

An Entrustment Journey by Fran Cooper Materra

Soon into our family's first meeting with "Jackie," at that time about seven months pregnant, we felt connected. We had a beautiful afternoon together at a local park, introduced her to our then three-year-old son, who also came to our family through adoption, and began to get acquainted. Jackie's spirit was gracious and courageous. She very much wanted the little child growing inside her to know a life and a family which she felt she would not be able to give him in the foreseeable future. She was excited that our already-transracial family (we are European American and our now four-year-old son is African American) would provide a creative home for her child's Mexican/Yaqui heritage. When we received the call saying that Jackie had chosen us to be the parents of her baby, we were ecstatic.

During the remainder of Jackie's pregnancy, we were lucky enough to get together often. More than once she spent several days with us, becoming familiar with our home, our neighborhood and lives. She saw where her son would sleep (making only one simple request, that for the first 2 or 3 months of his life he sleep in a bassinet next to our bed so she could imagine him very close to us each night). We were also able to spend relaxing hours in our neighborhood park, the park where our son would eventually play. Many times she expressed the belief that God was a part of us all being together. And we did, indeed, feel blessed that we were traveling this road together, with mutual respect, common hopes and so much love. We hoped she would always be a part of our extended family, although she expected her contact with us would be rare for a time after the birth, as she anticipated a period of reassessment and fresh beginnings.

As we planned for the actual time of birth, we all talked about possible names for this little boy and finally decided that his first name would be Rafael, that he would have two middle names including Jackie's family name and that he would have as his last name our family name. Jackie had three special requests for the hours of birth—that I be Jackie's birth coach and be present for the birth and to cut the cord; that, at the baby's birth, Jackie would have him placed on her stomach and a picture taken of the two of them together; and that Gary be the one to give Rafael his first bath. We also began to talk about ways we could recognize and honor the transitions to come after the birth.

The value of ritual and symbol, of acknowledging and sharing sacred space, and of doing so in a community of friends has long been a deeply-felt joy for both of us. And as it turned out, it was also so for Jackie. For each of us, it felt fitting and important to put together some kind of ceremony to enable us to cross this threshold into new lives, relationships, and worlds of meaning.

What came to pass was something both simple and profoundly moving. As planned ahead of time, a few days after the birth we

gathered at a chapel near Jackie's home for the "Entrustment Ceremony For Rafael." Jackie invited a dozen of her friends and we invited the same. We printed an outline of the ceremony on sky-blue, rainbow-embossed paper so everyone could follow along, and asked friends from "both sides" to take different parts. As everyone gathered in a circle, in the chancel area of the church, candles were lit and our ceremony went like this:

Gary, a long-time student of folk guitar, played some wonderfully appropriate songs by the contemporary folk artist John McCutcheon. The "Gifting Rafael" section offered Jackie, Fran and Gary the opportunity to say to each other and to Rafael, in a community setting, words of entrustment, hope and love which now surround this precious baby boy. After "Raffi's" birth, he came home with us. Then, three days later, as we all arrived at the chapel, he was placed back in Jackie's arms, and she held him for the first half of the ceremony, placing him and her trust in my arms as she said her words of entrustment. I held him for the remainder of the ceremony (while Gary tried keep up with our three-year-old!).

As we celebrated "Sharing Bread For The Journey," many varieties of Mexican sweet bread—to honor Raffi's heritage—were passed among us. It was a Lord's Supper sort of ritual, in which each person offered a blessing while passing the bread to the next. After the passing of the bread, we similarly passed a chalice of white grape juice; each participant dipped the bread in the juice before eating it. This fellowship to enable the participation of all, and blessings from Protestant, Roman Catholic, Native American, Jewish and "undeclared" traditions were made!

As the ceremony came to a close, small gifts were given to Rafael and to Jackie. Among Jackie's gifts was a photo album already begun, containing pictures of Rafael's birth, his new home, his new dog and kitty and so on.

The ceremony brought tears of joy and sadness and seemed to offer a kind of temporary closure which has enabled each of us to move on to the next stages of our lives. We will always be grateful that we were able to include our "Entrustment Ceremony" in this adoption journey.

Many factors came together to make this possible for us, including helpful pastors, fortuitous geography, flexible participants (as plans changed a couple of times along the way) and all-night copy centers! This kind of ceremony may not always be possible but when it can happen, it offers great treasures.

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