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Rejoice in What Unites Us: Creating Kinship Systems

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Kinship:

- When members of two distinct family units have one member in common through marriage or adoption (affinal relatives).
- A reservoir of persons who can be classified as a grouping because each has a formal relationships with a particular individual, whether they have significant relationships with one another or not.
- A network that can act collectively under special circumstances.

The difference between family and kinship is this: If you have a child who has a sore throat, and you fix her hot soup, sit by her bedside, and whisper soothing words to her, that is family. If you ask your child's birth parents about sore throats, welcome her grandmother bringing hot chicken soup, and then sit by your child's bedside and whisper soothing words to her, that is kinship.

Who benefits in a functional adoptive kinship system? The child. This system is child-driven. Members are connected through their individual relationship to the child. The broader the base of supporters, the better support the child will receive. The kinship group serves the family. The family serves the child. The child is the main focus. We find ourselves reminded of Kahlil Gibran:

"Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you."

Adoptive parents, and birth parents can't avoid Kahlil Gibran's message. How can we deny that our children are not our children? All thoughts of ownership dissipate when you face the truth about not raising your birth child or raising a child not of your body. Many of us do recognize our families as part of a larger kinship system despite the fact that in our society the nuclear family is autonomous and defended against outsiders. The question then becomes how to make the system work. As parents whose children have other parents as well, we wanted to learn more how having multiple parents affects family life for both the children and all of the parents, whether they are in direct contact with one another or not. This issue of Pact Press looks at how people feel about kin.

Our challenge as individuals connected by adoption has been to find ways to live with knowing we are connected to a larger group - whether we like the idea or not. After an adoption, the core group is always bigger than just one set of parents and their child. The smallest unit one can consider consists of the adopted person and his/her two sets of parents, birth and adoptive. What if several children are adopted , each with different birth families? What happens when some children are born into a family while some are adopted? What kind of attachment is there between siblings connected by birth who are not raised together? How do you feel if you place one child for adoption and parent another? What if you are raising a family and have to place your next-born for adoption? What if you place a child and when you are ready to start a family find you can't get pregnant? How does birth order affect you, if you are the oldest child of your adoptive parents and the youngest child of your birth parents?

Concerns about entitlement, about boundaries, about open/closed/and shifting styles of interaction, about coping with loss, about taking responsibility, and about defining roles seem inevitable. Our challenge is to include everyone by :

- Creating a kinship system that is balanced and can adapt to change.
- Creating a kinship system in which problems are viewed as existing in the whole group with components in each person.
- Creating a system that is connected across generations.
- Creating a system in which fusion and distance are not used to "solve" problems.
- Creating a system where people can deal with problems between them.
- Creating a system in which differences are tolerated, even encouraged.
- Creating a system which makes if safe for each person to deal with the others.

- Creating a system that encourages awareness of what each gets from within oneself and from others.
- Creating a system in which each person is allowed his or her own emptiness.
- Creating a system in which preservation of a positive emotional climate takes precedence over doing what is right.
- Creating a system which each member thinks is good enough to live in.
- Creating a system in which members use each other as sources of feedback and learning, not as emotional crutches.
- Creating a system that values the ability to sense and learn new ways.
- Creating a system that values the tenacity to ride a rough road.
- Creating a system that values the patience to learn deep love over time.