



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in *Pact's Point of View* © 1993 & 1997

Do not reprint without permission.

A Birth Grandparents Perspective Gone Too Soon

by Mary Stephenson

A Birth Grandparent's Perspective 1992

Your daughter is pregnant. It is not the joyous occasion you anticipated somewhere down the road, but a here-and-now reality. Your family feels wrung dry. You've run the gamut emotionally, passing through stages as predictable as those that accompany other crises: shock, sorrow, despair, even anger. The expectant parents are frightened and bewildered (even though they may put up a brave front), and are asking you for reassurance and solutions.

Soon you dry your tears and face the question which looms on the horizon like a thunderhead. How can you help your daughter make a wise decision so that both her life and the life of the baby will reach their full potential?

Like most pregnant teens, my daughter was ill-equipped for motherhood. Only 16 and a junior in high school, she had no skills and no chance of finding meaningful employment. Having just joined the work force, I found myself unwilling to give up a challenging job and step into the role of "back-up Mom" while she finished high school. Which left us with one other choice. Hesitantly, I raised the subject of adoption.

"I can't do it," she sobbed. "How can I give my baby away to strangers and never see it again?" My tears joined hers. Neither of us could imagine such a thing.

Then by luck or magic or twist of fate, we heard from a friend about a different kind of adoption, an open process where the birth parents and the adopting parents were not strangers but friends, a team working together. My daughter smiled for the first time in days and said she'd like to know more. We contacted an open adoption agency and made an appointment.

Before I knew it, my daughter had found the "perfect couple" to raise her child. They hit it off immediately and began the bonding process, which took like super glue.

Suddenly I was reduced to the role of third wheel, which aroused only feelings of euphoria and gratitude as a huge weight eased off my shoulders. The thunderheads on the horizon had been transformed into rainbows. But as I soon learned, I should not have put my umbrella away so quickly, for the critics and prophets of doom were about to dump buckets on our parade.

Enter my daughter's peer group gooning and cooing about how cute babies are and how much fun. Boy, if they were pregnant they would never never give their very own baby away to people they didn't even know. Brushing aside explanations of how the open process works, they tried to convince my daughter that "those people" were just being nice so she would hand over her kid. Fortunately, the glue bonding my daughter to "her couple," along with the trust she felt for her counselor, proved stronger than advice from flaky friends. There are many girls who are not so lucky. In fact, the majority of pregnant teens keep their babies. Adoption is not the "in" thing to do.

For the rest of the world, adoption (the old-fashioned kind) is still considered the best solution to one of life's stickiest problems. Most think the new, open forum is irresponsible, crazy, dumb, risky, plus an assortment of other uncomplimentary adjectives. At first, I was angry and resentful that others could not see the wisdom of my daughter's choice, that they offered not encouragement, but criticism.

"How can you allow someone else to raise your own grandchild? After all, it's your flesh and blood."

"Did you daughter really want to do this?"

"It will be too confusing for the baby, having two sets of parents, plus all the grandparents, aunts and uncles."

"It's too risky. If the birth mother knows where her baby is, she can just go and get it."

"How can a birth mother get her life back together if she is still connected to her baby? She should put the experience behind her, forget about the baby and move forward."

"What happens when the baby grows up to be a teenager and gets angry with the adoptive parents and wants to run away and live with the birth mother?"

In the beginning, I was very much on the defensive as I answered the critics, hoping, I suppose, to win converts. But then I realized that open adoption is no different from any other controversial issue. Some will say "yea" and some will say "nay."

The older generation I found to be mostly on the "nay" side of the fence while the younger, more liberal minded were apt to say, "how interesting, tell me more." My husband, who travels around the country in his job, learned that in certain localities where the words "teenage pregnancy" still cause shock waves, it was prudent to remain mum about our open adoption saga. Even family members whom you count on to be supportive in times of crisis may surprise you with their negative reaction. My mother, who learned of our family crisis after the fact and over the long distance telephone, thought I was making up stories to get attention.

"What crazy stuff is Mary talking about?" she asked my father. "Adoptions can't be open. I don't believe a word."

I reasoned that my mother was elderly and in failing health and was not able to embrace new concepts, but what excuse could I offer for my brother-in-law's reaction? The father of two adopted children, he scoffed at the notion of the parties involved in an adoption knowing each other, liking each other, perhaps even forging bonds. "How can a child know who he is with all those extra people cluttering up the landscape?" he asked. I had no ready answer, just a deep conviction that a child's life could only be enriched by the love and support of those "extra people."

My brother-in-law declared adamantly and self-righteously that his two adopted children, a son and daughter, were not the least bit interested in the "real" parents. I would win no converts here. But life sometimes takes unexpected turns. When my niece Vicki was 25, she decided to do something about the unfinished business in her life. "I can't go forward until I know where I've been," she told me. "I'm going to find my birth parents." She contacted a adoption registry and, to her joy, found that her birth mother had also begun to search. They met in London and talked non-stop for two days. When Vicki returned home and broke the news her parents, they offered their full support and, in fact, phoned birth mother Kay, inviting her to be guest in their home on an upcoming visit. "You're in the middle of an open adoption," I teased my brother-in-law. "Even if you did arrive by the back door."

This year, my granddaughter will celebrate her 7th birthday. My husband and I cherish our roles as grandparents to this lively child and her sister, also part of another open adoption. My daughter finished high school and junior college, married a terrific guy and is now a preschool teacher. She says that giving her daughter up for adoption was the hardest thing and the best thing she ever did. She thanks me for hanging tough and keeping her focused. That was the hardest and best thing I ever did.

Your pregnant daughter is looking to you to strength and support. Don't clutter up this landscape with unsolicited advice from friends, family or the man on the street. Remember, you are an intelligent, informed person. You did not pluck the concept of an open adoption out of thin air. You and your daughter, with the help of professionals in the field, have explored the "whys" and "wherefores" and the "who ifs." Don't explain or defend your decision. The "nay sayers" never listen anyway.

Gone Too Soon 1997

This year Karen McNamee, who placed her baby in an open adoption 10 years ago, died. Her family and that of the adoptive parents joined together to become a model of the wonderful extended family created by open adoption. Karen gladly shared her adoption story with all who knew her, and with her mother, gave endless hours of volunteer time in support of complete openness in adoption. How our lives can change in the space of a decade.

Ten years ago, my daughter was a 17-year-old who found herself in an "unintended pregnancy." Not the joyous event I had anticipated someday down the road, but a crisis! How would my daughter care for a child without even a high school diploma to her credit? Would she marry the father? Not likely, especially since he had denied paternity. Was it my place as grandma to jump into the breach and "make it all better"? That was an option with few merits.

But Karen began to focus on the most important person in this muddle: the baby. That she had been foolish, young, inexperienced and just downright stupid enough to allow herself to get pregnant, she acknowledged with an honesty that belied her years. What could she do to make sure that her child would have the opportunity to reach her full potential? I think I was the first to mention the word "adoption." Knowing nothing of the new trends in adoption practice, an open forum for all with no arbitrary secrets, I supposed that Karen's adoption would proceed along traditional lines. I am ashamed to admit that this is what I hoped would happen. Again, life takes strange turns. A friend whom I phoned for support and comfort clued me in about "open adoption," and when Karen discovered that she could become an active participant in the adoption process, she said, "If I'm going to do this, it's got to be open."

I am not an adoption professional, although I claim personal knowledge of the process. I have been more than willing over the years to sit on panels and attend workshops in order to help potential adoptive parents embrace, rather than fear, an honest open process. I was honored that the Independent Adoption Center chose to dedicate a conference to my daughter's memory and to include me in a round-table forum fielding questions from adoption counselors.

As I wandered around the conference hall trying to stem the tears that threatened to overwhelm me, I kept asking myself why my daughter had to die at age 27. She was so young, so honest and generous and good. I glanced at the program and noticed a workshop on grieving. Just what I needed to pull myself together and learn to cope, not just for the day but for all the months and years to come. The speaker, John James, co-author of *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, proved to be both dynamic and pragmatic. At times, I thought he was speaking directly to me. As I glanced around the room, I concluded there was more than a grain of truth to my perception, for what could he be saying to professional counselors that they did not already know? As a speaker at an adoption conference, why wasn't he focusing on the very specific grief that a birth mother feels when the baby to whom she has given birth goes home with the adoptive parents? Is grief generic, I wondered? As I grieve the death of my daughter, will I gain a better understanding of the pain she suffered so many years ago?

Ever since the conference, I have been thinking about the grief that hit my daughter like a jackhammer after her daughter was gone. The counselors at the adoption center had told us to expect it, but we had dismissed their advice. The adopting parents were perfect, the birth mother was strong and

capable. Everyone likes everybody else, bonding together like Velcro to a shag rug. What could be more perfect? Well, not quite.

Adoption grief is unique. Everyone — except the birth mother — is gloriously happy. The adopting couple have a child to call their own. The professionals feel joy at the completion of a successful adoption. My husband and I were ecstatic at the prospect of our daughter reclaiming her life, whatever that was supposed to mean. Didn't we realize that nothing would ever be the same again? We took her on a short trip to help her "get over it." Getting over it did not come easily or quickly.

Ten years ago, open adoption was even more controversial than it is today. I don't know how or why Karen fell into the role of advocate for this new way of doing things. Did she make a conscious decision to become proactive for open adoption? Probably not. I remember her being asked to serve on a panel discussion. She responded with enthusiasm and people in turn responded to her. And so she was called again and again. Sharing her story with others helped bring closure and gave her the strength to come to terms with her loss. "Giving up my daughter for adoption was the hardest thing I ever did," she told a television reporter. "The hardest thing, but the best thing."

As the years passed, Karen remained in close contact with the adoptive family. But as is the case in most every family, the intense emotions that accompany the birth of a baby soften and dissipate in time. The role of birth mother became a part, not the central focus, of her life. We enjoyed birthdays,

Christmas and outings together as a large extended family which included not only Karen, her husband, parents, brothers and sister, and her daughter's adoptive family but the family of another adopted daughter as well. Our common ground was the love we felt for two special little girls. Nothing else was necessary.

Karen continued to work on adoption workshops until finally the day arrived when she knew it was time to pass the torch to a new generation of birth mothers. "There are lots of birth mothers who need to do what I did," she said. "And I need to get on with my life. I've got so much to do — a husband, a house and a new career."

Sadly, Karen never got to realize all her dreams. Diagnosed with leukemia, she fought bravely through radiation, chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant. She relapsed and died a year to the day from first diagnosis. Through it all, the woman who adopted her child so many years ago was at her side donating blood and platelets, offering love and encouragement.

At the conference, Karen was cited as a shining example of why adoptions must be open, fully open — with no half measures! What if the adoption had been closed? What if this child had one day gone on a search only to discover her birth mother had died? What unnecessary heartbreak. What a senseless waste. I keep coming back to a conversation Karen had with her daughter a few weeks before her death: "I'm glad you found my Mom for me," she said. "I'm glad I did too," Karen answered.

Mary Stephenson is the author of [My Child Is A Mother](#). She and her husband live in Walnut Creek, CA. The one-year anniversary of Karen's death was approaching when the article [Gone Too Soon](#) was written.