pact's point of view
serving adopted children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 2004
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Open Adoptions
Navigating Our Differences
by Jim Gritter

Before we talk about differences, we should talk about similarities. I'd be negligent if I didn't start by admitting that adoption is simpler when the families involved have a lot in common. An easy way to illustrate this is to conceptualize adoption as a form of transplantation. If we're conscientious gardeners transplanting a seedling, we'll do our darndest to keep the soil and climate of the source and the destination as similar as possible. Or I point to our open adoption program in Traverse City. No doubt one of the reasons it works as well as it does is that we are working with a largely homogeneous population. I remember, too, that when I broke into this work thirty years ago, great pains were taken to very carefully match children to families deemed appropriate. By appropriate we meant similar. Similarity is great; it really is–it's just not always possible. When we're short on similarity, it follows that we must be long on differences, and it's the handling of difference that's the subject of this discussion.

There are different kinds of difference and the sorts of differences we're talking about make a difference. We may differ in our adoptive status (birthparent, adoptive parent, or adoptee) and in our socio-economic standing. We may vary in race, religion, values, life style, personality, and choice of sports teams we follow. Surely some of these variables are more defining (and exclusive) than others. We could test combinations for the rest of our days. Are prospects for a satisfying adoption better for a pairing of a rich Presbyterian and a poor Presbyterian or for a rich Methodist and a rich Presbyterian? Or for a poor Presbyterian and a poor atheist? Who knows? I don't think we should give up on trying to bring compatible families together, but we have to admit that it is an impossible task. We are more likely to achieve satisfaction in adoptions by learning to handle differences than by relying too much on engineering compatibility.

We vary greatly in our emotional response to the differences we encounter. If we took the time to think this through carefully we could probably spell out a continuum that ranges from delight to abhorrence with stops between at approval, neutrality, discomfort, and significant concern. We also vary greatly in our capacity and willingness to work with differences. Frankly, some folks, among them some very nice people, have very little capacity to work with differences. And some of the folks who do have the capacity aren't willing to do the work. That's understandable because the task of navigating differences is usually a lot of work. We do well to keep capacity and willingness in mind as we think about bringing families together by adoption. If there is no prospect for respect between the families, there is no choice but to conclude that they are not a workable fit.

One more introductory thought about differences. From whose vantage point shall we approach this subject? I'll mostly focus on the differences between adoptive parents and birthparents because that relationship cradles all others, but we should remember that there are other differences that call for attention. It is a startling moment, for instance, when the awareness suddenly hits a parent, birth or adoptive, "I don't get this kid. She is a stranger to me." And it is at least as disconcerting for a child, reflecting on his parents, to realize in a deep way, "I am not like them."

So, with those thoughts about differences out of the way, allow me to briefly share my framework for handling our differences. I propose six areas for consideration in the hope that they may help adoptive participants navigate their differences: accept the givens, build on the basics, establish constructive attitudes, prepare for the journey, work like crazy, and settle into an effective mode. Since space prohibits more expansive exploration of these notions, please realize that these suggestions are of necessity sketchy in form. Bear in mind, too, that it is a tall if not impossible order to carry out all of these ideas. It's never easy to be perfect.

GIVENS

If we're not careful, we can squander a lot of energy wishing things were different. Well, they're not; they are the way they are. Let this simple fact sink in—those "other people" are not optional! In fact, not only are they not optional, they are in truth an important part of this amazing child's story, and they always will be. Settle this issue in your mind and heart once and for all. Give up the protest, give up the martyrdom, give up the fantasies, and give up the magical bargaining that somehow appeals to us. When we genuinely love someone, we love everything about that person, even the difficult stuff because those difficulties helped mold and define him or her.

Another way to say this is to suggest that we give up on the myth of simplicity. It may appear that some families are configured in simple fashion. That's debatable, but whether or not other families have smooth sailing, we know for sure in the world of adoption that our families are a little on the complicated side, and that's just the way it is. Accepting this fact is a big help as it helps us create realistic expectations.

BASICS

We need to answer the why question and the what-are-we-trying-to-accomplish question. The bottom line is that we embark on these great adoption adventures for the sake of children and our goal is to create a truly promising circumstance for each child involved. It's really important to be clear about this because, if there's anything on the planet that can motivate me, it is my determination to give children a fair shake. If I lose my grip on the purpose for all this effort, I'm a candidate to bail. If I hang on to it, I can't be stopped; I'm a maniac in the cause of my child.

The other basic is to be a person of integrity. I need to carry out my commitment and to do it as honestly as I can. No one can do much about how the other guys play their cards; they may behave in ways that are surprisingly impressive or disappointing. All one can do is hold up one's end and a little bit more. Experience suggest that participants who have pledged to interact with the highest level of honesty they can muster have often been amazed at the quality of the relationships they end up forging.

ATTITUDES

Attitude is everything when it comes to handling differences. In coming to terms with difference, there is probably no more important variable than respect. Respect results from a finding of worthiness, and it sets the stage for constructive interaction. The opposites of respect—patronizing, condescension, or pity—are fatal to relationship building.

Our appraisal of the other is often multi-layered; we typically approve of some dimensions while we fret about others. We need to affirm as much as we can, accept as much as we can, tolerate (put up with) as much as we can, and then set clear, consistent, and constructive boundaries to deal with that which we deem unacceptable.

As is true in every dimension of life, adoptive relationships benefit from a spirit of good will. Operating from a spirit of good will, we see and concentrate on the best in the other. Constituents of good will—light-heartedness, a sense of humor, and a dose of gratitude—all defend us from the drag of negative thinking.

HOME WORK

The chances for effective handling of differences are greatly enhanced if I operate with substantial self-awareness. I need to be aware of my quirks; fears, irrationalities, insecurities and prejudices, and I need to keep these idiosyncrasies under control.

I also need to do some homework and improve my awareness of the other. Is there some reading to be done, or a movie that offers insight into the other's psyche and circumstance? Are there people to talk to? Any spokespersons, experts, or ordinary folks who are able to advance my understanding? We have to be careful about generalizing too broadly about any subgroup, but we honor our journey mates by making the effort to gain background information.

WORK

Effective relationships don't just happen; they take work. The work of adoption takes some predictable forms. Here we mention five of them.

Establish a "we": We need make an effort on the ground floor to make sure we are somebody to each other. We need to establish a sense that "we" are "in this together." This sense of partnership brings pleasure and reward. It also, in a good sense of the word, brings a sense of obligation. If we are something to each other, I owe you some effort to make things work.

Finding the common ground: It's not always easy to find, but I believe there is always common ground to be found. Sometimes it starts flimsy—an adoptive father and birthfather who were elated to discover a shared contempt for kitchen curtains comes to mind—but there is more to be discovered over time. Our shared interests give us some safe territory to enjoy and build on.

Creating common ground. If we discover that the scary truth of the matter is that we have hardly anything in common, we may have to manufacture some shared experience. We can join in on each other's interests or perhaps we can develop interests or traditions that are new to all of us. For example, one set of birth and adoptive families I know settled into a pattern of watching the super bowl together. They don't exactly know why this tradition emerged, but they all look forward to their time together.

Acknowledge differences and clarify boundaries: There very well may be some things about which we strongly disagree. We do well to rise above the temptation to gloss them over. Instead, we need to address those areas explicitly. We need to work out very clear understandings as to how we will handle the issues that we see differently. I like the way Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt speak of boundaries in their book, Radical Hospitality. They write, "The real meaning of boundaries is the insistence that I will not be violated by your selfishness." A reliable rule of thumb when building adoptive relationships: Flat out stay away from sex, money, politics, and religion.

Help each other: Be good to each other. Don't leave the other guy out there dangling. Give each other pointers, not directives. If you're puzzled, ask. Communicate with dazzling clarity. Double check for clarity, then check one more time for good measure. Anticipate misunderstandings—they are a fact of life in all relationships—and iron them out promptly. Forgive imperfections generously, and seek it when you're the offender.

MODES OF OPERATION

Perhaps the prior suggestions can be integrated into a couple "modes of operation." The first mode that I promote is that of Junior Anthropologist. I loved my anthropology classes back in college. It's sort of a "what the heck" way interacting with others. What the heck's happening now? Goodness, what makes these guys tick? Why do they do the things they do? The anthropologist suspends judgment (actually, there is an assumption that all behaviors are in someway functional), watches closely, and listens. It is a learning perspective, and it presumes that these people who are now forever part of my life have reasons for the things they do. What the heck, they have a lot to teach. The anthropological approach takes the view that those other guys are interesting.

Brace yourself, because the other mode I favor doesn't come quickly to mind for most people. I propose you consider the mode of the Marvelous Mother In Law. I know a little about this because I happen to have one. She's wonderful. Through the years she gave my wife and me lots of space and imposed very little unsolicited advice or criticism. Plain and simple, she had faith in us. No doubt we tested that faith regularly, but she hung tough. It takes the view that those folks who are new to the family will probably be okay in the end despite their rough edges and that the smart thing to do is to give them plenty of opportunity to prove themselves.

So there they are, six clusters of ideas that can help us navigate our differences. I hope you share my view that these are attitudes and skills worth cultivating. Whatever progress we make in these areas will serve us well, not only as participants in the blow-your-hair-back adventure of adoption, but also as participants in the blow-your-hair-back adventure of life.