



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 2011

Do not reprint without permission.

Director's Corner

Getting Over It and Stepping It Up

by Beth Hall

This essay is adapted from my closing comments at Pact Family Camp this year. While I recognize that the Pact community includes adoptees, parents who have placed children for adoption, extended family members, adoption professionals, and other allies, I choose to speak here to one segment of our community—adoptive parents—as a member from within.

Beth Hall

As an adoptive parent, I have come to believe that honoring our community means approaching adoption with a social justice mindset that says it is OUR job to change things in adoption, not just continue to be the recipients of the privilege that is ours within the system.

Get over it.

Recognizing our privileges in the context of adoption can be a rude awakening – but let's face it, the system of adoption does privilege adoptive parents and professionals over birth parents and adopted people. As adoptive parents we get the "prize"—we get to fulfill our desire to parent and care for children, to create a family we might not have been able to have otherwise. We are generally seen as charitable or rescuers and while we may not always be viewed in a completely legitimate light as parents, the stereotypes applied to us (the not-quite-real parents) are generally better than those applied to birth parents (the irresponsible or abandoning parents) or adopted people (the perpetual children who should feel grateful for their new families and forget about their first families and/or communities of origin). And those of us who are willing to acknowledge our privileges too often go to a place of guilt over our feelings of joy at having the children we have adopted in our lives. But don't all children deserve to be joyfully cherished? We don't have time to get bogged down in guilt or angst, we need to step up to action and advocacy. This doesn't threaten us, it frees us to be honest about the ways in which the system is wrong, even if we have benefited from it by receiving our beloved children into our lives.

Adoptive parents need to speak out against injustice and inequity in adoption.

You may be thinking, "Well, it's true I am in a privileged position in the adoption triad, but I already formed my family—what can I do at this point? What's done is done, for better or worse."

There is plenty you can do! Challenge the high cost of private domestic adoption—not because it is hard on your pocketbook, but because it is commodifying children. This needs to be OUR problem. In fact, if we receive a tax credit for adopting a child, doesn't that ultimately reward us as if we are somehow doing charity work when we pay professionals who are too often operating on a business model rather than a child welfare model? Demand something different of the professional community and you will interrupt the system and force for-profit entities out of the marketplace and mandate change among regulated non-profits who need to rethink who they are actually serving. Where is our voice speaking out against practice where Black babies cost less than white, Latino and Asian children? What about practices that let anyone who says they want a child get a child without proper preparation or qualification? As adoptive parents, we can and should be powerful advocates for the highest possible ethical standards in adoption.

International adopters, why is there so much hand-wringing about countries being closed to adoption, rather than acknowledging that the reason they are closing is because of the injustices and rampant corruption that were and are part of our children's adoption history? We adoptive parents should be leading the fight against the racist, classist, and sexist biases upon which our opportunities to adopt are at least partly based. We should be mortified at the way in which our First World dollars have corrupted Third World countries and furious that even one child has been stolen or kidnapped in order to feed our lust to become parents. We must speak out to say that it is not inherently better to be raised in the US, acknowledging the incongruence between this attitude and the popular attitude of "celebrating" children's birth country cultures.

Foster-adoptive parents, acknowledge that there is a problem with a child welfare system that takes children away from poor women (disproportionately women of color) and places them with families with more money and often whiter/lighter skin, more often than it supports struggling families with the tools

and resources they need to overcome their challenges and stay together. Insist on reality-based honesty in yourself and those you work with to be sure that you are in the very best position to support an identified child – this needs to be a lifelong commitment no matter how rough the going gets.

Transracial adopters, where are we in speaking out against practices that promote transracial adoption over same-race placement? Especially for those of us who are white, it needs to be OUR concern and OUR problem that people of color continue to experience barriers in every adoption system that keep them from adopting children of their own racial group. Good intentions are not enough; we need to be working to promote the placement of children with families who match them, allowing those children the opportunity not to lose their in-family connection to their racial community on top of the losses that are already inherent to their placement in adoption. Not to mention the loss of privacy that is intrinsic to the experience of having parents who do not share your race. Again, why should this threaten us or our family construction? Every child of color deserves options, which includes not being transracially adopted at least as much as being transracially adopted.

How is it possible that the only group of people in the US who do not have access to their original birth records are adopted people? Join the fight for open records and make it OUR cause—not as a favor to our children or our children's birth parents but for ourselves. Because it diminishes us to support a system that institutionalizes a lie, making us pretend to be our children's birth parents rather than saying that our role in our children's lives as 2nd, 3rd, or even 15th parent is not valid or important enough unless we co-opt that of the first parents. Birth certificates need to tell the truth, not mask it. Birth information and history is a right that belongs to the human being whose creation and beginning it describes. Until all people, including adoptees, are legally entitled to accurate information about their own origins and a birth certificate that reflects the truth, all of us are diminished.

Ask yourself: do we adoptive parents diminish the role of birth parents in our children's lives in order to uplift our own? When we hold them up as saints for making the "best" choice for their child, are we not also saying that they are somehow a lesser parent compared to us, that the child is better off in our care? Look around the world of adoption and it is clear that birth parents are the least vocal, most absent member of the triad in both the professional and advocacy/reform community. We have to ask ourselves: is their invisibility, cloaked in shame and guilt, because of our fundamental desire to be the most important parent? And how many stories do we have to hear of adoptive parents who promise contact and then revert to fear and excuses about how less is somehow "better" for their children? We need to keep our word. Period. Second, we need to remind ourselves that we have been trusted with a child, how can we not trust that honoring that child's first family and original connections is something that is owed to that child? We need to stop justifying our own comfort and be open to our partnership with our child's other parents that is the only way they will be able to find their whole selves.

We have to step up.

Good parenting is actually making these problems OUR problems. Be brave, live in the truth, and know that nothing will speak louder to your children than your actions. Take up the fight—there are so many wrongs waiting to be corrected in adoption. Make it YOUR problem—together we can make a difference.

[Sidebar]

What Can I Do?

- When you read an article or blog post that privileges the adoptive parent perspective and neglects or ignores the needs of adoptees or birth parents—speak up! Write a letter to the editor, or post a comment.
- Challenge organizers of adoption-related workshops and conferences about how the experiences of adoptees and birth parents are being represented. Where are their voices? They should not be represented as the recipients of the goodwill of adoptive parents or professionals but rather be speaking for themselves and be held in good standing by adoptive parent allies.
- Talk with your children about your concerns about what is wrong with the adoption system, why it isn't fair to people of color, children, expectant and birth parents.
- Join and/or support organizations such as AAC (American Adoption Congress), AHA (Adoptees Have Answers), Bastard Nation, and CUB (Concerned United Birthparents), that advocate for adoptees and birth parents, as well as those that offer peer-to-peer support, such as AFAAD (Adopted and Fostered Adults of the African Diaspora), AKA (Also Known As, Association of Korean Adoptees) and OYF (On Your Feet Foundation). Get on mailing lists that will keep you updated on breaking issues and opportunities to take action.
- Become involved in organizations and movements working for social justice in your child's country and/or racial/ethnic community of origin. Write letters, write checks, attend meetings, attend rallies—and bring your kids!
- Volunteer as an advocate for children in the foster care system.
- Make sure you are doing everything you can to honor and maintain contact with your child's family of origin. Participate in Registration Day (where triad members are registered to find family members) and support organizations in your state that support open records (unless you are lucky enough to live in the small handful of states that already have them).
- And here is perhaps the hardest of all: when seeking to build your family through adoption, be willing to question or object to any behavior that strikes you as unethical. Have the courage to follow your conscience, even if it means you may have to wait a little longer for the child you desire so desperately. This means not only walking away from certain professionals, agencies, and facilitators but also telling them why.