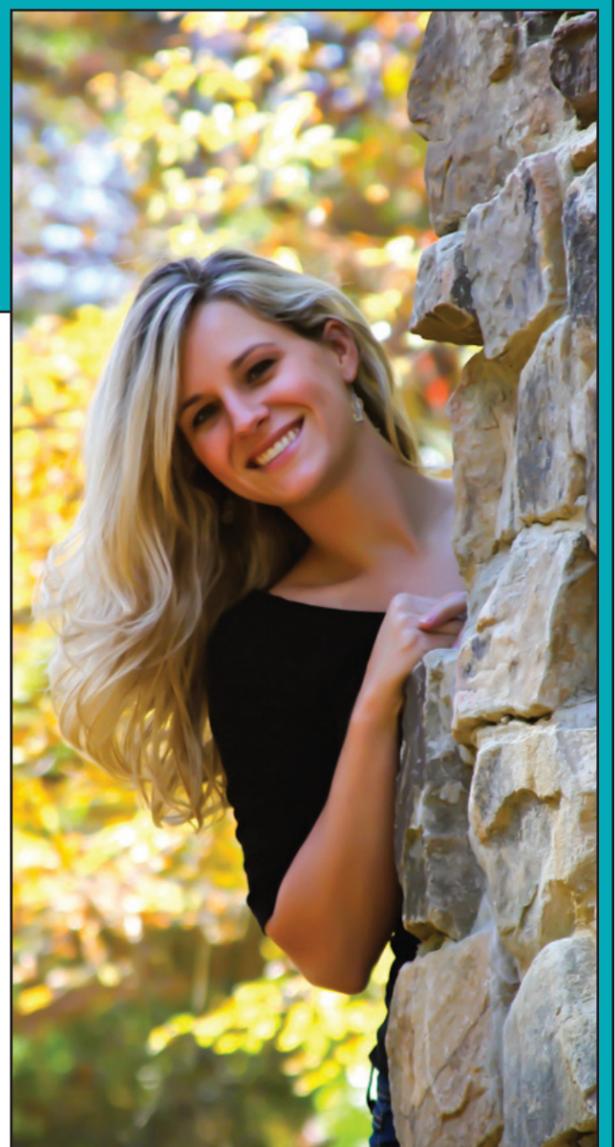
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