

Adoption Stories

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By Annette Baran

During the past month, three mothers have shared with me their dilemmas with their daughters of color, who range in age from 14 to 21. In two of these three cases, these mothers asked for my professional opinion. The third wanted to update me on a saga that goes back almost two decades, and we enjoyed laughing and crying together as we have in the past. I hope their stories are helpful to you.

ALICE AND BETTY

Alice, a preschool teacher and a warm and emotionally effusive single parent adopted Betty at age five in Mexico. Betty, a pretty girl with vivid dark eyes and warm olive skin, had lived most of her life in an orphanage, although Alice was told that her birth mother visited often in the early years. When adoption became a possibility, Betty was moved to the home of the adoption attorney's mother, where the child was apparently lonely and unhappy and may have been physically mistreated for many months. She left that foster home without any show of feeling and seemed to adjust to her new parent and new country easily. There was no post-placement contact with the orphanage or staff. The only information Alice has about Betty's history came from the attorney, and more recently from Betty who is having dreams about her childhood. She often writes her adoptive mother notes and letters rather than engaging in verbal exchange. Betty lost her fluent Spanish very quickly after the adoption, and resists learning it again in school. Alice tried to align herself with a group of parents with Latin inter-country adoptions, but the group soon disintegrated because of lack of interest.

Betty, at age 14, has a somewhat sullen, angry demeanor and is difficult to reach. Recently, she announced that she wanted to go to Mexico to find her birth family. Alice was unprepared for this, since Betty had always insisted she had no interest in her background despite Alice's efforts to get her to talk about it.

Recently they began joint therapy to learn to communicate and hear each other better. Betty is also seeing her own counselor to explore feelings she cannot share with mother. Alice says she is comfortable with the idea of Betty reconnecting with her roots, although she admits being somewhat fearful that her daughter may be rejected or disappointed. We began working on how Alice can help in her daughter's healing process.

Betty is unrealistic and operates on an impetuous level without much ability to persevere at tasks, but this behavior is part of her adolescence and is quite normal. Many adolescent adopted people become very excited about searching, but few can work through difficult and disappointing delays and rejections. In this case, Alice can help Betty communicate with the orphanage and the administrator to locate records, pictures, and nuns who may remember the child and how she lived there. She was probably

baptized in one of the village churches, where the record would still exist. She should be able to locate her birth family, including grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles. She may have a reason now to learn her mother tongue once again, because it will represent a gain, not a loss, as it once did. Betty is young, but old enough to start back on the road to integrating her dual identity. For her mental health, self perception and future happiness, she needs to be given every opportunity to gain back what should never have been removed. On that road, she needs the help of a sensitive therapist who understands adoption issues and how they impact on the individual.

CAROL AND DONNA

Carol is a volatile, immature divorced woman who teaches elementary school in an urban center. About nine years ago she met Donna, a student in the next classroom. Donna was a ward of the court, living in a foster home after being removed from an abusive and neglectful family situation. Slight, adorable, exotic and of mixed racial and ethnic heritage, Donna appealed to a deep emotional chord in childless Carol. She convinced her husband that they should petition to adopt this child. Perhaps she also hoped that the child would revitalize their relationship. It did not. Their marriage broke up before the adoption was finalized and Carol completed the adoption as a single parent.

Carol felt so sad about Donna's past that she wanted to wipe out the bad years, offer a new life, and heal her with intense love and understanding. Toward that goal, she terminated contact with the foster parents and was adamant about ending any further visitation with relatives. A number of times over the ensuing years, birth family members attempted to reinstate communication and Carol became overwrought. She didn't trust any of "those people" because some of them had hurt her little girl both emotionally and physically. She felt that meeting siblings or grandparents might lead to other potentially dangerous situations and could undermine their mother/daughter relationship. Carol raised Donna in a Jewish environment, sending her to religious school, summer camps, and having her bat mitzvah.

Donna's problems were acceptable to Carol when she was still a little girl, but delinquency in adolescence is harder to accept. Lying, stealing, and other anti-social behavior is now a major problem in this family. Although Donna and Carol have been in and out of psychotherapy throughout the years, neither appears to have benefited much. Mother is more hysterical, and daughter is more delinquent. During this past year, Donna has stolen money from purses at big family weddings, Thanksgivings, Passover seders and funeral wakes. She is extremely sorry and promises to reform each time. The last episode involved a group tour to Israel, where shortly after arrival, the leader had to send her home because of her stealing. Donna, now 16 years old, is

in a psychiatric inpatient unit for diagnostic evaluation and future therapeutic planning.

I am worried about Donna's future. We don't understand what it is like for the Donnas of the world to lose their main stem despite its spiny sections. Donna's stealing may be her way of trying to call attention to her feelings of alienation, isolation and emptiness. Donna was mistreated and was correctly removed from a bad environment. Nonetheless, Donna also needed to know that she could keep some contact with her birth family. With monitored visits, parts of Donna's family can be important and provide health giving elements in her life. Without such considerations, I worry about Donna's ability to grow as whole person.

ELLEN AND FIONA

I had known Ellen's parents socially, but I first met Ellen and her husband Gil twenty years ago when they consulted me about adopting Fiona, whose mother, Hilda, was their friend and co-protester during the turbulent free speech movement. Although still radical in their politics and life style, Ellen and Gil were returning to a more traditional life. They had married, taken professional positions, and made plans to have children. It was at this time that Hilda asked Ellen and Gil to adopt her 14-month-old biracial child, Fiona. Fiona, who was already living with them, was a most appealing toddler, with huge round dark eyes, gold brown curly hair and matching skin. It was a totally seductive situation. Hilda trusted them to be the good parents she wanted for the child she felt unable to rear. This request appealed to their most basic humanitarian instincts. An open adoption arrangement with Hilda fit into the scheme and offered no concern. The future for them as a family seemed perfect. They came to see me only because Ellen's parents had concerns and insisted. We all agreed there was no point in trying to anticipate problems, but that I would be available to them whenever they needed me.

Indeed, they felt the need to consult me in the years that ensued. They gave birth to a male child, Peter, within two years, and their attempt to become an integrated stable family floundered on many levels. Fiona was hyperactive, angry and difficult. The marriage frayed badly. Gil wanted the freedom and structureless existence of his pre-family days. Ellen needed stability for herself and the children. Ellen was attached to Fiona but aware of the differences in her relationship with the two children.

Hilda came in and out of their life, sometimes too much, often too little, with no predictability. Gil left the family home to live in a trailer in the mountains, taking the children on visits whenever it suited him. Ellen now could not count on either Hilda or Gil. She supported herself and the children by teaching at a private girl's high school.

As Fiona approached adolescence, she became more difficult, exhibiting asocial behavior and drug and alcohol dependency. In the middle of this turmoil, Gil became ill with pancreatic cancer and died after a short illness. During the final months, the family regrouped as a meaningful emotional unit. This intense experience was useful in the acute mourning phase, permitting authentic communication between Ellen and the children. All of the old radicals, including Hilda, gathered around their dying comrade, which not only offered a support system for the family, but reunited Hilda with both Fiona and Ellen.

In the years that have passed since Gil's death, Fiona and Ellen have weathered numerous crises and Hilda has remained in the picture. Now an adult, Fiona is the mother of a three-year-old girl and lives with the child's father in a conflictual but semi-stable relationship. They live near Hilda, who is now conventionally middle-class, monogamous with a non-political husband and a ten-year-old daughter.

Fiona works as a topless go-go dancer, and is considered one of the most responsible employees in the club. Ellen, still teaching, is getting another advanced degree and looking forward to becoming a full-time psychotherapist. Recently, Ellen visited Hilda and Fiona. She attended one of Fiona's nightly performances, but couldn't get Hilda to accompany her. Hilda was too embarrassed and uncomfortable at the prospect. Ellen thought Fiona was the best dancer in the group.

Is there a lesson in this last case? Not one, but many - too many to enumerate. A major theme for Ellen is Hilda's lifelong importance to Fiona and to herself as well. Fiona many not be everybody's idea of a success story, but she is, on her terms, a responsible mother, daughter, employee and common-law wife. Being able at crucial times to share the burden or rearing Fiona with Hilda has meant a great deal to Ellen. For Fiona, it has helped her find ports in the storm and hope for the future. Ellen believes in open adoption without reservation. She even believes that a guardianship open placement might be more beneficial than adoption in many situations.

SUMMARY

My point of view is hardly subtle. The three cases are offered to support and substantiate my belief that adoption must maintain root relationships. All adopted people feel alienated and disconnected to a greater or lesser degree. All adopted people feel a sense of rejection because someone "gave them away." To adopted children, this loss translates into an internalized sense of personal badness; they feel on some level that they have caused their own abandonment. For adopted people to feel and know clearly that the birth parent or parents cared and continue to care ABOUT them but cannot care FOR them would help lessen that feeling of abandonment. Having the birth parents available is a way of demonstrating that caring.