



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 2010

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Director's Corner

Aftershocks of the Haitian Earthquake

by Beth Hall

It was one of those moments when time slowed down. I remember noticing how the window was covered with children's smudgy handprints. I remember hearing a crack. I couldn't seem to focus. As I rushed downed the hallway of the San Francisco hospital where I worked, a crack was opening downward, seven floors to the ground, although the building was still standing. I still don't know how I got down the stairs, along with a mass of other terrified yet incredibly polite people.

My precious daughter, my first child, was just two months old, only in her third day of childcare. I got on a bus, but it didn't move—cars and buses filled the streets and none of the signal lights were working. Someone with a portable radio called out that the Bay Bridge had fallen into the water. I felt my stomach falling through my feet. I pushed my way off the bus and spent the next two hours walking, running across the city to get to my daughter. When I arrived, she was alive, and that was all that mattered. A bookcase had fallen and missed her by inches. My mother was on the freeway that collapsed—we were not reunited for days.

That was the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989. Of course the bridge hadn't fallen into the Bay and most of the city was safe—"only" a few lives were lost. But I remember the terror of wondering if my daughter was alive or dead, the stressful days spent tracking down friends and family.

I cannot even imagine what Haitians are experiencing after the infinitely more devastating event that they are still trying to survive. The San Francisco I ran through, like any American city, has its pockets of poverty, hunger, and homelessness, but it is essentially an affluent city in a prosperous nation. Haiti, burdened by widespread poverty and political instability—the deep scars of colonization and slavery—faces a tremendously difficult road to recovery.

But it is clear to me that this is not the moment to contemplate adoption for Haitian children whose families are still trying to cope, still trying to get to them, still trying to find their way home. I understand that those who have the desire to adopt see their potential children in every doorway of every town—I was so frantic to become a parent I could barely see a child that wasn't "mine" without scraping against the gritty

sandpaper of my own grief and pain. But still, we can't resort to trading on someone else's pain in order to become the parents we want so desperately to be. Can we? Or have we all, those of us who have adopted? And if we have, then how do we live with our guilt, our pain, in the stark glare of this culpability?

For me, the answer lies in recognizing and holding the truth that I have benefited from someone else's pain. It's not right. But it also isn't wrong. It's just not fair. Life isn't fair. I've been telling my children that for years. All we can do is do our best—within our own context, our own role—to be ethical and careful. Cautious and honest. For instance, let's ask ourselves, push ourselves, to acknowledge the role race plays in our reaction to the situation in Haiti. If there was a similar catastrophe in a predominantly white country, would so many immediately assume that the best thing for the children is to be removed from their home country and culture as soon as possible, rather than assisted in place? What patronizing or even racist assumptions about Haitians and people of African descent lie beneath our supposedly altruistic desire to "save" Haitian children?

It is gratifying to see that the policies being followed in the current crisis seem to reflect a growing global awareness of the complex issues of power and privilege that surround international adoption. I don't see how rushing to adopt children from Haiti before the records have been reconstructed, the country has begun to heal, and families (including extended families) have had the chance to reconnect is in the children's best interest. Send money. Volunteer. Advocate, agitate. Help all the people of the country. But don't take their children, their most precious resource—not until we are really sure that leaving for adoption is the only or best option for any individual child. I have no objection to expediting adoptions that were already in process. But let's slow down and give the people of Haiti the time they deserve to figure out what is truly best for their children.

In the meantime, if you are really ready to love a child through adoption, if you truly feel prepared to parent a child who has suffered trauma, deprivation, and loss, there are children who need families, in situations where all appropriate measures have been carefully taken to ensure that adoption is the last, best option.