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On Feeling Insignificant

by Jane Calbreath

I have just completed a seven-year cycle of transformation. I have spent the past seven years recovering from the relinquishment of my first-born child to adoption. Prior to the beginning of those seven years, I was certain that the relinquishment had no impact on my life whatsoever. That was before I met Marla, and the waves of lost emotions began to pass over me. I have literally "recovered" the lost feelings that I was unable to sustain as an eighteen-year-old exiled to an unwed mother's home. I had been numb, and denial made me a survivor.

My reunion and healing process has been an awakening. I have gained an understanding of the unconscious feelings that have plagued and directed the course of my life. It has been a discover. Small pieces over time began to form the larger picture of what this crucial event meant. It was the single most significant experience in my life .

Part of what still haunts me as a birth mother is that I was told, and I believed, that I had no value to the daughter that I relinquished. I understood that I was of no consequence to my baby. I could be replaced and forgotten. I was inconsequential. That feeling still lived deep inside of me twenty years later. I feared it might be true.

I have experienced feeling insignificant and unnecessary in other areas of my life. I have only just realized it reminds me of being told I wasn't important to my daughter's life.

I still dread receiving feedback from others. I stiffen when someone is about to say something that reflects my contribution. I practiced being invisible all of these years, so no one would ever say that I affected them. I didn't want to be noticed or to have a significant role in anyone else's life. I tried to stay in the shadows, "back stage" or on the sidelines. I never wanted to draw attention to myself or stand in the spotlight. I secretly feared that I would hear the words that I thought might be true. "You are unnecessary." "We don't need you." "You are an extra part that is not essential." "We can all do without you." "You won't be missed."

I have tried to prove "them" wrong. What a task! It has kept me struggling and trying always to prove and improve myself. It has made me work harder and harder to show my value. I have taken on more and more responsibility, so that I would become "indispensable!" I wanted people to need me. It has been a heavy load that has often worn me out.

Looking back, the social service system treated me as if I were an incubator. I provided a biological service for my daughter's "real" parents. They had lost their only daughter. They wanted to replace their child with mine. What a strange concept. Did anyone really think it was possible? Are children so pliable and similar that they can be shaped into their parents' dreams?

I was told to go on with my life and not look back. My daughter would be provided everything she would need to be happy and healthy. I wasn't important. How strange! Most people still believe this myth. Mothers, biological mothers just give birth. They can be replaced. Their role is insignificant. They are strangers in every other way.

What about maternal-infant bonding? What about genetics? What about the fact that babies recognize their mothers' voices and odors? How did my daughter's other mother duplicate that? Who explained it to my daughter? How did she feel when they told her, in so many ways, that I wasn't important? How did she feel when she asked about me and they said she was fine and didn't need to know anything about me? What happened to her sense of worth and identity when she realized I did have impact on her life, even though they told her different?

How can we deny that giving life, growing a life inside your body, has value and impact? Mothers can't be so easily replaced in the lives of their children. Mothers are important. Birth mothers are vital in the lives of their children. All mothers should be honored and supported. Mothers are forever. Adoptive mothers don't replace us. They become another mother figure, not the only mother. They are the ones who play a daily role in our children's lives. But we are also vital! If I am not important to my children, of what importance can I possibly be?

Jane Calbreath, M. A. is an organizational consultant and trainer. She is Board President of the Post Adoption Center for Education and Research (PACER), for which she runs workshops and leads support groups that bring together the adoption triad. She was reunited with her only daughter, Marla, who lives in Seattle and who communicates with her regularly. She also nurtured and raised three sons. Her personal passion is to play a vital role in the transformation and healing of the institution of adoption.