

Rosa's Story: Adoption Then and Now

Doing the Right Thing for the Wrong Reasons

Placing my son for adoption 28 years ago was an experience of tremendous detachment and denial. When I think back on the values and belief systems in place at the time, I find it hard to admit ever thinking that way. Being an unwed mother caused shame and secrecy, and the "illegitimate child" born out of wedlock unfairly carried the stigma of his parents' disgrace. In the small New England town where I grew up, I remember a kind older woman with a son about my age whom we always snickered about because he was "illegitimate." Though totally ignorant about the facts of life, I knew early on that being a "bastard" was bad.

I grew up in a strict Roman Catholic family, in which our religious education pretty much bordered on abuse. My aunt was the Mother Superior of an order of nuns who terrorized us with threats of hell. I would go to Mass every day hoping to accumulate enough extra grace to make up for my sinful state, but I never knew the peace and joy of Christ.

Nevertheless, I managed to keep my morals about me until my sophomore year in college where my very first sexual experience (which lasted about 15 seconds, I might add) ended in pregnancy. I was three months along when the doctor's office called to confirm the good news. Abortions were still illegal and risky in the '60s, and getting the name of an abortion doctor was pretty much on the same level as trying to buy a pound of heroin. Even though my roommate had had one and could refer me to the same doctor, abortion was never an option for me. Instead, I dealt with being pregnant as many young women might — in complete and total denial. I hid my pregnancy from everyone by wearing baggy sweatshirts and not gaining any weight. I planned to resolve my problem by having a spontaneous miscarriage which I would help along by lifting heavy objects. In those days, making beds and turning mattresses was rumored to do the trick, but for some reason it did not work for me.

Finally, in my sixth month, some much-needed guidance from the school nurse and the Dean connected me with the Florence Crittendon Home for Unwed Mothers. It was the perfect place for me to go, because all I really wanted to do was disappear off the face of the earth until my nightmare was over. I confided in one dear friend, informed my mother, and took a term's leave of absence from college to begin my self-imposed exile. The home was filled with young women like myself, and I could finally let my guard down and concentrate on having this baby. We had lectures and prenatal classes throughout the day. I recall that a major objective of the staff was for us to recognize and admit we were there because we chose to get pregnant. I remember actually making this announcement, like at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, while the counselor nodded in approval.

It was sad for me not to enjoy my pregnancy and to feel only terror in the experience. Even though I gave my baby up, I wish I could have marveled at his birth and loved him for the brief time he was near. When Stephen was finally born, I was allowed to see him for a few minutes through the nursery window (no holding allowed, lest it lead to some maternal bonding). I felt so terribly disconnected through the months of letting go, I could only stare at this tiny stranger. Weeks later, the social worker shocked me by mentioning that Stephen was quite a kicker — it was the first time I had any sense that he was actually a live being. The time after leaving the home and little Stephen was most difficult for me. He was whisked away by a new family I knew nothing about; I would never have the pleasure of picturing him with them on his birthdays.

Because of all the secrecy surrounding unwed motherhood, adoptions fit right into this sad scheme by insuring the privacy of all, albeit an irrevocable, cast-in-concrete privacy. It erased the sting of being born illegitimate, but replaced it with the even more painful

state of growing up adopted and of being “given up” by some nameless, faceless mystery mother, not to mention the totally insignificant father.

Today, I sometimes work with Pact as a bilingual support person helping Latino birth mothers go through the adoption process. Much progress has been made in making this a positive, rewarding experience. Birth mothers are allowed to choose and meet the adoptive parents and together they share all those uncomfortable, ambivalent feelings, such as the joy of adopting a child mixed with the agony of giving one up. Many confusing emotional issues develop; at Pact, they are resolved with clarity. For example, during the adoption process, birth mothers often receive money to help with their pregnancy-related expenses; in such cases, the terrible temptation to profit from the pregnancy can arise. At Pact, they are gently counseled about the risk that doing so means being left with the lingering fear that the birth mother had sold her baby. At Pact, social workers review adoption decision with every birth mother, examining ways she may be able to keep her baby, before any papers are signed. In the end, the birth mother feels she has made an informed and proper choice.

The new parents get to know the birth mother and can ask the many questions their child will want answered

as she grows up. For the birth mother, the pain of the process is lessened during a gradual transition period. Knowing the new parents and seeing her child in their loving care eases her concern and offers important closure. Birth fathers are also retrieved from the shadows, participating at any level possible.

In my case, shame and disgrace dominated my existence, and I am more ashamed now to admit I wasted valuable energy hiding and keeping my secret. Worrying about my reputation kept me in a very self-centered state and prevented me from taking care of what really mattered — my baby’s life. In general, the morals of the time made people do the right thing for all the wrong reasons. When couples “had to get married,” it was to rescue the girl’s reputation and to give the baby a proper last name. When a woman gave up her child for adoption, it was often to avoid embarrassing her family. In both cases, the baby would end up in a two-parent family, but the good results were the incidental by-product of morality instead of its main goal. Today, people in the adoption process are helped to focus more on doing what’s right for the child instead of doing what’s right principally for themselves. It has been very healing for me to help other women give their children the gift of hope and promise through adoption, and to emerge stronger for the experience.