



pact's

point of view

serving adopted children of color

## Being A Mommy - A Birth Parent Story

By Marta Barton

*This anthology of four essays written by Marta Barton over a four year period gives a view of the birth parent experience in the context of the evolution of feelings and spirit.*

### Being A Mommy

Ever since I was a little girl, I've dreamed of getting married and having children. Back then, my dolls were my babies. I named them, promising that I would someday give my children the same names. It seemed to be such a simple and painless way of life. But I'm not sure it's as simple as it seemed. And I'm positive that life is not painless.

On April 27, 1991, I gave birth to the most beautiful baby boy in the world. I placed that beautiful baby for adoption; he now lives with his adoptive family. Two years later, I am engaged to a wonderful man whom I love dearly. This is the beginning of my childhood dream of getting married and becoming a mommy.

Now that marriage and family are quickly becoming actual parts of my life, I am faced with the possibility of having another child. Will this be my second child or will it be my first? Searching for a place in my life for this new child has proved to be a seriously difficult issue. What will I tell my first child (with whom I have contact) when he sees his sibling remaining in his or her birth family? Will he truly understand why I chose not to parent him? What position will he hold in my heart and in his birth family after there is another child?

Being resented by my firstborn child is my greatest fear. In my heart and mind I have a strong loyalty to him. This loyalty is so strong that I often have feelings of guilt when I think about the joys of parenting another baby.

Being a mommy is a position I would die for. But do I deserve to have that most honorable title? Birth mother - this is my current title. I will hold this title forever; it pleases me to know that thanks to the evolution of the adoption process, I can be acknowledged as such.

I had thought it would be so simple: getting pregnant, giving birth, and the reward - being a mommy. But the thought of being pregnant again sends chills through my body. The fear of not being able to give my second everything he/she is entitled to is something that I cope with every day. What if I can't provide the love and stability my child needs?

I suppose every new parent shares these concerns. But I'm different. I once had the chance to prove to myself that I was capable of providing a child with these things, and I chose not to. Before I become pregnant again, I need to feel certain that I will not deprive my child of the love he/she so deserves.

Will I ever feel entitled to become a parent?

For a long time I believed I was the only person suffering these anxieties. I was afraid that if I revealed my feelings, people would immediately assume I regretted the adoption. But making the adoption plan for my son was no mistake, and I do not have any regrets. I used to believe that these feelings were punishment for "giving my baby away." But by finally opening up to friends, family, and other birth parents, I have discovered that I am not alone and I am not being punished by anyone. Even my son's adoptive parents have supported me.

I know that I will be able to overcome the obstacles I'm facing. I am positive that I'm fully capable of being a wonderful parent. And I look forward to that special day when I can officially be "mommy."

### A Journey of Self Discovery

I was on a train, moving at incredible speed. All of the passengers on this train were important people in my life, immediate family and close friends. I was desperately trying to find someone to share my secret, but no one would listen to me. Instead they yelled at me and shunned me, as if I had some dreadful, contagious disease... The train abruptly came to a screeching halt. My friend of 13 years boarded the train. As the train began to move again, I was desperately trying to tell her my secret. She said it was too late and I should have told her sooner. She could not have anything to do with me now... The train stopped again and she quickly got off. I followed her to her house and began banging on the door. She would not let me in. I got back on the train and continued to attempt to get someone to listen... Suddenly the floor turned to dirt and I could no longer find anywhere to stand. I was forced into another car and I began to cry. In this car stood a very strong and fearless man. He was the conductor of the train. He began to cry with me. I felt safe, secure and at ease. I realized that he would be the person to help me through this very difficult journey. The tears flowed harder and faster... and then I woke up.

Although this was just a dream, the tears were very real. I know this because my pillow was damp and my face was wet. I recorded this dream in my journal almost three years ago, just a few weeks after I gave birth to and placed my son for adoption. The train was my life journey, the conductor was me and the secret was my pregnancy, which I had hidden from the world.

My personal experience with adoption has truly been a journey of self-discovery, determination, courage, sadness, loss, grief, anguish. I could go on and on. Through all of this, I have become a much stronger person both spiritually and mentally. I came to the realization that I alone held the key to picking up the pieces of my life and making it once again whole and plentiful. After I had this very profound dream, I realized that a part of me would be gone forever, but I also knew that I could learn from my experience.

I know now that I can accomplish anything I set my mind to. This is a very simple realization, but it was something that I had doubted in myself before. I have learned, through my experience, the importance of having support from family and close friends. The value of having allies such as these cannot be compared to all the riches in the world. When I was pregnant and in crisis, I did not seek the support of my family and friends. Instead I shut them out and denied them access to my true feelings.

Since then, I have reopened the door to my family. One by one, I have revealed my secret to them, praying that the person I was telling wouldn't tell the next person before I myself had the chance to do so. Everyone was shocked by my news; to my surprise, I found I had done a great job of concealing the pregnancy. To this day, I wonder if they all really knew and were in denial because no one wanted to face the truth.

I kept the pregnancy from my family because I felt that they would not have given me the support I needed or wanted. I knew deep inside that if I told them about my secret, they may have convinced me to parent my son. They all tell me they would have responded differently. I have to admit that I do regret not telling my family. Maybe they would have supported my decision. Could it be that, had I had their support and love, the adoption would have been easier? I doubt it. But I could have shared the birth and the nine months with them. I would not have had to lead a double life for the year it took me to tell them that I had given birth to a baby boy and placed him for adoption.

My experience with adoption has made me see life through a brand new pair of glasses. My relationship with my family is more open and real. I feel that now I can talk to them about anything. I am no longer afraid to find out what they really think. I know now that I can take control of my life and shape and mold it in the way I want, in a way that I am comfortable and happy with.

### **Achieving Understanding**

Never, before the birth of my son, had I experienced such a gamut of emotions. Emotions ranging from the fear of giving birth, to the joy and elation of seeing my first-born, to the grief of relinquishing my child to adoption.

Adoption is a scary road to travel. But at the same time, it is an unforgettable experience filled with challenges and wonderful people to share it with. These are people who will remain in my life for years to come. Aside from the facilitators, therapists and lawyers, the adoptive family/birth family relationship is the most challenging.

The development of a relationship between the adoptive family and the birth family is an important part of the adoption process: what an understatement! Although developing this

relationship can be painful at times, I think it is important to have a strong bond with a lot of understanding. Getting to this point might be difficult, but I have found that once you are past the initial "getting to know you" stage, it becomes easier to be yourself and to express feelings more openly.

After relinquishing a child, a birth mother may have feelings of anger and resentment toward the adoptive parents. This is a natural reaction, but overcoming these feelings takes the effort of all involved: the birth parents, adoptive parents, and therapists.

My son's adoptive family and I have developed our relationship to a point where we can be open with each other and feel comfortable doing so. In the earlier stages of the adoption, I never thought I would have such a close relationship with my son's adoptive parents. But now I realize that it is important so that my son will have a healthy understanding of adoption and how he came to be.

The one question I continue to ask myself is, "What do I want out of this relationship with the adoptive parents?" I ponder this question often. Each time, I think of something new that I would like to achieve out of this bond.

The first and foremost thing I want to accomplish is a feeling of togetherness. I like to think of my son's adoptive family as my extended family. It is very important that we can all understand each other and work together as friends and allies. As an adopted child, my son will have many questions regarding his biological roots. But when he needs to know these things, I will be just a phone call away. And when the time comes for me to start a family of my own, I hope that he and his family can be included as part of my family.

Another thing we'll be working on is trust - a difficult task that I am sure will take much time and come much later in our relationship. The trust that I am speaking of is necessary so that my son and I can spend time together alone. I am positive that this will be very difficult for his adoptive parents, and I understand.

That's what developing a relationship is all about. Understanding.

### **The Perfect Mother**

I placed my son for adoption at birth, almost five years ago. Since then, I have married and had another son who is almost one. During my second pregnancy, I had the need to read every book on parenting that had ever been written and to subscribe to many parenting magazines. My husband and I took every class we could find — parenting classes, newborn care, breast feeding, sibling issues — you name it we took it. I'm sure many parents take similar classes, but I felt that I had to take these classes or else....

Back then, I didn't know why I felt this need. But after reading *Birthmothers; Women Who Have Relinquished Babies for Adoption Tell Their Stories*, a book by Merry Bloch Jones about birth mothers and their stories of relinquishment, I understood. The book forced me to look at my life in a different light. One section in particular struck me with shock. I was so amazed at the similarities with my life story, I could have sworn that the author was talking about me. It was about motherhood and the need to be perfect. Reading it, I realized that I, like the mother in the book, had to be sure I was going to be the perfect mother. I still have that need.

Since I work in the area of adoption, most of the people I come into contact with daily are aware that I am a birth mother. At work, when I'm talking to people on the phone, I wonder in the back of my mind what they must think about me, what assumptions and judgments are they making because they know that I am a birth mother. Do they think I'm a bad person because I "gave my baby away"? Do they wonder if I am a recovering drug addict, or an irresponsible teenager who didn't have enough sense not to get pregnant in first place? Maybe I should just start out my conversations by answering these questions, even though no one asked them!

But then again, that wouldn't make sense. So I do the next best thing I can: I present myself as confident, knowledgeable, and I try to make sure I don't say the wrong thing. When I am conducting workshops or conferences, I always make sure to let people know that I am married and I am parenting an infant son. Somehow this makes me feel better. It's like I'm gaining acceptance as a person. In society's eyes, marriage is acceptable; relinquishing a child is not. According to that "common wisdom," adopted people are the victims, adoptive parents are the saviors, and birth parents are irresponsible people who can't parent the children they birth. These are some harsh assumptions. Many of those who read this may not hold these views, but many people who have had no adoption education certainly do.

At home, I am the perfect mother — or at least I try to be. I am also the perfect wife and perfect hostess. Many times, I go out of my way to make things happen exactly as they should. My husband tries to point these things out in a diplomatic manner, but these are evidence of my need to feel accepted. If I do more than I have to, there is no room for mistakes. My need to take precise control over every aspect of my life sometimes feels obsessive. I have a hard time leaving my son at daycare, not just because of the common fears about daycare but because I have special reasons to hate leaving him. Once a week, my husband and I force ourselves to go out without our son. This is more difficult than it sounds; each time, I replay the day I left the hospital without my first son.

In my personal life, many people with whom I come into contact, including a substantial number of my family and friends, have no idea I am a birth parent. I choose to keep it a secret because I can't go through 'judgment day' every day. I don't want to go through my story again and again, explaining why I relinquished my son. When I recently told a friend that I had placed my son for adoption, she was obviously shocked. Telling her even that small bit of information drained me. Her first words were, "I could never do that." I couldn't respond to her statement. I shut down, and it was obvious to her that I did not want to talk about it anymore. So instead I began talking about the Gymboree class we had just left and about how wonderfully our children play together.

Many birth mothers probably have such experiences; I am sure I am not alone. Coming to terms with relinquishment is a life-long journey with new obstacles for us to face each day. Life presents birth parents with constant reminders — some negative, some positive — of the relinquishment. Many birth parents never have other children and never marry; many have secondary infertility. It is seldom the case that a birth parent can walk away from an adoption with no lingering legacies. But despite these reminders, challenges and difficult resolutions, I feel positive that I, along with other birth parents, can make our lives work in a way that is comfortable

## My Two Sons

The door closed and there I stood, my back against the door, tears flowing down my face like acid, melting my body. I fell to the floor. My body was so weak I felt as if I would never again be able to rise to my feet....

This was the night I said good-bye to my son. His adoptive parents had brought him over so that I could see him before I returned to Los Angeles. The visit was difficult and awkward. We ate dinner and talked a lot. We got to know each other a little better. My body was in the room, but my mind was somewhere else. I held my tiny baby in my arms. He seemed like such a stranger, an unfamiliar face I had never seen before. I had carried him in my body for nine long months. Why didn't I feel like I knew him? I thought I must be crazy. This was my child, my flesh and blood, I should have been feeling differently. I wondered if this was normal. Was I an awful person for not feeling comfortable with my own child?

During the nine months of pregnancy, I had tried not to think about the little person inside of me. It was the only way to get through those long days. I did not want to become attached to him. I thought it would make the adoption easier.

Five years later, I visit with my son, Adam, on a regular basis and I am parenting my 15-month-old, Malik. Now that I am parenting a child, I realize how much of Adam's life I have missed. I have missed feeding him, comforting him, holding and cuddling him, touching him, soothing his cries, all of the things that a mother shares with her child. The very things that make attachment possible.

During my pregnancy with Malik, I spoke to him daily. I shared my feelings with him, my hopes, dreams and fears. When he was born, I felt all of those things I never had a chance to experience with Adam. It was impossible not to think about Adam as I nursed. I fought with the feelings of remorse over Adam's placement. How could I have given up the wonderful experience of breastfeeding my child? When I gave Malik his first bath, I thought of a photo of Adam having a bath, soap bubbles on his head and a smile on his face. Whenever Malik had a "first," I would think of Adam and wonder what his "first" had been like.

Although I did not share with Adam many of the early attachment rituals that I shared with Malik, we have developed alternative ways of connecting. On occasion, I was invited to "baby-sit" Adam while his parents were gone. This gave us a chance to share fun games, silly stories and a few curious questions. Recently, we went on an excursion to a local pizzeria, just the two of us. For such a small excursion, it meant a lot to me. It was another chance for Adam and me to become more comfortable with each other. Another chance to share quality time together.

Adam is only five years old, but I think he also knows that there is special importance in our attachment to one another. Whenever Adam and I are together, I find myself looking for things we have in common: small mannerisms, expressions, likes or dislikes. Even though Adam and I have never lived together as mother and son, we will always share the common bond of our genes. When he is older, I hope he will appreciate the connections we have.

### Update

*Marta's two sons are both teens now. Marta and Malik live in Los Angeles while Adam and his adoptive parents live in Oregon. Both boys are only children in the family they live with.*