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## **Birth Parents: Vicitims of Adoption?**

## by Candace Kunz

There are no guarantees when lifelong decisions must be made in a relatively short period of time and in the absence of the certainty that our expectations will match the reality. It is almost impossible to recognize the complexity of such a decision; in adoption, this uncertainty can be especially traumatic. How many times have birth parents been heard describing their experiences of being victimized by adoption? These individuals are often in groups, at conferences, or talking with adoption providers. The reasons behind such feelings may vary; more often than not, however, these feelings are associated with something the birth parents could have prevented. But there are some elements that no birth parent can quard against: a "change of heart" resulting in regret; the adoptive family's withdrawal of emotional support or physical contact; and unforeseen changes in life circumstances for birth parents or adoptive families.

Often times, birth parent victimization is the result of inadequate preparation. It is not uncommon that birth parents proceed into an adoption without any or adequate education or information; without having participated in any preparatory grief work. Sometimes, the situations are not well considered; later, reality may feel like betrayal. This betrayal is a basis of a sense of victimization.

Birth parents must not rely upon others to inform them about or structure an adoption. They must do their homework. Exploring options means being proactive, not reactive. It means asking questions in order to understand the legal process. It means talking with many adoption providers, not just one or two. And it means exploring the decision, emotionally, over a period of time. It is unlikely that birth parents will ever make another decision of greater import in their lives. Yet this decision is often made without real consideration of the reality of the experience. Life offers no truly comparable decision to that of deciding to place one's child for adoption; its unique status makes proper planning and preparation critical. Yet it is very common for birth parents to remain very passive during the process.

Deep realization of the ramifications of this event and decision often occurs during the first year post birth. The crisis has subsided, making way for attempts to "normalize" life again. It is during this period of time that birth parents must examine their own process and the ways they reacted to the

pregnancy, the birth, and the planning of the adoption. Often, this reconsideration becomes externalized and birth parents may displace their feelings onto the adoptive parents, the adoption providers, or family and friends who supported the adoption. However normal it may be to want to place the responsibility (blame) on others, doing so isn't realistic. This externalization may become the glue that cements a birth parent's feeling of victimization.

Birth parents must empower themselves early in the adoption process. This means being an educated consumer, just as is true for people confronting infertility. Exploring options is a must. Adoption cannot be the quick-fix for an unplanned pregnancy. Absorbing this experience takes time. Emotional recovery takes time. The issue of time itself, not the event, defines the process.

Examining the experience means asking oneself:

- Am I planning an adoption because I want to or because others want me to? (You cannot follow through with a decision based on the wishes of others.)
- Is the adoption provider taking my needs and wishes into consideration? Have I clarified my own expectations?
   (An essential element of a "good match" with the adopting family is a complementary level of needs and expectations. If this match is absent, the risk of conflict later is much greater.)
- Where will I be in my life one year from now? What are my goals? Has planning an adoption supported these goals? (It is important to look ahead. What are you looking forward to that will help you define your life? If you feel that nothing in your life will be different from what it is now, how will you reconcile or make peace with your adoption decision? Ultimately, the decision is for the betterment of both your life and your child's life.)
- Do I have a clear agreement with the adopting family?
  If our agreement is "wait and see," can I live with any
  decision regarding our contact in the future? (You have the
  right to clarify "wait and see.")
- Have I approached this situation in the most responsible

manner? Have I kept basic agreements and appointments that are related to the planning process? Have I afforded myself the best opportunity to explore this decision thoroughly? Was I my best advocate? (If you have not fully supported yourself emotionally during this time, why would you expect others to respect your emotional process? Others look to you in an effort to learn what the process means to you. They can only follow your lead.)

When birth parents adequately prepare for their adoption and advocate for themselves, they are better able to face the unique challenges of adoption. It is important that birth parents carefully explore the initial consideration of adoption to begin with. What personal factors affected the choice? Gaining an understanding of these factors is imperative in the reconciliation of a painful and complicated decision. Reconciliation of the decision is determined by their degree of responsibility and ownership of the primary situation.

Additionally, true resolution means making peace with oneself. This is an internal process that evolves over time. The dictionary defines a victim as "one who is cheated or duped." Are birth parents victimized? Not if they made every effort to balance needs and expectations and to insure that respect was demonstrated for all involved.

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