

# **Grief and Open Adoption**

**by Candace Kunz**

I once worked with a birth mother who assured me that she wouldn't experience sadness or loss like the "old time" birth mothers, because she was participating in an open adoption. This way she could see her child and know that he was okay and happy. Being able to be a part of his life would spare her the feelings that had haunted so many women who had placed their children for adoption in closed situations.

Although some of what this birth mother related to me reflected a common philosophy about open adoption, it also reflected a myth about the grief process - a process that occurs regardless of the kind of adoption a woman chooses.

When I first learned about open adoption I, too, felt that women would be spared the difficult feelings of loss and grief. It was impressed upon me that through respect and the power of choice, birth mothers of open adoption would be able to readily move forward with their lives and not be burdened by an intense grief process. However, I have learned in my experience counseling birth mothers that grief, loss and sadness accompany even open adoption to some degree.

Often, prospective adoptive parents will assure themselves that their child's birth mother feels so good about her adoption she is unlikely to feel badly for any significant period of time. Attaching themselves to this belief can prove to be disheartening and threatening when they experience the birth mother's grief firsthand. Often this exposure first occurs at the hospital and catches them off guard. Many birth mothers have told me that they felt abandoned at the hospital when they were experiencing sadness and grief. The adoptive parents

left the room, to allow the birth mother her privacy, perhaps because they did not know what else to do.

It is important to know that there is nothing adoptive parents can do to alleviate the pain. Feeling sadness and loss when separated from one's child is to be expected. It is extremely difficult to gauge the grief responses a birth mother will experience, but she should not be discouraged from freely expressing them. Whether a birth mother shares her pain or not, it is there. This is in complete contrast to the elation experienced by the adoptive parents.

Often, adoptive parents need reassurance that their child's birth mother feels okay about her decision in spite of her sadness. Even if she feels certain that she made the right decision it does not mean she won't grieve.

Open adoption offers the possibility for birth mothers to know and experience some of their children's lives. The lifetime of wondering what happened and if their child is okay is minimized during this process. What used to take women who participated in closed adoptions years, if ever, to resolve, may not take as long for women in open adoption. Nevertheless, issues of loss and grief accompany every adoption.

It is important, for everyone involved in open adoption, not to perpetuate the myth that the adoption grief of birth mothers has been eliminated by the openness. Approaching the process realistically entitles birth mothers to their feelings and at the same time allows them the opportunity to openly share these feelings.