## **Adoption Reversals**

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## **By Michael Trout**

What happens when would-be parents who intend to adopt a child find, at the last minute, that it has all fallen apart?

I approach this question from a viewpoint which may be different from yours. People do not come to me regarding adopting a baby. People come to me because they think that I know something about how babies develop and how babies feel, and that I know some things about how it is that mothers and fathers and babies get on together, when something breaks down in their "attachment" — a term now used widely to describe that mysterious, often-delayed, difficult experience that mothers and fathers and babies have together over the days and weeks and months during which they get to know one another. So I will address the issue of adoption reversals by telling you about a couple of families who have come to me regarding a problem with the babies who came to them after adoption reversals.

A man went to Romania to adopt a child at a time when that was thought to be a dangerous, but brave, thing to do. He tells of arriving amidst all the confusion of the travel and the language and trying to find a place to stay and finally finding his way up the hill to the orphanage. As the story continues, he is finally finding his way into the director's office, and finally being introduced and finally being acknowledged as "the guy who came over from American to get one of our babies," and finally, after a couple of days, of being taken into a room where there were about a dozen infants and toddlers. Among those pitiful children, one was introduced: "Here is your son, Mr. Jones." (The child was about fifteen months old at the time, but was not crawling or walking, as was true with most of these children. The child had had very little stimulation in his life and very little experience of being cared for like a real human being). This man described doing, immediately, the one thing he could think of to do to make some sort of connection with this child, and that was to change his diaper. And as he did that, they looked into each other's eyes and he stroked this child and the child did, in fact, become "his son." They played together for a few hours and then he took him back to that horrible room where he had found him and then went to the director; and arrangements were made for Mr. Jones to pick up his son the next morning.

When he came back the next morning, there were just a couple more things that had to be taken care of. And so they did all that and the hopeful father-almost-to-be came back again the next day. But the stalling continued that day, and on into the next (during which time, by the way, he was not allowed to see his son). On the eighth day, he came back yet again. "Something has gone wrong, Mr. Jones. Somebody has taken the baby." He protested. He yelled. When he got back to his hotel, he punched a hole in the door. But there was really nothing to be done. All the while, he tried to take care of his wife back in Minneapolis. He had told her at first that everything was fine, because he

thought everything was fine. He had told her that they had a son because they did have a son. He had described their son to her and she had made the best transatlantic attachment that she possibly could. He delayed telling her that there was a problem. But he finally had to tell her that as well. He stayed for four more days and he fought in all the ways a father would to fight a distant haze of bureaucracy, and he went home.

They subsequently adopted another child from another country. Actually, he was careful to tell me, the subsequent child was from "another whole damned continent." But my question for you is this: Whatever happened, in their hearts, to their first child? Exactly how does he live on in this family?

The second family includes a set of very bright, well-educated, energetic, well-meaning parents who had not been able to have a child of their own and wanted one, and the delightful tenmonth-old they had been able to adopt. The parents said that everything was really wonderful except for a couple of things: "He will not look at us; and I don't think we have the right feelings about him." Mother said, "Could it be the case that I would not have the right feelings about this child? I care for him deeply, but sometimes I just can't seem to make a connection with him." So I went to their home, as I always do when parents express these sorts of worries to me, and I sat with their baby and with them, and they had lunch and we chatted. And I want to tell you some of the things that they told me over lunch.

First I asked them a little bit about their experience with trying to have a birth child. They said that they had tried for awhile, and then Father (a biologist) took his own sperm sample to the lab, did a test on it and found nothing alive. (Consider what that might have meant to this man: to carry his own sperm into a lab and watch it "be dead" under a microscope. After all, he said that it was "no big deal" but then again he said, "nothing much is a big deal for me.") So that solved the question of what the problem had been. They began to consider adoption, and were eventually presented with the possibility of a semiopen adoption, with an adolescent mom to whom they "gave themselves over," emotionally. Father's commitment to this mother was principally financial, he claimed: he gave her \$3,000 for rent and health care. Mother acknowledged that she made quite a personal bond with this teen mom. There were a few problems with the pregnancy, and the adoptive family had some real concern about how the baby was going to do. They had put an ultrasound picture of the baby on their refrigerator. The prospective adoptive parents and the birth mom had visited each other several times. The adoptive mother was given a shower by her sisters and she made a yellow sweater and booties. She painted some birds and some Barney figures on the wall of the room they had selected for the nursery. Dad painted the house, stripped the doors, refinished the brass on the fixtures in the

baby's room. They even picked a name for the child and they painted that name — "John Stanley" — in a big sweep across one of the rainbows in the baby's room above the crib. (Later, after the reversal, Dad would become unable to recall the name they had chosen and painted on that wall.)

The weekend arrived when they knew that the baby was about to be born. That date passed. The call did not come. Confused by the deafening silence, the family contacted the caseworker from the Social Services agency. The caseworker tracked down the birthmother, who had indeed birthed a baby, but who didn't want to proceed with that adoption. The almost-mother and almost-father went out to the movies that night and then went up north to a little town for a couple days of retreat. They really did not know what to do with themselves. Dad was angry and Mom was mourning.

It was later that week when the caseworker from the Social Services agency called and said, "I feel so bad about what happened. I've got another baby for you. Would that be okay?" And they said, "Yes, of course. Would it ever!" It took several more days to get the paperwork done, but by the middle of the next week, they had Adam. Adam became the baby who would not look at them and about whom Mother said, "I don't have the right feelings."

I fully believed this mother and father to be accurate informants when they told me that Adam made no eye contact. Nonetheless, it was of deep interest to me that he made a great deal of it — with them and with me — during that time I spent at their home. I did notice one curious thing: he would avert his gaze a full ninety degrees each time he was passed from one person to another. Father was extremely annoyed with all this talk about the other baby and that other bad situation and "that damned \$3,000." But it was clear that he was in sorrow. It was also clear that Mother was as well. It was also clear that not a soul had ever brought that matter up with them. No one had ever held it in front of their eyes as if it were a treasure — not just the actual lost baby, John Stanley, but also the whole experience of falling in love with that adolescent mother; the experience of falling in love with that unknown baby with a name that swept all across their wall; the experience of falling in love with themselves as parents. They thought their job was to put that experience in the past as soon as possible and turn themselves over to Adam. If anyone could, they could. They gave it their very best, but they could not quite pull it off. (Our bodies and our spirits often will not let us get away with pretending.) As we pondered all of this unknown sorrow and carefully-tucked-away grief, Mom said about Adam: "I'm afraid that he will look at me and that he will see that I'm thinking about John Stanley."

But what about Adam's part in this peculiar looking-away phenomenon? This was a baby who had looked away from his birthmother and when he looked back — she was not there. This was a baby who looked away from his foster mother, with whom he had spent about ten days, and when he looked back — she was not there. What a silly baby he would be, the parents were then able to hypothesize, if he did not realize that when you look away, sometimes the people that are supposed to be there are not there when you look back? So maybe, then speculated, he has just learned to avert his gaze. And for some reason, Adam stopped averting his gaze that day.

These are two stories about grief, neither case very well resolved. But then again, can grief of this kind be resolved?

Just as in a few other rare situations in life when the object to be grieved does not have the good grace to hang around and let us know who it is, so adopting parents who lose their baby at the last minute do not have an object over whom they can grieve. That makes the problem big for many hopefully-adopting families. It means that they have mourning to do, but they do not know what it is that they are supposed to mourn. Where is the baby? They tell themselves that she is safe; she is in somebody else's arms. Then why do they feel so bad? Some conclude it must be selfishness. The truth is that they would like to mourn, but they do not have language for their mourning. They do not have an object that is clearly available for the mourning, and they are not likely to have support about this kind of mourning. What are they going to say to their friends and to the caseworker and others: "We almost had a baby but then we didn't"? People will say the very same stupid things that they say to a mother and father whose baby dies in the uterus: "Oh gosh, you can have another one. There are lots of babies. Oh my, I saw a thing on television just last night about all the babies in... [wherever is the latest besieged country where babies are suffering]. It shouldn't be any problem." And all of that is true and all of that is an utter mismatch with the way the mother and fathers are feeling at the moment.

I am suggesting that mothers and fathers who intend to adopt and who lose that opportunity at the last minute are, in fact, in mourning. They have a right to be. But they have two problems: one is that the object is not there for them to mourn, and the second is that they do not have support and, therefore, opportunity to describe what they are feeling.

What I learned from these two families is not only that their experience was painful, unresolved, and almost entirely unacknowledged by the world around them, but also that the next child, the subsequent child, was at some risk. For a long time, we have known that about mothers and fathers whose babies die: it is always a problem for the next baby. There may be a tendency to withhold a little bit with the next child. A mother whose baby dies of SIDS at four months will be able to tell you precisely the moment in the life of her subsequent child when he hit four months and one hour of age. The she could "let go and love him." A mother and father whose previous baby died in the uterus may be on pins and needles throughout the next pregnancy, until that moment passes when the stillborn baby died. Sometimes they remain on pins and needles because, with a stillborn child, the grief never does get fully resolved; if so, anticipatory grief may then last well into the life of the next child. Adam's parents, for example, had to go upstairs and figure out a way to get "John Stanley" off the wall. The new baby was already in the crib, but he was not John Stanley. There was, in an amazingly concrete way, a ghost in that nursery. Adam did not really have much of a chance to be Adam until the ghost of John Stanley was exorcised from that room. They could paint over that beautiful thing they put on the wall, but it took them a little while to imagine that it really was over and to stop feeling guilty about the fact that they felt connected to their almost-first-baby even when their second needed their attention.

Adoption arouses deep and primitive feelings in all of us. So does loss. An adoption reversal involves both. We can better serve adoptive parents and adopted people who came along after an adoption reversal if we attend to these facts of the human spirit, acknowledging parents' grief, supporting their integration of the whole of the experience, and making possible their attachment to the subsequent child with freedom and joy.