

## **Noble Choice - Or No Choice?** by Paula O'Loughlin

### **Imagine this:**

You are an adoptive parent to three beautiful children. Unexpectedly, you find out that you are pregnant—something you and your partner never thought possible. A flurry of mixed emotions overcomes you. You're not exactly old, but you are older. You think of the impact another child will have on your family financially, physically and emotionally. You remember your partner telling you how excited he is that your family is complete, how glad he feels to finally be free of diapers and bottles. But on the other hand—you have a baby inside of you. You are going to give birth. It's a dream come true. Ultimately, you feel immensely blessed for a miracle of this magnitude to have been bestowed upon you and your family.

After taking time to digest and celebrate the news privately, you and your partner are anxious to start spreading the word. The person you are most excited to share the announcement with is your sister. Upon hearing the news, her eyes light up. She responds slowly and hopefully: "Sis, I have the best idea. Why don't you make an adoption plan for this baby? One of my dearest friends has been trying to get pregnant for the past five years and they can't afford to try anymore. She and her husband would make the most magnificent parents and they want a baby more than any couple I know. You would be doing SUCH a good thing. I mean, you already have three children and it's not like you were even planning on this one or trying for another kid. You've said so many times yourself how you'd never want to go back to having an infant. Think it over, okay? But just remember back to all those years ago how much you wanted a child and then think of my friend and her husband. They want what you have and you are in the position to make their dreams come true. You'd be doing such an amazing thing, sis; you'd be doing the right thing. I know it might be hard, but try not to think of how it would impact you, but rather what it could do for them. You have the power to change this couple's life forever and to give this child to parents who would love it just as much as you would. It really is an amazing

thing that you can do—for yourself, for them and for your baby."

After much thought, prayer and careful consideration, you and your husband decide that yes, making an adoption plan would be mutually beneficial to both your baby and your sister's friends. You know this baby will never lack for love or anything else and you tell yourself that this couple deserves a chance at parenthood, just like you had. You've made your decision and you're convinced that you're doing the best thing for everyone involved.

### **Or imagine this:**

According to the papers that comprise my adoption file, I was left in a box on the steps of a police station in Seoul, South Korea in 1971, presumably just a few days old.

For as long as I can remember, the act of my relinquishment—assumed to be made by my Korean mother—has been characterized as the epitome of generosity, selflessness and nobility. Endless variations on these sentiments have been used to offer me comfort about a woman that I will likely never know, but to whom I am undeniably connected. I've heard so many well-meaning but purely speculative statements such as "your birth mom was such a brave and selfless woman to give you up for a better life," "how lucky you are to know that she loved you so much that she gave you away," and "there truly cannot be a more selfless and powerful act of love than to do what your biological mother did for you."

Following this logic, if relinquishing one's child is the model of courage, selflessness, and unconditional love, why aren't we encouraging and supporting our own sisters and friends to do the same with their own children? Furthermore, why wouldn't we do it ourselves if we could? After all, doesn't our American culture informally define a mother as one who forever places others' needs before her own, one who make the

ultimate of sacrifices in the best interest of her child? If women who have placed their biological children with others are so amazing and heroic, then why aren't more of us doing the same and paying it forward? And what about the men and women who are desperate to have a child and have an abundance of resources they are willing to share? Surely there are countless families who could offer our kids a far "better" life than we ever could. Keeping our children to ourselves when they could clearly have so much more seems rather selfish, doesn't it?

Any woman with an unexpected and perhaps unwanted pregnancy is faced with difficult decisions. But what if we tried to influence her decision by reminding her that this would be her chance to take a less than ideal situation and turn it into a perfect, happy ending for everyone involved? We could show her pictures with accompanying letters written by loving couples whose dreams she could fulfill, people who are counting on her to answer their lifelong prayers. We could reassure her that placing her child is the very best decision for her baby, herself and the deserving couple who wants so desperately give her baby everything that we feel she cannot. We could even point out her inadequacies and use those shortcomings against her to suggest that they could actually hurt her child if she decided to parent. I bet that with a carefully constructed case, we could make a compelling enough argument that would make the "right" decision quite clear: that if this woman truly loved her child, she would place it in hopes of a better life.

Because in adoption, the relinquishment of a child is almost always synonymous with love. "She loved you so much that she chose to give you up." Declarations such as these, however, operate off the supposition that there indeed was a choice to be made.

I've often wondered how so many people are able to unconditionally embrace the act of adoption as fate, God's will, destiny, luck, etc., even when it is the result of a woman forced to place her child because any real options for her to parent her own child ceased to exist. It has been my experience that most people who comment on the actions of my Korean mother have not ever considered that perhaps there was no real choice available for her to do anything else. The assumption that continues to prevail is that my Korean mother had the courage to make a choice that proves how much she loved me. The reality is, while people are quick to commend her decision and lavish her with praise and adoration, they rarely stop to consider the circumstances surrounding my relinquishment.

Please let me be clear. I am not trying to make adoptive parents feel guilty or ashamed about their decision to adopt. I myself, along with my husband, made the very conscious and intentional decision to adopt our son.

I know that we personally did not cause or create the circumstances behind his relinquishment. However, I absolutely accept responsibility for my role in the collective mindset that too often portrays first moms the way we want them to be, the way that suits the needs of those who feel that they deserve to be parents too. People might not come out directly and say, "Thank God there are women out there who cannot parent their own kids, because without those situations, I'd never be a mom," but we might hear it stated in a more politically correct way such as, "I know that the world is an imperfect place. But it is what it is. Should we just let these poor kids starve and languish in orphanages? Those kids need a family and we want a child. Adoption is the very best solution for everyone."

And so while we may not exactly be rejoicing in the fact that children are available for adoption, we're certainly not doing anything to prevent it from happening here or in other countries; well, at least not until we're able to adopt ourselves.

Maybe at the heart of the issue is the belief amongst many that as long as we love adopted kids "as our own" and promise to do our very best by them and to give them the world and have them not want for anything, that it's somehow okay to keep averting our eyes away from the cultural, socio-economic, political, societal and religious reasons that make it "unavoidable" that women are continuously forced or asked to give up their children.

In truth, the scenario I opened with is unimaginable, from the safety and comfort of our middle-class American lives. We'd never dream of asking even our sibling or closest friend to give us their baby, but are willing to accept without much questioning that it is best for a distant, faceless woman to give us hers. It feels wrong to say that we could never make that kind of sacrifice for someone else but that we're incredibly grateful that someone else could do it for us.

Yes, it's absolutely an imperfect world. But adoption isn't the perfect answer—even if we believe it is our perfect answer.

*Paula O'Loughlin was adopted at the age of six months old. Paula and her husband have two children, a daughter by birth and a son who is also adopted from Korea. Paula is a teacher, a volunteer and an avid connoisseur of *dolsot bibimbap* and *yukgaejang**