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The Optimal Adoptive Launch

By Michael D. Trout

The adoptive mother said, "You are so beautiful. How could she ever have given you up? Maybe in some mystical way you are mine. Maybe you were just destined to grow inside another woman's womb."

The birth mother - speaking of a judge who had just issued a ruling in the case - "How can he do this? How can he do this? She is my baby!"

Of Baby Jessica, The New Yorker magazine said, "By the child's second birthday she would be in an unprotected limbo, treated by the courts not as a person but as a disputed possession. She would have no legal mother, no legal name, and no suspicion as she grew and played that her world could topple at any moment."

It was actually a very short time ago, in human history, when men were able to put their own children to death, if they chose, without intervention by the state. The children, after all, belonged to the men; they were their property. Men could also buy other men and women (who happened to be Black), and they considered themselves the owners of their wives. It took a war and much social upheaval to turn these presumptions of ownership on their heads. Only one presumption remains: that babies are the property of certain self-appointed or state-appointed adults.

Babies cannot be owned. As one adoptive mother puts it, "Babies are not anyone's possession. They are passing though, and we are their custodians." Both the baby's body and the baby's story belong to the baby. No law may be morally enacted which deprives any baby of either. And the only laws enforceable about either are those which protect the baby's rights to both.

The adoptive mother later wrote, "Jessi, I feel like all of this is my mess. I just want to crawl into myself and never come out. My daughter who is not really my daughter is slipping through my fingers with no way to really grasp her and have her be mine." And finally: "Even if we win in court, we will never be able to legally adopt her, because of [the birth father's] parental rights.... While we waver and debate - is she theirs, is she ours - I realize she is no one's. She is not a piece of property. She is an individual, who is learning to walk, talk, sing. At the end of the day, I want to say that I have been her guardian ad litem. I have to keep in my mind that we will recover from this, but she will not.

Baby Jessica did not have an optimal adoptive launch. While her case has garnered more media attention and notoriety for both families than most, the truth is that many adopted babies get a less-than-optimal adoptive launch. So what would such a launch look like, from the baby's point of view?

Baby as Witness

Above all, an optimal launch would be one in which it was acknowledged that the baby is an observer - a witness - as the birth parents and the adoptive parents do their work of living, and deciding, and preparing. After all, at a gestational age of six months this baby had already been attending to rhythms of movement, sound and chemistry, getting to know her mother and the few visitors who draw near to her world. By eight months she was listening in on conversations, playing with the cord, jumping at loud noises or fretting at hormone surges, and complaining about the food.

In the weeks and months after her birth, we see that this baby - and every baby - is some kind of complicated combination of what she came as, what she has seen and experienced, what she is being "taught" about herself and the world and about confidence and safety and trust and love. Her attachment to her new family is growing. Her cognitive awareness of her birth mother is dim because her cognitive capacities are limited, as is her language - which means merely that she has no words to describe her observations and experiences. But she has not forgotten. She has other capacities for storing her awareness.

So all the while never let us forget that a person is watching, witnessing, storing impressions. It might change our behavior - it would certainly change our attitude - if we understood that. And it might improve the adoptive launch.

The Adoptive Family's Pregnancy

An optimal adoptive launch would be one preceded by pregnancy - in both families. Important psychological work is done in all pregnancies, and we know that the child always gets a better deal if this work is uninterrupted by premature delivery or something else big enough to sidetrack mother and father from their unconscious emotional preparation.

But it turns out that adoptive parents must have a pregnancy too. It just cannot be that the adoptive parents focus all of their energy on getting the baby out of there (away from the birth family). This is unnatural, and it makes people manipulative,

dishonest with themselves, and incomplete. A pregnant woman does not begin pregnancy thinking only of how to get the baby out of there (away from her uterus). She and the baby's father get to linger over the separateness and reality of the baby in this place they cannot touch. They get to ponder all the ways their lives will be changed, and they get a chance to fantasize running away, as well as to fantasize the wonder of opening their space and their hearts to this separate and mysterious new person. They sometimes struggle with their terror that something is wrong or their certainty that the baby has gone away - and sometimes they deal with the baby actually dying, and leaving them.

Adoptive parents need to be "pregnant," too, to do their work, to experience this range of feelings. Where infertility has been a factor, allowing the ambivalence is harder. When there is little time for "pregnancy," the work may go on for awhile even after placement, and that can be tough. Such incompleteness of this normal psychological work - juxtaposed against an external perceived threat, like the birth mother's presence and/or needs - may result in a terrible ignoring of the real baby and a desperate, compensatory clutching at the infant's body: "He is mine! You cannot have him!"

An optimal adoptive launch requires that both families are able to be pregnant, and that both do their preparatory psychological work. It may be that the pregnancy of the two families need to merge, with certain of the work done together. One adoptive mother likened the many hours she and the birth mother spent together - preparing for the baby and for the transition - to time spent by teenagers having those no-holds-barred, secret, all-night, marathon disclosure sessions. Such time and sharing forms the basis for:

- a spiritual connection that lasts a lifetime
- absolute trust
- meticulous trust
- absolute commitment - including a commitment that it will happen and that it will work.
- a shared appreciation for the deep pain and the individual marvel of this baby

This kind of trust, respect, commitment and spiritual connectedness must be developed while the question of baby ownership is on the shelf. (During the pregnancy, after all, it is clear: the baby belongs to the birth mother. That is where he/she is, and that is that.)

So a lifetime commitment is formed. One adoptive mother who went on to try to adopt a second baby spoke of feeling uncomfortably promiscuous. She was tied forever to her first baby's birth mother. She did not know if she could make such a commitment to another.

Another adoptive mother who made such a commitment discovered that the birth mother was suicidal when the baby was about age one or so. She was furious and reminded the birth mother she did not have the right to kill herself. She (the birth mother) was a mother, after all, and they had made a deal, a commitment to each other and to this baby for life.

Baby-Driven-ness

Finally, an optimal adoptive launch would be a baby-driven one. It is not about filling a hole, it is not about adult convenience, and it is not about fixing a mistake. As soon as adoption becomes lawyer-driven, cause-driven, or agency-procedure driven, the chance that this baby will be protected is reduced to just that: chance. No baby-driven search group could ever name itself "Finders Keepers" (as does one in Delaware). Adoptive parents could never refuse to return a one-month-old to a birth parent who has changed her mind, if they were baby-driven. And no baby-driven birth parents could ever keep up the interminable fight for two years, as did Baby Jessica's.

A baby-driven adoptive parent might write a letter like this one, composed by a foster/adoptive mother who decided it was best to give back a five-month-old girl placed with her at eleven days of life, due to maternal drug addiction (which profoundly affected the pre-born child). She and the foster father would have very much liked to adopt her, but they knew this was not about what they wanted or needed. So when the birth father got himself in shape to care for his daughter, the very sorrowful but baby-driven and triumphant foster mother wrote to the dad a letter to be read in court, at the hearing. In part, it said: "I am struggling with my grief as I say good-bye to Louise. To have used myself as a tool to better the life of another...is a unique experience. But this is hard work. You have also weathered the storm and you have a relationship with her. One of the hardest lessons is to realize that this love story is about the baby's life. It is not about you or me or the system.

"John, I have trust that you will know if she needs to see me again and will arrange a visit, for you are now her witness and her helper. You will be the one to listen to her 'voice,' which for her is about her body tone - her appetite, her weight gain, her sucking, her eye contact and, of course, her crying. I pray that you will be able to hear her voice and honor what she is saying.

"If this job becomes too difficult, too frustrating, or seems to be 'going wrong,' you have the responsibility to ask for help, because your daughter will grow and learn from what she sees and hears around her. You love your baby and this love deserves the greatest respect.

"I feel that this story does not belong in the courts because this human/love part that I am talking about is not written into our laws. You are in charge of her and you are the one who will decide how this baby lives her life. This is very important work. My family and I wish you both well....Love, Anne"

If we really believed that a baby was watching us - that a whole human being, whose life was in our hands, was witnessing our every move - could we ever be cavalier again? Would it really be so confusing to know what to do (as a birth parent or an adoptive parent or caseworker)? Shall we ask the child how to optimize his or her own adoption?

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