



pact's

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The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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## Parenting the Next Time

by Brenda Romanchik

I am the mother of three, the parent of two. I am Matthew's "birth mom" and Katarina and Daniel's "mommy". My experience as a birth mother has a great deal to do with the kind of parent I am. In fact, it has a great deal to do with my becoming a parent at all.

Before I became pregnant with Matthew, children were never a part of my life's plan. I never felt I was very good with children. I was going to have a career, be independent. If I got married, it would be with the understanding we would not have children. Ironically enough, through Matthew's pregnancy and birth I learned that I could love a child deeply. It was this love for him that carried me through the difficult decision of placing him with his adoptive family. It was my way of providing for him the best I could at the time.

During the intense period of grieving that followed, the thought of having other children some day was a great comfort. While I was not looking to replace Matthew, believing that I would someday experience motherhood fully was a very pleasant thought. The years, however, took their toll. Besides the guilt I felt in placing my child, I was also grappling with the demon of shame. In the beginning, there was a double message in almost every conversation I had with those not educated in adoption. "It was a very selfless thing you did, but I could never give my baby away, or "It was a wonderful thing you did for your son, but how could any real mother not want to raise her own child?" The underlying message was that somehow my maternal instincts were deficient if I did not do everything in my power to keep my son with me.

Three years later, I got married, with the stipulation that my husband and I would never have children. While outwardly I maintained that my life was too busy for children, inwardly I felt I was not worthy to be a mother. My husband is a patient man, and he knew me well enough to know that I would be an excellent mother. He was willing to take the chance that I would someday overcome my feelings

of inadequacy to be the mother of his children. He also loved me enough to stick by me if that should never happen. Two years later, we bought a house in a nice, quiet neighborhood. Over time, the house seemed to be missing something. The closer I got to the answer, the more anxious I became: it was the voices and sounds of children. I slowly came to realize that it was not the house that was missing something; it was my life.

Despite this revelation, I still had a long way to go. I started seeking out other birth mothers. For the most part they fell into two categories: those who had never had other children and those who had other children soon after relinquishment. Most of the birth mothers I talked to felt a certain unworthiness to parent, whatever their parenting choices. I felt that many of those who had parented were either over-protective or too lenient. I wanted more for my future children than a mother emotionally crippled by shame. I wanted to be mentally healthy and whole so I could be the best parent possible. Through therapy, I resolved those feelings of shame and unworthiness. It was not easy, but I came to believe that I would be a good mother. I soon began to look forward to getting pregnant and having other children again.

Two miscarriages and two children later, I am in the thick of motherhood. Katarina is four and a half and Daniel just turned one. It has been a trip like no other. When I first began to talk about having other children, many told me that it would intensify the feelings of loss I had over my son, Matthew. Experiencing parenthood has certainly added a new dimension to the loss. All of my ensuing pregnancies brought long-buried memories of my pregnancy with Matthew.

Whether sweet or painful, all these memories taught me to cherish the time I shared with my children while they were growing inside me. One of my favorite memories of pregnancy was the wonder brought by feeling my babies kick and move inside me. As one woman put it, it is "more

intimate than a kiss." Each child moved differently. Matthew, even in utero, was full of kinetic energy, giving me vigorous kicks and even playfully jabbing me back if I pressed on my belly. My other two, mellow and calm like their father, seemed to prefer ballet to karate.

Lamaze classes were another story. Learning how to puff and pant with my husband reminded me of how alone I had felt in my Lamaze classes for Matthew. Occasionally, I would flashback to that time... walking alone to class, standing alone during break amid a group of happy couples. While these memories were painful, without a doubt they gave me an increased appreciation of the love and support of my husband. I cherished his involvement because I remembered what it was like experiencing a pregnancy and birth without it.

Parenting two children has also reinforced my belief that my decision to place Matthew for adoption was the best decision for the both of us. I was right in trusting my gut feeling that I would have not been able to handle single-parenting successfully. As I write, I have a one-year-old fussing in his father's arms. There are times it is a relief to be able to hand over the tremendous responsibility of caring for a child to someone who is an equal partner in the endeavor.

Although parenting has reinforced my decisions, it has also more clearly defined what I lost in placing Matthew for adoption. As Katarina's and Daniel's parent, I have had the privilege of being there as they have learned to walk and talk. I have observed with amusement, and

sometimes dismay, as they have mimicked my turn of a phrase, or a certain mannerism. I have watched with wonder as my daughter has shown caring and consideration beyond her years. There are times when I look at my children's experiences and realize that I wasn't there when Matthew learned to walk, that I wasn't there to observe, to teach, and to learn from him. It is, indeed, a profound loss.

Knowing how much I have to lose, there are times when I have to really work at not being over-protective. There are other times where I have had fight off the feeling that something terrible or tragic will happen to separate my children from me. While these are struggles common to many parents, for birth parents the reality of being separated from one's child is a real-life experience that stays with them.

Just as parenting has deepened my sense of loss over not being Matthew's parent, it has also deepened the joy I feel in parenting my own children. I have spent countless guilt-free hours holding a sleeping newborn, reveling in the soft skin, the sweet breath, and the warmth. I have spent whole afternoons just playing with my children. I have spent hours cuddling my daughter while watching the same children's movies over and over again. In not parenting my first, I am even more aware of the preciousness our time together. I take nothing for granted.

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