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The Missing Voice in the Professional Community

by Candace Kunz

If there is one thing I've learned about the professional adoption community, it's that discussing the birth-parent experience is often frowned upon, because it sounds so "negative." Yet experts in the adoption community do not perceive themselves as unwilling to address birth-parent issues or uninterested in providing emotional support to birth parents. They are generally great advocates of respect, fairness, and honesty when it comes to working with birth parents. However, the pivotal issues affecting birth-parent judgment and behavior cannot be addressed by basic emotional support. The issues are more complex, more psychologically disturbing, and therefore have the potential of becoming more problematic over time.

Experienced professionals are often faced with these issues while at the same time providing educational and placement services to prospective adopting individuals and couples. 0n some level, in order to feel able to continue being involved with the adoption process, professionals must view these as issues that will be resolved over time, rather than as issues that may affect birth parents psychologically and socially for the rest of their lives. The fact is that we really don't know what the long-term impacts on birth parents will be, though we hope that the issues can be resolved. As a result of this uncertainty, we have to believe that adoption is best and that everyone involved will benefit. However, when working with birth parents during the adoption process, it often becomes apparent how difficult and deeply disturbing it is for them to give their child to other people. Rationally, they usually maintain the notion of "what is best." But the difficulty comes from trying to learn to accept and live with the feelings that accompany their adoption plan. It's a process of bringing the "head" and "heart" together, because often they contradict one another.

All professionals have their horror stories of birth-parent indecision, lack of readiness, dishonesty and personal limitations. Most will acknowledge some understanding of reasons why birth parents behave as they do. But few professionals are fully aware of their own deep biases which can foster the irritation and impatience they experience when birth parents become ambivalent or indecisive. We refer to birth parents during these times as selfish, confused, impulsive, misinformed, influenced by others, or uncaring. That the decision is difficult or more difficult than originally anticipated is often only casually considered. It's at such times that birth parents must commit to dealing carefully and painfully with their feelings. Often, however, professionals focus on the commitment that birth parents are making to the prospective adopting parents.

These two commitments are not at all the same, but birth parents often don't realize that they are making more than one commitment. The professional's need to believe that birth parents will eventually come to view adoption as the best decision (therefore soothing the pain) justifies our resolve to move the adoption plan forward. An additional, and often more important sense of obligation comes from the fact that prospective adopting individuals and couples are counting on us to make it all "work" for them.

When birth parents struggle emotionally during the adoption planning process and become "problematic," it is often very difficult to determine the true nature of problem. The top ten comments made by adoption professionals regarding birth parents during this time are:

1. This is a normal part of the process and they will overcome these feelings if they just take the time to consider what is best for the baby.

2. They really don't understand how difficult it's going to be to raise a child in their situation.

3. If they really loved their child, they'd let people better prepared and more stable raise their baby.

4. They don't understand what they're doing to the adoptive parents, who have already been through so much.

5. If they try to parent this child, they may realize the mistake they've made when it's too late. By then, they'll have bonded with the baby.

6. I don't understand why they did not got better prepared for going through this process. They must have known it was going to be difficult.

7. I don't feel comfortable talking with them about whether or not their decision still seems like the best plan; to do so might encourage them to have second thoughts.

8. I don't understand what went wrong. They've been given everything they've asked for during the entire process.

9. I feel sorry for the baby. That's the person who will suffer over the long run.

10. It's so unfair. The adopting parents have waited forever to have a baby. They're wonderful people.

I think a lot about birth parents — because I am one. I've had many of the same reactions as other professionals to the birth parents I've worked with over the years. What is different for me is the fact that, on a deep emotional level, I can understand their reactions, the inconsistency in their behavior, and their ongoing (often hidden) ambivalence. As a result, I sometimes feel a guilty tug on my heart when adoption plans are altered due to the birth parents' emotional struggles. It is very difficult to determine whether or not this struggle of feelings is something transitional, that can be expected to pass, or something touching them on a very core level. Maintaining a certain level of denial is often necessary for the birth parents to continue with the process, once deeper feelings are touched upon; after all, these feelings are about the love of one's child and must be tucked away in order to proceed. I can understand why birth parents sometimes feel like they are obstacles to be overcome or merely tolerated. They come to believe they are the losers in adoption. Birth parents are always in the bind of wanting to do "what is right" and sometimes feeling emotionally unprepared to do so. The thought of never having their child with them again (as their child) can be unbearable.

Given the opportunity, most people would avoid this loss if they could. Self- imposed loss is the most difficult to resolve, because there is so little empathy from others. It's not to say that support is not available. But it's difficult to re-establish oneself in the mainstream in a world that cannot understand how anyone would willingly give their child to someone else. I'm not sure whether most people could envision themselves making an adoption plan for their child or allowing the adoption of their grandchild. The response I often hear is that most people believe they would simply never allow themselves to be in that situation. But what situation is that? Something unforeseen? Something preventable? A change in plans? A change of heart? A break-up? Bad judgment? Whatever it is, it is something that happens to "other people."

Adoption is a difficult process because it's so complex. For birth parents, it's about accepting the emotional aspects of losing one's child in a way that is "good." It is the responsibility of adoption professionals to maintain a perspective that includes the reality and feelings of both birth parents and adopting parents. Sometimes, this managed perspective may an adoption plan may not work out. Sometimes birth parents cannot make it through the process. That outcome is a professional reality and something we must first respect and then accept. It is not for us to determine whether or not an adoption plan should move forward. Our role is to help all involved to determine what works for them.

Birth parents, like prospective adopting parents, must be allowed to choose. When I am asked by a birth parent whether or not the pain will go away, I can only say I don't know. When I am asked whether or not the adoption will always feel like the "right" decision, I can only say I don't know. And when I am asked whether or not the child will understand, I can only say I don't know. This is just a small portion of the birth-parent reality that should not be minimized or ignored. As positive as it can be to build a family through adoption, these issues are very much a part of the process.

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