

Four Narratives & A Baby: An Adoption Reunion Story

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In 1992, a 19-year-old single mother of one made the decision to place her second child, a newborn, for adoption. This qualitative exploration of adoption issues is written, in part, in first person by the authors: the birthmother, the daughter she raised, the daughter she placed, and the adoptive mother. The article explores adoption reunion, adoption literature, and a scriptural adoption narrative for themes and for recommendations. The authors address negative stereotypes around adoption, the common theme of loss in all parties, and the potential for healing in reunion through life stage changes, including marriage and the next generation. This is a unique opportunity to hear the multiple voices of adoption in one narrative.

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THE ADOPTION NARRATIVE HAS BEEN PART OF HUMAN HISTORY from early biblical times. This article provides the perspectives of birth mother, children, and adoptive mother contextualized by biblical narrative and by the historical and current adoption literature. The authors reported their own adoption stories and examined common themes and experiences with recommendations for parents considering placement, for families considering adoption, and for children everywhere who are making sense of their own stories.

Perhaps the most notable adoption story in the Old Testament is the story of Moses (Exodus 2:1-11; Numbers 26:58). Many, if not most, readers will be familiar with this story. The nation of Israel was enslaved in Egypt. Threatened by their growing numbers and strength, Pharaoh issued an edict

that all male newborn children were to be thrown in to the river to drown. When Jochebed, an Israelite, delivered a male child, she hid him and then decided to save his life by placing him in the care of another. She put him in a basket floating in the river near the palace of Pharaoh's daughter and sent her daughter, Miriam, to hide and observe.

This biblical story is filled with difficult choices. Jochebed, the birth mother of Moses, faced the choice to let someone else raise her child. Pharaoh's daughter heard the cries of the infant, knew this was a Hebrew child, and chose to care for him despite their ethnic and religious differences. Moses' sister, Miriam, chose to offer her mother as nursemaid. Moses, the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, chose to return as an adult to his birth family.

This article provides four narratives in a current-day adoption process, giving voice to the experience of birth mother, the daughter she raised, the daughter she placed, and adoptive parent. The narratives clarify how individual experience and relationship change over time. The relationships challenge the historical United States (US) adoption stereotypes of good and bad, address the myths that surround reunion, and propose possibilities for children through adoptions that value birth families. While every adoption story has its own answers, the authors believe the narratives of Jochebed, Moses, Miriam, and Bithiah deeply resonate with our own stories.

Literature Review

The authors conducted a brief literature review in order to put the narratives in context. The question was whether these narratives are consistent or inconsistent with the research on adoption. The literature overview also examined the nature of current adoption practices, including some of the opportunities and challenges. The literature on adoption includes many of the compelling questions nested in the narratives of birth mothers and their children and adoptive parents. These issues include: the stigma and uncertainty of adoption, the loss experienced by all parties, and the concerns around reunion.

The Overview

In the United States in 2013, there were 400,500 children without permanent families; 115,000 of those were eligible for adoption (Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, 2013). Adoption remains fairly rare as fewer than two children are adopted per 100,000 persons. While an established social practice, adoption is also provocative with implications for altering multiple families and their family relationships.

Adoption has historically been secretive, reinforcing the negative stereotypes of shame and guilt (Gritter, 2000). In fact, marginalization of birth parents includes labeling them as bad, dysfunctional, and disposable (p. 2). Therefore, families believed secrecy would prevent contact and disruption (Sachdev, 1992). Horowitz (2013) stated: "I struggle with the contemporary language used to reference my experience. 'Birthmother,' 'relinquished,' 'surrendered.' I gave up my child. I gave up" (p. 12). Gritter (2000), however, found that most birthparents are realistic, prioritize their children's needs, and want stability for their children. Yngvesson (1997) found birthparents articulated their commitment to the child's happiness and integration into the adoptive family. Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, and Grotevant (2007) wrote about the sacrificial love of birthmothers that resonates through their grief experience. Howe and Feast (2000) found that while adoptees who searched for birth parents in their study experienced some ambivalence about their adoptions, they experienced a sense of completion and fulfillment as a result of the search and reunion. In a follow-up study (Triseliotis, Feast and Kyle, 2005), researchers studied 38 cases, concluding that adoptees frequently experienced the benefit of two families, with positive experiences by birth parents and adoptive parents. Open adoption is creating new opportunities and challenges around search and continued contact (Ayers-Lopez, Henney, McRoy, Hanna, & Grotevant, 2013).

Stigma and Uncertainty

Gritter (2000) described the negative stereotypes of birth parents as well as the courage of birthmothers who speak openly of their experiences. Horowitz (2013), a practicing psychologist, writes about her own experience as a birthmother: "Secrets and myths surround adoption. . . . meant to protect and inform, but often they serve instead to obscure and contaminate the complicated task of adjusting to what is known and unknown" (p. 11).

Miall and March (2005) reported that "relative adoption is as old as human society itself" where "adoption was, more often than not a quite deliberate transaction between two sets of parents" (p. 381). The secrecy in adoptions is beginning to be mitigated by increasing numbers of single parents and by the open adoption movement that is gaining community support. Henney et al. (2007), in a qualitative study of 169 birthmothers, found secrecy increases guilt in adoption. There is growing interest in open adoption. In these cases, there is less need for search and reunion and less stigma and secrecy (Speirs, et al., 2005). It is possible this may also address the vicarious stigma of adoption experienced by adopted children.

Scharp & Steuber (2014) found that all members of the adoption triad experience stigma. . . . "the perception that their family is somehow inferior

to biologically related families” (p. 515). Sachdev (1992) reported that one out of three adoptees in the study were concerned that their search would be painful for their adopted parents and chose not to discuss the search with them. Gritter (2000) reported that adoptive parents worry about “birthparent regret,” i.e. the birthparent wishing to withdraw the placement decision, which could jeopardize the child’s identification and satisfaction with the adoptive family. Perhaps this is because adoption reunions have not had “a cultural script to guide their initial interactions” (Scharp & Steuber, 2014, p. 515) or social rules or norms to guide the interaction (p. 516).

The uncertainty about family of origin and the resulting risk for negative self-image may contribute to anxiety and depression. Brand and Brinich (1999) studied children in placement, and found that adopted children are at greater risk for mental health contacts, particularly before age 15. Adoptive parents seek mental health treatment earlier than birth families as they are concerned about family identity and about disruption, when adoptive placements do not last. Adoption disruption occurs as much as 9-15 percent of the time in younger children and as often as 25% of the time in older children (Smith, Howard, Garnier & Ryan, 2006 in Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012, p. 22).

Reunion Concerns

Lifton (2009, 1977) wrote about reunion based both on her research and her own experience as an adoptee with the negativity of secrecy, her birth mother’s failure to embrace her, and her attempt to protect her adoptive parents. She stated: “Most adopted people were not visible enough; that no one saw their sense of abandonment and loss or understood the identity struggles they were going through” (p. ix). She felt like a traitor to her adoptive parents and an intruder in her birth mother’s life.

Even so, Lifton (1997) and others believe that most adoptees want to know their biological roots, though motivation and intensity of desire varies (Sachdev, 1992). Motivations include wanting information, wanting to meet, and/or wanting a sustained relationship. In a qualitative study of 21 adoptive families, Peta and Steed (2005) found that birth parents search to check on their child’s well-being while adoptees search to learn their history and address identity issues. Scharp (2013) found several themes in search and reunion: desire for relationship with someone who looks like them and desire for connection. This is enhanced by a need for health and other information. Consistent with developmental theory, the interest in search during adolescence is linked to the developmental task of identity development. This is particularly important when considered with Gitters’ finding that “negative stereotypes of birthparents can undermine children’s self-image” (2000, p. 8).

Baxter, Scharp, Asbury, Jannusch, and Norwood (2012) found that it is important for birth mothers to tell their stories to make sense of their experiences and that these stories help their children make meaning of the experience as well. This is consistent with Becker's (1997) finding that telling their story promotes healing in all of the parties. Story telling becomes a kind of resistance to the status quo negativity around adoption that Lifton (2009, 1977) reported. Sachdev (1992) notes that the quality of relationships after reunion is different among adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents. "Some suggest that the completed search is not the end; it is only the beginning of a period of adjustment" (Sachdev, 1992, p. 54).

The New Relationship

Sachdev (1992) found in his study that 50% of reunions resulted in ongoing regular contact, 33% were contact without meeting, while only 17% included contact that did not continue after the reunion meeting.

How often the contact occurred varied and was influenced by the reactions of biological mother's present family, her ability to face her past and to reveal her true feelings, compatibility of temperaments of the adoptee and the biological mother and reciprocal expectations, and the ability of both parties to relate to each other affectively (p. 63).

Contact with other members of the biological family was important as well. Meeting siblings and other birth relatives is important in the reunion process. Feast, Kyle and Triseliotis (2005) reported that reunion was positive for the majority of adoptive parents and continued contact with biological family members did not negatively impact relationships in the adoptive family. "In the words of an adoptive mother: 'My fears were unfounded.' And according to the father, 'We know now that our relationship with our daughter is stronger than ever'" (p. 61). Harrigan & Braithwaite (2010) found that "a multitude of discourses central to the individual's meaning making completely enhance or enable one another" (p. 131). Whether or not reunion resulted in continued contact, the search and reunion themselves were important (Miall & March, 2005; Sachdev, 1992). Speirs, et al. (2005) include this quote from a birth mother: "Thank you for your part in ending some of the pain and guilt I have lived with for 30 years" (p. 857).

Methodology

This qualitative case study is presented in the first-person written narratives of four persons engaged in the adoption story. Presented here in their own voices are the adoption experience stories of Jennifer, birth mother; Caiti, the daughter raised by Jennifer; Beth, the adopted daughter; and Helen, the adoptive mother.

Narratives

The adoption took place through The South Texas Children's Home, a faith-based agency. Remarkably, 17 years after the adoption, the social worker who placed the baby was still available to help with the search and reunion. The mothers are a nurse and a social worker, both with work histories in hospice, both committed to care for others. The adoptee is a masters-prepared social worker in health care. Her biological sister is a college student in health care as well. The reader will hear from the birth mother (Jennifer), the daughter she raised (Caiti), the daughter she placed (Beth), and finally, the woman she chose to raise her daughter (Helen).

Pregnant and Scared

My story is not so unusual today. I was a teenage mother. My first-born, Caiti, was not yet a year old when I felt the familiar symptoms again: tender breasts, overwhelming nausea and a deep sense of protectiveness within. My reaction, though, was not the same as it had been with Caiti. I was terrified, ashamed, guilt-ridden and overcome with a desire to separate myself from the new life within me. I couldn't take care of two babies.

Sadly, my first thought was abortion. I was not under any illusion about the father's ability to support me and two babies and what passed for our relationship had dissipated and I wanted nothing to do with him. I had money – I worked a good job and was going to nursing school so I could afford a procedure and the medical mechanics did not deter me. However, I didn't count my mother and step-father's reaction. When I calmly announced my condition and plans, my mother left the room and my step-father said he would not live with a murderer. I couldn't go through with it.

I couldn't think of another thing to do. I couldn't think beyond getting out of bed every day, watching my body change, with no refuge and what seemed a bleak future. I was so angry... at myself, my step-father, my mother, and at that little life depending on me. Unfair as it was, it is honest. I didn't have a path forward.

One morning over apple juice, my mother quietly suggested adoption.... a respite to my desperate fear was now visible. Adoption, a choice I had not even considered. I chewed on the word. I took the idea and tasted it, smelled it, touched it to see what would happen. The world did not stop moving. I did something then I'd not done in years: I prayed. I took the word "adoption" and I went to my room alone. I asked God what He thought. At that moment, I experienced the most profound sense of peace I have ever known – before or since. God gave me permission to think about adoption as a concrete solution and that this baby I carried would be loved and cherished in a way He knew I was not prepared to

do. The search began. Gone was my anger, shame and fear – I had a new purpose, a mother's purpose to find a family for my baby.

I will never forget when I read the file for the family that would become my child's family. The social worker told me their adoption story and about their little son Daniel who only wanted a sister for Christmas. I knew they were right.

As my time to deliver grew near, I thought frequently about this woman who would raise and love my baby. I thought more about her than I did about the baby as I did normal pregnant woman things – nesting, patting my big belly, picking out a name. I wondered if she was picking out names and preparing a nursery or afraid this adoption would fall through? I thought how much this would help us both.

When Meagan (my name for Beth) was born, I longed to nurse her, to keep her with me all the time, to kiss her little face. But I also tried to create some emotional space and so I did the most unnatural of things – I sent her to the nursery and asked them to keep her there. I remember the nurses calling me every few hours asking if I wanted to nurse my baby. It was the cruelest of moments to say no and hear their silent judgment. This was one of the most difficult experiences of my life, but that sense of peace that had enveloped me found its way to me again, making it possible to not curl up and die of grief.

Over the years, the grief lessened and I lived with the hard knot of it like a bruise in my heart. I grieved for Caiti who didn't have the sister I had. While I was given "room" to grieve, there was a sense from others that I should be "over it" – perhaps I even felt that myself. I decided to deal with the grief by talking about the experience. I thought it would be like picking at a scab – eventually it stops hurting and a scar forms. I was wrong, of course. It never stops hurting – but talking openly about it did make me stronger in that broken place.

Then came the day I never dared to hope for. The social worker found me – on Facebook of all places. Meagan-now Beth- wanted to connect with me. Nearly an adult, her search for self could not be complete without finding out about her roots – I totally understood that. I had to be vetted by Helen, of course. I couldn't wait to talk to her! The first moment I heard her voice, all I could think was how grateful I was for her shining soul and her giant capacity to love the child of another woman's womb. I am still in awe of her.

Angel songs could not be more beautiful than the first time I heard Beth's voice. No other experience can compare. Then I got to meet them! Holding Beth in my arms again after 18 years was precious and priceless. Bringing her to be part of our family – meeting Caiti, my sister, my mother – our family was whole in a way we didn't realize could be possible.

Being a “birth mother” has profoundly changed my life. I deeply understand the power of spirit, the strength that grief can impart even as it drives you to your knees and the refining fire of love that mothers have. Mother love – no matter the adjective used to describe the mother – is a force beyond words. Once I came to understand that my decision to choose another mother for Beth let me be a better mother for Caiti, I was no longer afraid or ashamed. I was empowered to be worthy of that title “Mother” and to live up to the challenge of raising Caiti in the best circumstance I could create, knowing Beth had her own mother now to do the same for her. While I had always included Beth when responding to questions about how many children I have, the answer rings truer than ever.

Much has happened in the intervening years since we first set our stories down to weave these threads together into a hopeful vision of what adoption, reunion, and the future could look like. I have grown in my respect and love and knowledge of Beth as a person wholly her own, and in my admiration for her and Caiti as they have navigated their own relationship. I wondered if the newness would wear off...but this was not the case as I continue to love our interactions.

Inevitably, time moves on. I’m not much of a phone talker but Beth and I talked every few weeks just to keep connected and Helen and I talked occasionally. Life was busy for everyone! We were all in higher education programs! In early 2014, we started talking about Beth’s pending graduation and there was no hesitation in either Helen or Beth when they spoke about the events with me as part of the process. I was the other mom. I was in. It was breathtaking to know they already included me in their thinking and planning. I was not as sure of my place in this event and did not in any way want to detract from Helen or Beth’s experience. I worried over it and Helen assured me their joy would be multiplied. My mother also came and met the whole family and heard growing up stories. My husband and I and my mother were included as family and that was a priceless gift.

We were included when Seth proposed to Beth. Helen and I read together to her the Dr. Seuss book *Are You My Mother?* Seth reminded me that Beth was the product of both of us and we should both be involved. I was overcome. What an affirmation of how a person is much more than the sum of their parts! When Beth and Seth were married, I was included in the planning, the shopping to buy the dress, and in also being escorted in as one of the mothers of the bride. I didn’t have to worry about Helen’s feelings. I saw the love Beth has for her mom and the look they shared when she chose THE dress and when she walked down the aisle. My family, Beth’s “also” family, were all there to participate.

And when wedding bells gave way to nursery planning and baby arrival, my husband and I were there in the family labor and delivery room with Beth’s parents and Seth’s parents. I am a nurse and I’ve given birth and

I wanted to help Beth but didn't want to hurt Helen who would be hurting over her own lack of knowledge in this one area -of all the other things she knows and has experienced, this one area was one she couldn't draw from. I wanted to be a bridge but feared I couldn't and yet wanted to be there. In a tearful but very honest conversation, Helen and I agreed that we both love Beth and love each other and while there were things we each missed, we could both be present as Beth needed us and that was more important than anything. We had different gifts to offer; that was a profoundly moving realization for me. After a long labor and a long recovery, we were finally allowed to see Beth and her new little darling, Corrie. I held the child of my child. She is beautiful and perfect and without a doubt she has her father's eyes and her mother's nose. Which is also my nose. And she has the endless love and connectivity with Helen that I cannot have – but which I do not in the least begrudge. Beth and I talk almost every week. She calls me with Corrie in the car and me on the speaker so Corrie can hear my voice and I can hear her babbling in the background. This is such a thoughtful and gracious thing to do and so in keeping with how her mother has modeled love and motherhood for her. I am very proud of the woman Beth has become and of the decision I made all those years ago.

The Older Sister

I remember looking at the few pictures we had of Beth (then Meagan in my mind) and thinking how similar we looked, deep brown eyes, same button nose, and brown curly hair. All I could seem to think about, though, is, "I wonder if she's thinking about us, too." I don't remember when I made the actual connection that she was MY sister; the little girl in the picture was my baby sister. Although I grew up with other children who were my step-siblings and felt like my siblings, there was a connection they had with each other that I longed for.

When mom sat me down to tell me that the social worker had made contact with her and that Meagan/Beth and Helen were looking to make contact, I was shocked; a wish that had become so unreal was finally coming true. I started telling everyone about her, showing them her pictures from Facebook, telling them our story, about the wonderful parents she had and the love and support they gave her. Most people couldn't understand why my mother couldn't care for another child when she already had one. They kept using the phrase "gave up" making it sound like a horrible act. I informed them of the situation my mother was in at such a young age and how she did this to better the lives of not only Beth and myself but about how she was helping a family. My mother went out to meet Beth and her family. There was a picture they sent to me. It was of the two of them side by side having coffee. I cried; this was what had been missing, my sister.

I will never forget meeting Beth that November. She was more than I imagined; she was smart, funny, incredibly caring, and most of all the sister I'd wished for. We had bizarre similarities like the way we made our coffee in the same order and at the same time. I remember looking across the breakfast table at Helen who was just staring in complete awe and smiling. I knew they had raised Beth to be the best version of herself, always willing to help others, never giving up on childhood and youth and loving herself for who she is. There is no doubt in my mind that our lives are different because these three wonderful people finally came into our lives, but I believe we were brought together again to make both of our families whole.

Several years later Beth and I have been through so many different experiences together. I watched my baby sister graduate from college, and I was a bridesmaid in her wedding as she gave herself to one man for the rest of her life. I lived so far away and I wasn't really able to be there for all the normal pre-wedding activities. My favorite pre-wedding activity was being there when she chose her dress. I got to see the fairy tale look in her eyes and the look on our mothers' faces when she tried on "the dress." It was a magical moment. She was there when I got married; she and Helen supported me during my own infertility struggles and through my divorce. I'll never forget the moment Beth called to tell me she was pregnant. I have nieces and a nephew but this was a different feeling; Beth's child would have my mother's and grandmother's DNA. I would be able to see glimpses of each of them in this little baby. Despite the distance, thanks to social media and the pictures from Beth, I am able to watch this little Corrie grow. I also get to see Beth as the combination of our mothers and she is the mother I always knew she would be.

The Child of Two Families

I do not remember a time when I did not know I was adopted. It was my bedtime story as a child: "Once upon a time, there was a young mommy who loved her baby so very much..." and so on. Even though I grew up wholly loved, I knew there was still something missing. I could not identify exactly the shape of this missing piece of my soul or articulate its name; yet its absence was tangible. Mere words seemed inadequate to make sense of how I could grieve for someone I had never met. I remember this clearly from an incident when I was about seven years old, and I ran up to my mother in tears, almost inconsolable. The only thing I could say to convey my feelings at that stage was that I missed my birthmother, this person of whom I had only a picture and two handwritten letters to identify as a real person.

Through the years, as a child and preteen, I remember how my friends would sometimes talk about their births; what their moms told them about

the day they were born, or when they were pregnant with them and the things they craved; how big or small they were; and the list goes on. I always felt left out and awkward because they had answers to all these questions while I had none. This was a part of my story that I desperately wanted to own, yet was always out of reach. I remember experiencing the social stigma of being an adopted child when an unkind classmate found out I was adopted and was convinced that I was thrown away and unloved, unwanted, somehow lesser in value. However, I always had a very positive view of my adoption and immediately set her straight. These instances were rare; mostly I experienced others calling my birthmother my “real” mom, as if being my adoptive mother made my mom any less real. I never internalized those things, but it did resonate with me that other kids had experiences and knowledge that, at that time, I didn’t think I would ever have.

My parents always tried very hard to portray my adoption as something very positive. My mom always spoke of Jennifer, my birthmother, in glowing terms—how much she loved me, how she wanted the best for me, how strong she must be to have made such a hard decision. Mom also, to this day, expresses her grief that I couldn’t grow up with Jennifer, yet her joy that I got to grow up with her and my father and brother. Of course, I had imagined what my life might have been like if I had grown up with Jennifer and had my big sister in my life (something I always dreamed of after growing up with an older brother). However, I also recognize that God has written my story this way for a reason, and that my past experiences make up who I am—that if I had grown up differently, I would be a different person. I would not change anything about my life, but of course I have always imagined what my life might have been like.

As I grew up through the years, I kept this positive view of my adoption close to my heart. I never felt ashamed of being adopted. If anything, I was proud of it and willing to tell my story to anyone who asked. I even felt kind of special for it. However, when I was about fourteen or fifteen, the major feeling I had was one of being completely stuck. I was in that stage of identity formation when I was supposed to figure out who I was but I felt I could not know where I am or where I am going if I didn’t know where I came from. I felt this soul-deep longing for my roots. Though I had always wanted to know, it was during this time in my life that I began really exploring the possibility of reuniting with my birth mother.

In February 2010, before I graduated high school, my parents and I made the decision to officially search for Jennifer. My social worker, who had been a part of my life since before I was born, found Caiti on Facebook, which led to our finding Jennifer. We made initial phone contact which led to a face-to-face meeting over Labor Day weekend of that year. Imagine all the emotions rushing through me, a brand-new college freshman, driving up to the hotel where I would finally see her after 18

years. She wasn't just handwriting on a letter or a printed face on a photograph—she was real. I went back and forth from terrified to nervous to so excited that I was almost jumping out of my skin. Then I saw her face, and as we walked toward each other to hold each other for the first time since I was born, I finally knew what it was to be complete, to feel like a whole person, to be healed. It was surreal. We spent the weekend just getting to know each other. I kept hearing phrases like, “When I was pregnant with you,” and “When you were born;” phrases that my peers growing up took for granted, but I had never heard directed at me. I could finally start to identify those things about me that were genetic, things that were resultant of my upbringing, and things that are just me. Few people have that kind of opportunity to distinguish between nature and nurture. The whole weekend was perfect. It was everything we all hoped it would be, and more. All weekend my two moms and I were constantly surprised at all we had in common. That November I met my big sister Caiti. She instantly fell into the big sister role, asking me if I was okay after we hugged and I said a tearful “Nice to meet you.” Meeting my sister made one more dream come true. I discovered that week that Caiti and I make our coffee the exact same way. It was one more thing I had always seen my friends and others experience with their siblings or parents and was finally getting to experience myself.

Fast-forward several years—holidays, birthdays, and a couple of trips to see Jennifer and Caiti. I was engaged to a wonderful man and planning how to incorporate all these parts of my heart into this most special day. First, I should say that not only did Seth ask my parents for my hand before his proposal, he also asked Jennifer which was incredibly meaningful to all of us. I asked Caiti to be one of my bridesmaids in my wedding, and Jennifer was seated and honored as a mother of the bride. I almost felt that there could not possibly be this much joy to fit into one day. Of course, I was wrong—both on that day, and on another day about a year and a half later.

During the summer of 2016, I called Jennifer and Caiti to announce that they were going to be Grandma and Aunt. We all cried tears of joy and hormones. Throughout my pregnancy, I called Jennifer almost weekly, and my mom just about every other day on my way home from work. We talked about pregnancy experiences, the highs and lows, the fears and worries of new motherhood, the joys of each milestone. Again, I got to hear the phrase, “When I was pregnant with you,” and this time apply it to what was going on with my own pregnancy. I will admit that I felt a little awkward talking about my pregnancy with my mom. I wanted to protect her feelings, and I didn't want my talking with her about my pregnancy to open old wounds for her. However, as we do with everything else, we discussed it with honest and open hearts, and I re-learned that a thing can be hard and joyful at the same time.

In late December, I called Jennifer to let her know to get on a plane—there might be a grandbaby on the way! It turned out, as with most first-time moms, to be a false alarm, but I got to spend a whole week with her before the baby arrived, an unexpected joy. Then, early one morning after a long and difficult labor, I finally understood that rush of mother love—that sudden, fierce protectiveness and an overwhelming joy, an intense fear and recognition of responsibility and the unknown, a quiet empowerment and a growing confidence—a baby wasn't the only thing born that moment. A new mother emerged as well. For the first time, I think I really saw a glimpse of the Father's love for His children. And my two moms were with me, in the waiting room at the hospital, and celebrating after Corrie arrived. I still get chills thinking about the three of us together experiencing that.

A couple of days later, when the three of us arrived at the home we'd left as two, I began to realize that this was the first time I was living with someone with whom I share DNA. People say all the time how much Corrie looks like me, and it still does not sound familiar to my ears. But every time I look at my daughter's sweet face, I see echoes of myself, and it's like I've known her my whole life. That is a wonder too sweet for words.

Old Empty Arms

It never occurred to me that I would not have a choice about parenting. I was healthy, strong, and invested in the lives of children. In fact, I was a social worker whose life work was with children and their parents, including those placing for adoption. When treatment for an illness resulted in infertility, I experienced an incredible sense of being damaged and “less than.” I remember the day I went to a high school basketball game in our small town and heard someone in the stands whisper to her friend: “there comes old empty arms.” Damaged goods. Barren. Useless. It was my fault that we were childless.

We discussed adoption. Could I parent a child that did not grow in my body and did not get to grow up in his/her own home? I ached for the mother who would be relinquishing the right to raise her child. I worried about the child who would grow in another's womb for nine months and hear her voice and the patterns of her life and then, as a vulnerable infant, lose that voice, those rhythms.

Our first adoption experience was the incredible gift of a newborn son. Five years later, our prayers were answered again when we learned Jennifer had chosen our family for her newborn daughter. Once again, I bought a crib bear that played a recording of intrauterine sounds, the “swish swish” of a mother's heartbeat. I prayed that somehow I could be enough for this child whose circumstances made it impossible for her to grow up with her mother and family of origin. I prayed for her mother, for peace, strength,

courage, and grace to put the pieces of her broken experience together. Sharing with Beth about her adoption was always about her understanding that God had given her two mothers to love her. I always believed that they would meet one day and be reunited. I wrote letters to both birth mothers each year to help bridge the years in between.

I discovered that motherhood was not about me being enough. It was about me being faithful. I found myself even grateful for my own brokenness and barrenness that made it possible for this incredible child to enter in to relationship with us. I love her birthmother and I see Jennifer in Beth's smile and laugh and determination. I wondered how we might change when Beth found and developed relationship with her birth family. I learned that Beth is as capable of loving two mothers as I am of loving two children. I have witnessed Beth's heart becoming whole in response to Jennifer's love and affirmation. I love knowing her sister and grandparents and extended family. I have seen the strength that flows into her from being accepted into, and embraced by, this family that looks like her and accepts her; these are gifts that most people take for granted.

She was now part of a family that we (Don and I) were not part of and we encouraged her to spend time with them and be part of their family celebrations. Beth also became part of another family, her husband's. Jennifer and her family were part of the wedding celebration. I grew up in a very small extended family. What joy to have more family with whom we may share special occasions. I've been asked if it was hard for me for Jennifer to be there also as mother of the bride. I can say with certainty that it would have been hard for me if she weren't there. What matters to each of us is that Beth have what she needs from each of us.

Now lest you nominate us, or me, for sainthood, let me say that there have been times when I felt jealous and left out. When Beth and Seth flew to Atlanta to spend Beth's birthday week with Jennifer and Chet and Caiti, I was frankly a little whiny. And God was parental with me, reminding me that I had a whole childhood of birthdays with her and surely I could share. The truth is, the time for having her home for birthdays and holidays is behind us as she establishes her life and family and her own traditions.

The sharing of a granddaughter is the next iteration of our journey together. Beth was able to spend the week before delivery with the woman who delivered her. The waiting room in the hospital was a full night of three sets of grandparents walking the floor and praying for the laboring parents and the soon-to-arrive center of our world. When a new baby arrives healthy, there is plenty of love and joy and fatigue and exhaustion and celebration for the whole world to rejoice together. Corrie is a perfect blend of her parents. I see Seth and Beth in her smile and when she is unhappy. I see Jennifer in her ears and her intense curiosity about everything in the world. I see her love when she grins back at me and nestles in my arms and runs

to me calling “nana.” I know we are making memories deep inside each of us when I rock her and when I hold her in a warm shower to help her little congested self breathe.

There is powerful truth here. Love does not diminish. Love always multiples. Beth lives with someone who looks like her for the first time in her life. Corrie is surrounded by multiple talented and devoted grandparents. Beth has the benefit of two mothers and a mother-in-law who adore her and adore Corrie. God knits together the persons and experiences we need.

Discussion

While adoption has been a part of the story of humanity throughout history, it is an increasingly rare phenomenon that has been shrouded in secrecy (Gritter, 2000; Horowitz, 2013). The literature identified the continued marginalization of birthmothers despite the increasing phenomenon of open adoptions (Henney, et al., 2007; Speirs, et al., 2005). However, March (2015) found that “adoption separates the biological and social aspects of parenthood” (p. 107) which could result in boundary ambiguity or could result in role definition and the sharing of parenthood. These factors impact conversation around reunion while adoptees long to know about their origins, medical histories, and families (Ayers-Lopez, Henney, McRoy, Hanna, & Grotevant, 2013). Often, birthparents and birth siblings create new lives that still feel incomplete. Prior to their child’s search for the birthparent, adoptive parents worry that reunion will alter the families they have formed. Yet, they want their adopted children to have whatever they need for wholeness. For all parties, the reunion experience is most always positive and eventually reassuring (Feast, Kyle & Triseliotis, 2005). The narratives identify the same issues as those identified in the literature: the themes of stigma and secrecy; the importance of openness; and the challenges and opportunities in reunion. The way forward is the willingness to shine light on the stigma and the compelling questions that remain for each member of the adoption story. These questions resonate in the literature, in the story of Moses, and in the narratives in this article.

Conclusions

The Biblical narrative of Moses’ adoption provides a rich example of the challenges and the God-inspired calling of adoption. There is a foreshadowing of the nesting of Jesus in the home of an adoptive father. The call of God is evident in these Old and New Testament examples of non-traditional families. For the social worker in religiously-affiliated agencies, these examples may help normalize the adoption experience.

Further, these narratives are the anecdotal evidence of possibility in the face of cultural and societal concerns about adoption and reunion. While the adoption literature identifies the statistical rarity of adoption, the complexities of the adoption story, and a number of unfortunate reunion stories, our narratives offer a rich and powerful promise. In an age when it is more socially acceptable to have an abortion than to place a child for adoption, the literature also identifies common themes that contradict many of the negative stereotypes and myths. Adoption can be the plan that gives a child what they need from two mothers, and two families. This is most possible when we stop the shame and secrecy. Most adoptees wonder about their biological families and, in adolescence and early adulthood, consider searching. Many experience successful searches, and some reunions result in continued positive relationships with families of origin. While many adoptive parents are anxious about the searches and concerned about the impact on relationship with the adoptee, their experiences are largely positive and their fears largely unrealized (Sachdev, 1992; Sharpa, 2013; Speirs, Duder, Kirstein, Propst & Meads, 2005). Our experiences line up with these points and proclaim this truth.

The narratives suggest an approach that provides for adoptees the chance for wholeness by integrating their birth and growing-up identities. There is much we wish we had done earlier. What if we could create a family tree that includes both families? Can we influence legislation that would allow for birth certificates that provide both birth and adoptive parent information? Can we find paths that legitimize the adoption experience and bring it out of the shadows and into the celebratory light?

Observations

The following observations may help inform social workers in adoption agencies as well as those working with birth mothers, adoptees and adoptive families in various types of social work practice:

- The Christian scripture provides both Old and New Testament examples of adoption in service of God's plans for some individuals and families
- Society and social work agencies must address the stereotypes; adoption is not "less than" for anyone. In fact, it can be God's answer for some situations.
- Birth parents and adoptive parents love their children. They are each human and frail and imperfect, and they are each wise and loving and willing to do what it takes to provide what their child needs.

- Adoption is a gift in the midst of pain. This includes recognizing the plan of God for good, and for His purposes. God's plan can include two mothers in a child's life to provide what one could not provide alone.
- Open adoptions and/or reunions with birth mothers/parents can be opportunities for more family. The complexities are worth it. Reunion of birthmother and child can result in union of two families.
- Various types of adoption relationships can be explored and examined including siblings, birthfathers, and other extended family members.
- Joint family documents can be created that legitimize all parts of the adoption triad beginning with birth certificates and family trees.
- Reunion does not need to be a one-time event, but can be an ongoing development of family narrative that includes family milestones and developmental events.
- Reunions can also have an impact on future generations. Our granddaughter is blessed indeed.

It is true. The story of Moses is true, the story told in this article is true, and the principles of God's plan and goodness are true. However, the details will be different in each story. The challenges are not insignificant. They are also not insurmountable. These narratives hopefully communicated both the pain and the hope, as well as the challenge and the opportunity. We wonder about a culture that stigmatizes the decision to place for adoption more than the decision for abortion. We challenge the marginalization of birth parents/birth families and the negative stereotypes of barrenness. We assert that God's plan can and does include the possibilities of strength coming from two families in a child's life. We believe that in each child there is the story of Moses, a called child of God, gifted for a special purpose. We stand together aware that we each are part of God's plan for each other. Moses became the great liberator of his people. May adoptees continue to lead the way to freedom from shame and stigma to the promised land of family relationships. ❖

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