

Open Adoption Birthparent



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DEALING WITH THE GRIEF OF ADOPTION: PART 2

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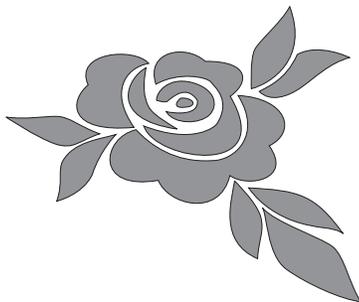
by Brenda Romanchik

Successfully resolving the loss of a child to adoption is not an easy process. It requires us to let go of our role as our children's parents and define what being a birthparent means. It calls us to examine and identify what the loss means to us, its effect on our life, and how we will fit it into the new life we must create for ourselves. It is further complicated by the fact that while we must allow ourselves to feel the pain of separation, we are seeking to forge new relationships with our child and their adoptive parents.

The first step towards resolving any loss is to acknowledge the loss and come to an understanding of what it means to you. For birthparents in open adoptions the loss can most purely be defined as losing the parental role. For at least three months after my son, Matthew, was born I struggled with putting that definition into words. Emotionally, I knew that I had lost something very precious to me. My body and soul were responding to the loss as if it were a death. Intellectually, however, all I could see was that he was

still a part of my life, that I would be able to see him, that he would come to know me and have a relationship with me.

Like many birthparents, I was totally unprepared for the emotional impact of no longer being my son's



"Mom," despite all the information I received before I relinquished. A lot of what I was feeling was a profound loneliness.

During my pregnancy I spent a lot of time just "communicating" with my son, feeling him kick, watching him move, talking to him. After he left with his adoptive parents I felt so deeply alone. So much of my energy had gone into nurturing him that his absence left a tremendous void. For me, the loss was further complicated by the fact that I never thought of myself as "mommy material". I was overwhelmed by the maternal feelings I was experiencing, giving my loss an

added dimension I was not prepared for.

For other birthparents the meaning may be different depending on their circumstances and values. Birthparents, for example, who have always included parenting in their future plans, may find the deeper meaning of their loss to include the shattering of how they always dreamed their first child would be born. The loss of this dream is another loss that must be dealt with in addition to the loss of their child to adoption, because it is a part of how they see themselves.

Birthparents who are already parenting children, are also making a major shift in their self image. They simultaneously have the responsibility of parenting one child, while not parenting another. For these birthparents, who already have experience in directly caring for a child, losing the role of parent can be difficult and sometimes confusing. This is especially true for birthparents who find differences in the parenting styles of themselves and their child's adoptive parents. These birthparents also have the additional responsibility of helping the children they



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are parenting understand and cope with the adoption. This includes not only helping the child through the grieving process, but educating those that have contact with the child.

Another aspect of defining our loss is to look beyond the loss of our child to adoption to the secondary losses that may have occurred as a result. Matthew was born two weeks after the start of the new university semester, so I was unable to re-

sume classes right away. Additionally, I was fired from my job and forced to move back in with my parents. The multiple losses of school, work, and independence certainly added to my grieving process.

Other secondary losses may include losing friends who are not supportive of our decisions, dealing with the disapproval of family members or even feeling the loss of a more carefree kind of life. I am reminded of a conversation with a birthmother whose son was only seven months old at the time. She kept on repeating, "What about me? These are supposed to be the best times of my life, instead all I feel is hurt."

Knowing and understanding your losses, will,

at first, be very painful. Though it may seem to us to be overwhelming, pain plays a very important part in the grieving process and needs to be fully experienced if we are to move on to resolve our loss. It enables us to release our tears, to feel our empty arms, to acknowledge the dull ache in our chests.

While experiencing

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the pain of loss is difficult, minimizing or denying its existence for an extended period of time is very unhealthy. It will not make the pain go away, and will increase your suffering. Buried grief can cause a multitude of problems, excluding psychosomatic illnesses, anxiety, as well as affecting our personal relationships. To fully resolve the loss of our children through adoption, this pain must be felt. Only then will you be able to leave most of it behind.

It is important to note that you do not need to "live" with your grief twenty-four hours a day in order to successfully resolve your loss. Taking breaks from thinking and experiencing your pain is a healthy thing

to do. Setting your grief aside to escape into a good book, watch a funny movie, or go out for a really great meal, will give you time to recharge as well as remind you of life's pleasures when all seems bleak.

Resolving grief is not only about understanding and accepting what we have lost, and feeling the pain, it's also about integrating that loss into our lives.

This means redefining our relationship with our child from caregiver to birthparent. It may seem, in the

midst of our pain, that we have lost everything. Even seeing our children may initially be more painful than the joyous experience we hoped it would be. Contact may seem only to serve to remind us of our loss. It is important to remember that, though dramatically altered, a relationship still exists between us and our children as their birthparents.

Feeling comfortable as a birthparent will not be a simple task. There are no role models to go by, and there is often resistance from family and friends. Additionally, it may be difficult to see the importance of your role in your child's life while they are very young and not capable of having a direct relationship with you. In determining your role, do



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not underestimate what a birthparent's involvement can mean to your child. You are a source of information, surely; but your involvement, even when the child is an infant, also communicates that they are loved and accepted by you, despite the fact that you are not parenting them.

One of the most frequently asked questions I get is what my relationship with Matthew compares to. Does he see me as an aunt or close friend of the family? Everyone wants a definition that they can relate to and feel comfortable with.

Yet I am not his aunt, and while I certainly feel as though I am a close friend of the family, my relationship to him alone can only be described as being his birthmother. There are no comparisons to be made. In being a part of his creation, in nurturing him the months before his birth, and in the days after, I am to him what no other can be.

How will you know when you have successfully resolved your loss? There are a number of signs. If the relationships with your child and their adoptive parents are

stable, you will find a certain comfort in being your child's birthparent. You will be able to talk about them with some degree of ease, and you will feel secure of your place in their lives. Over time, you will find you have developed traditions and routines that come naturally to all of you.

Not all open adoption matches are made in heaven. There may be situations where the adoptive parents are less than cooperative or there are personality

You will find that, in developing a relationship with your child as his or her birthparent, all has not been completely lost.

clashes. If the relationships are less than what you expected them to be, or strained in some way, resolution will mean you will have come to accept the realities of the situation and have developed strategies on how to handle it. This includes finding a way to have a meaningful relationship with your child in spite of the circumstances, and dealing in a healthy way with the anger you may feel over being in an undesirable position. In brief, your relationships with your child and his adoptive family will become a familiar part of your life. That does not al-

ways mean you will always be completely at ease with it, but it will no longer be your main focus as you live from day to day.

Post Grieving Issues

Resolving loss does not mean you will never again grieve not being parent to your child. We never fully leave the pain behind us. There will always be times in our lives where we are revisited by our grief. Times when the battle scars of grieving will make

their presence known to us. They may be situations that catch us by surprise, or significant anniversaries or events that trigger our memories.

Even happy events, such as the birth of other children in your circle of family and friends, weddings, and family reunions may bring with them pangs of grief for what we are not able to share with our children. Milestones in the lives of our children may also remind us of our loss. The first day of school, the first date, graduations, and weddings, even if we are able to participate in some way, may make us aware of our altered role. That does not necessarily mean that we will view these events through a vale of tears,



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rather, through our gladness there may come the dull ache of what might have been.

New loss also has a tendency to remind us of previous losses. After my second miscarriage, I had a particularly hard time in grieving for the loss of that child. It was hard for me to understand why it was so difficult since, on the surface, the circumstances of my situation were not as extreme as with my first miscarriage. The first miscarriage occurred during the fifth month of my pregnancy, in a foreign country and with a number of physical complications. My second miscarriage occurred at 8 weeks without the physical problems. I finally realized that what I was responding to was not only the loss of what would have been my fourth child, but all the pregnancy losses that had come before it, including the loss of my son to adoption.

There are a number of other situations where you may acutely feel the loss of your child to adoption. For those who have not fully resolved the guilt and shame they may feel in not parenting their child, the decision to marry or have subsequent children or her birthparent can be the cause of anxiety or even crisis. Three years after my husband and I were married we began

discussing the possibility of having children. These initial discussions sent me into a tailspin of anxiety and depression that took me a number of months to connect with my adoption experience. I felt unworthy to parent, because I had given the privilege of parenting my first born to someone else. It took some intensive counseling and introspection for me to get to the point where I could see myself in the role of parent.

The fear of more, or greater, loss may also be a part of the post grieving experience. In the effort to protect ourselves from further loss we may be extremely cautious about getting into intimate relationships or having other children. Or you may find yourself feeling overprotective of the children you are parenting. You also may worry about losing those you love in some way. While all of the responses are normal, they can be harmful if they begin to adversely affect your life. It is important that we see these fears in light of our loss and do our best to overcome them. Allowing ourselves to be controlled by our fears will only hurt ourselves and those around us by not permitting us to live as fully as we might.

There is no doubt that losing a child to adoption is a life altering experience. With resolution, however,

you can find some degree of peace and understanding. You will also find that, in developing a relationship with your child as his/her birthparent, all has not been completely lost. While there still may be times of grieving, there will also be joy in what you are able to have together.

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