

Which Comes First?

by Lynn Lape

There is an ongoing "which-comes-first" argument about what appears on TV. You know, does TV reflect what is happening in society, or does it influence and shape society? I'm asking because I wonder if the media reflects society's myth-filled image of adoption, or does it perpetuate and enhance society's adoption myths?

For example, I'll describe an adoption commercial I've seen. In it, a soft-spoken voice tells us how precious life is and that adoption is a wonderful way to build a family, which is all very true. On the screen appears an anxious, attractive young couple entering a hospital. A nurse is seen leaving an infant-filled nursery with a baby in her arms. She walks over to the couple and hands them the baby. The couple is overjoyed with their new child.

Do you notice what is missing from this commercial? The answer is: the birth parents.

Here's the next interesting question. Who are the creators of this commercial trying to convince about how wonderful adoption is? The answer is: prospective birth parents. Television and society seem to think that if you can prove how many perfect, deserving parents are waiting for a baby, families faced with an untimely pregnancy will choose adoption for their baby.

A media campaign is much easier to implement than changes in the adoption system to meet the needs of birth families - but it's not very effective. This type of commercial, a technique also used on some adoption billboards, is ineffective. It also isn't an accurate depiction of what is going on in the majority of adoptions.

If I produced an adoption commercial, it would show the adoptive parents in a hospital chapel. The birth parents would be there, too, with the baby in their arms. A few loving words would be said before the birth parents placed the baby in the arms of his new parents. We would see smiles, tears, joy, grief: -we would see a painful reality. This picture of adoption would speak more strongly to birth families than a false picture in which they're not even included.

In 1988, I co-founded Birthparents Support of Cincinnati. Our primary goal is to provide guidance and support to families faced with an untimely pregnancy who are considering adoption. We then continue support if adoption is decided to be the best plan.

We three founding birth mothers were all very positive about adoption when the group formed. Each was content with her choice: in my case a semi-open adoption, for the other two, closed adoptions.

We spoke about adoption as a responsible decision for birth families. While we definitely discussed grief, we spoke more about the appropriateness of adoption for some families than the pain of adoption.

Then, one founding birth mother dropped out of the group when she gave birth to twins. In 1990, I suffered a crisis of trust with my son's adoptive parents. In 1991, the third founding member also suffered a crisis of trust, but hers was with the adoption agency. We suddenly found ourselves disillusioned with adoption and its promise of a better future.

From these crises came growth. We each have now resolved the problems in our adoptions and have moved into a new grieving period. Our group began presenting parenting as the first option for every pregnancy, and adoption as a last resort.

And a surprising thing began to happen. More families with an untimely pregnancy who contacted the group were choosing adoption. I realized that when you address birth parents' concerns and fears about adoption, they are better able to accept the risks of adoption than when you don't tell them everything.

People intuitively sense when there is more to something than they are being told. Most will run away rather than accept unknown risks.

The greatest risk involved in allowing the myths surrounding adoption to continue is to families and children who would be better served by an adoption placement. There are tens of thousands of children in the United States who have been removed from their birth families due to neglect or abuse. These are families which did not have the resources to parent adequately, who maybe even knew this, but who, because of their perception of an adoption system that only concerns itself with adoptive parents, never even considered adoption.

These myths exact a heavy toll on those families who do choose adoption. Society has been conditioned to forget and ignore birth parents, resulting in many birth parents going into the closet. When birth parents do seek healing, society often seems to say to them, "You chose to place your child for

adoption, so why are you sad? Forget it ever happened and go on with your life." Society is extremely unsympathetic to the pain of mothers who have lost a child to adoption.

The price paid by birth parents due to the myths surrounding adoption will never be known. How many birth parents will never be healed from the trauma of being completely separated from their child? How many birth parents are frozen

in time, waiting until their child is an adult to search, connect, and discover if the right decision was made? As we return to an age of openness in adoption, birth parents will no longer be forced into the closet of silence and secrecy, but will receive hearing and a place in their child's life. But I ask, which must happen first? The destruction of the myths of adoption or birth parents being given a place in society?