

Gentle Transitions

A Newborn Baby's Point of View

about Adoption

by Michael Trout

In late 1996, I was challenged by the organizers of the Sixth Biennial National Institute on Open Adoption to prepare some remarks about optimizing the transition of a baby between his/her birth parents and newly-adopting parents. I struggled with it for months, and got quite stuck on the matter of format: how to present my thoughts. The problem was that I wanted listeners to focus not on the specifics of what to do, but on the concept that the baby was watching us every step of the way. Each thing we did would matter, in other words, because the baby was very much there.

Finally, it dawned on me that the point could best be made if I simply allowed a baby to talk to us all about his or her own point of view on all that was happening. The enclosed script is the result of this effort to imagine a baby speaking directly to us about his or her experience, then, to present the words of the baby, without getting my own voice (a rather deep, gruff, male one, at that) in the way? It was at this point that the concept of a video was born, in which the words of the baby would be presented on the screen, allowing the audience to imagine listening to any baby speaking the words (or perhaps, some particular baby that the listener knew, or was working with).

While this may well be of interest to all members of the triad and to professionals, please know that you are quite right to feel that your voice — if you are a birth parent or an adoptive parent — is not being heard here. It is not, indeed. Your voice needs to be heard; what you have to say is important. But this is the baby's forum. This is about the baby's message. I hope it is useful.

Michael Trout, Director, Infant Parent Institute

So, you want to know how I feel about your moving
me from one family to another?
May I tell you what it is like, way down here, inside of me,
to be so very special —
so special that I must lose everything
that is familiar to me?
So special that a great many big people are talking about me
and looking at me
and pointing at me
and looking away from me
and crying near me
so much that I am losing my own sense of who I am
and where I belong
and what I am supposed to do to keep myself safe.

When you look at me
I wonder if you know that I am really here?
Do you understand that I am watching?
So you understand that
all of the papers you are signing,
all of the decisions you are making,
all of the ways you are behaving

are noticed by me, that I am affected by all of it,
and that I won't forget?
Thank you for noticing that I am not simply a hunk of ham lying
here —
a beautiful hunk of ham, to be sure,
and undoubtedly very precious
and beautiful to behold and much wanted by all
and really quite "special" and all that —
but a hunk of ham nonetheless.

Thank you for imagining (I know this is hard for you)
that I am something else.
I am not something with a language, but you had
better know that I have some things to say
and I will find a way to say them.
I am something very different from you,
but not necessarily less than you.
And so I hope that you will not focus your feelings and your
thoughts
for my feelings and my thoughts.
And I really so thank you for asking.

First of all,
if you are going to do this thing,
if you are going to have me go
through this great, huge change,
then please let my birth mother and my birth father be sure.
The last thing this world needs is another Baby Jessica or
Baby Richard mess.
(I knew about both of them. Who finally won there?)
Make sure everybody gets a chance to say what they really
want.

Make sure everybody gets a chance to know what they really
want.
Make sure they get a chance to see me.
Don't play that hide-and-seek game, where everybody
pretends that
if you keep my birth mother and my birth father from looking
at me,
they will go away, they will be able to forget and they won't
cause any trouble.

Second, give my new mother and my new father —
my adoptive parents — a chance to be pregnant for me.
Let them know me while I am still inside my birth mother.
Let them learn about whether my birth father likes his
pancakes crispy or fluffy,
and what my birth mother's favorite sport is,
and what both of them thought about me.
So these new people can know me better when I come out.
And so they can help me know better too.
It would be best if you could go through most of this process
of bringing me into the world together.
Then we might all feel so connected that the grownups could
concentrate on what is best for me.
Not on their own loss.
Or their own fear of loss.

Remember, it helps me if my new parents can get relaxed,
so they don't act funny around me —
either not letting themselves have too many feelings for me,
or having feelings that drown me.

Don't any of you forget:
I am really not something you can own.
It doesn't feel good at all to me for you to fight over me.
My voice is so small, even to me, when you forget all about
me
and start treating me like a thing —
a thing to be negotiated over,
a thing to possess,
a thing that causes perfectly sane grownups to act
like jealous and mean little children.
(Did I mention before that the last thing the world needs
is another Baby Jessica or Baby Richard mess?)

Third — and this works only if you were paying attention
to what I said the first and second things were —
notice what you are doing, and when you hand me
from one to the other, have some kind of a ritual or something
that will make all of you feel like this thing is real, and
permanent,
and so you will never forget it
for the rest of your lives.

But also so that you will remember why you are doing this,
This ritual thing doesn't have to be somber,

unless that is what all of you really think you need.
It could be also playful.
It seems as if it ought to be joyful:
After all, if you are not extremely happy
about this huge thing you are doing,
then why are you doing it?
I am not asking you to pretend.
(Although pretending is not such a bad thing to do around a
little baby,
who sometimes gets very confused watching all of your faces
and trying to figure what they mean and whether you are all
right and whether I am all right.)
But what I am asking you to do is to make the giving of me
from one of you to the other a Very Official Thing,
because I don't want you to go back on it later.
That would hurt me a lot.
(I can't believe I am having to tell you this.)
And I am asking you all to show honor and love for
each other.

Finally, please don't ask me to pretend that I love
one of you more than the other.
Don't ask me to forget my birth mother or my birth father.
Don't ask me to think of my adoptive parents
as anything less than my real parents.

Don't ask me to not talk about things
because they make you feel uncomfortable.
For crying out loud, we were all there.
We all know what happened.
So how about we pry this thing open
and act a little more like all of us are in it together?

There are some things you need to just let happen:
Sometimes I will have the weirdest flashes
of what it feels like
to move around inside my birth mother.
Sometimes I will miss that.

Sometimes I will wonder why you,
my new parents,
don't smell or look or taste or act or feel like the people I grew
up with
(for the first nine or ten months of my life).
Some days I won't remember my birth mother at all.
That doesn't mean I am disloyal.
It just means I have got other fish to fry.

Actually, I wish that none of you would ever expect me
to prove my loyalty to you.
That is really not my job.
It is your job — all of you —
to pull yourselves together
so that you feel okay about yourselves
and you don't have to get me to work it out for you.
I can't fill up that part of you that is empty,
or scared,
or lonely,
or feels like you might lose me.

(Actually, I probably could do some of those things,
but I really don't want to. And it is not my job)
Please fill your own holes so you can help me be whole.

If you want to know what I am feeling —
or whether I am feeling — ask me.

See how I am sleeping.
What, and how, am I eating.
Do I look at you?
Do I let you cuddle me?
Or do I protect myself from the pain of losing you
by never letting myself have you in the first place?

As I grow up, please try very hard to let me be
an everyday kid.
And don't ever forget that I am not.
Forget all about where I came from.
But don't ever forget where I came from.
(This is a tall order, isn't it?)

Remember that if I see you —
my adoptive parents who now
feel like my real parents —fighting,
I am pretty likely to freak out.
After all, splits of any kind are a little bit
too familiar to me.

I may do some weird stuff like climbing inside your pajamas,
or only wanting to watch to watch TV in that mummy
sleeping bag you are going to give me for my fourth birthday,
even rolling myself up in rugs
and having you lie on top of me.
Because part of me really wishes that you could birth me,
or I could sort of be born in you.
(See what I mean about how you can't really ever
forget that I'm not an everyday kid?
And that I still want you to?)

And I might take some things from your dresser when I am
six,
and you might start to think I am a terrible thief.
Because I am adopted.
Because I have terrible genes from somewhere back there.
Remember: the biggest thing in my life
is to figure out how to make connections stick.
And sometimes the way I know how to do that is to hold onto
things
that belong to people I care about.
I don't mean to steal from you.
I mean to take you with me.

So, that's about it.
You asked me to tell you how it looks from down here
when you move me from one family to another.

I think you really meant it
when you asked me how all of you could do it just right for
me.
I want to tell you one more time that I'm glad you asked,
and I hope you won't be ticked off
when I tell you that is about freakin' time that you asked.
I know you all mean well. You probably always did.
But you haven't always acted so smart, and you have often
acted
as if I were not even here...and watching.
I'll take your having asked about this
as a sign that things are going to change for me and
all of my brothers and sister adoptees.
Thank you for your courage and your unselfishness.

I'll be seeing you around.
Forever.