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The Best Support

by Carol Schaefer

If I had a fairy godmother's magical wand, I would touch it to the womb of every infertile woman to make her fertile and able to create the child she longs for. I would touch it to the forehead of every woman pregnant with a baby she feels unable to raise, so that she can find all the emotional and financial support she needs to keep her baby.

To accept for either woman any other solution is to come to motherhood out of great, irreparable loss. All support becomes false until we honor this truth. Honoring this truth creates magic.

My son was born in a Catholic Home for Unwed Mothers in 1966. I gave birth surrounded by strangers. Fortunately I was able to be with my son for his first two days. I was then asked by everyone I knewto walk out of that hospital without my son. For years, I was isolated in my grief. Millions of mothers shared my fate.

Little by little, support groups began to form in the '70s, as women tiptoed out of the woods, still pariahs, whispering in awe to each other: "You gave up a baby, too? The pain has never gone away for you either? I have never had any more children. You, too? Yes, I have been suicidal. Much of my memory is gone. I have been sober three years now. You haven't had a decent relationship since that time either? You are searching? Do you mean that it is possible to some day see our children again, to know they are alive and well? You mean I am a Mother?" And then the tears finally came.

For the longest time, we were the blind leading the blind. We were not supposed to have reacted this way. Text books still described us as sexual deviants. Therapists didn't have a clue. Only we could heal each other, by listening to each other's stories.

Our first support came indirectly, with the new understanding of the Vietnam Vet's "post-traumatic stress syndrome". Their symptoms were ours. They, too, found it impossible to live a lie in order to try to fit back into society. The same society that had declared us noble and unselfish when we gave our babies to a "better" family did not want to hear of our pain, made us feel like criminals when we wanted to find our children again. Our only hope was that our children had been given all that had been promised. But we did not know.

Open adoption is supposed to solve all of the problems we "old birth mothers" had. Women considering open adoption have read The Other Mother, about the way adoption was twenty years ago, and are certain their fate will not be the same as ours. But some of the support offered now to birth mothers may unintentionally create the same pain, or worse.

Just as wrong as the advice we were given to "go on with our lives and pretend it (our child) never happened" is the advice that "this decision to give up your baby cannot be made with your heart; it must be made with your head." These days, women are encouraged to make their decisions about adoption before the baby is born.

But the baby becomes real only after it is born. Therefore, no true and informed decision can be made before then. If a mother's heart longs for her to keep her child, she must honor this longing or live forever separated not just from her child but from her heart as well. How many times a day do our minds play tricks on us, lulling us into false beliefs? How many times does our heart lie? Wise decisions cannot be made without examining our hearts.

Honest support pays honor to the time it takes a mother to make a wise decision. Until her baby is actually gone from her, a mother can only imagine what it will feel like. Even a woman with ten children will not really know the pain and sorrow until she actually experiences the loss. The emotional experience of giving birth, coupled with the physical hormonal changes and stresses, leave her in an incredibly vulnerable state. In contrast, it's rare that a person is asked to make life decisions right after undergoing major surgery.

It must be remembered that a mother is not a "birth mother" until she signs the papers. Using that term prematurely subtly erodes her decision-making power.

If her wisest choice is relinquishment — and hopefully an open adoption — she will need support of other mothers who share her experience. However, her most vital source of support is her child's adoptive mother. In fact, there are many ways in which they can be the best source of support for each other.

By choosing one mother over the other so as to keep the baby whole, Solomon actually left us a divisive legacy. By not challenging both women to develop greater maturity, his advice encourages us to still believe women are not sufficiently courageous and compassionate to share equal billing in nurturing the life of a child. I believe we are.

If we can recognize and retain our right to be "mother," without being qualified as "birth" and "adoptive," then our children don't have to say they are adopted (and thus, different). They are simply blessed with two mothers.

Carol Schaefer is the author of The Other Mother, A Woman's Love For The Child She Gave Up For Adoption, which is now available in paperback.