

Acknowledging Open Adoption

By Daniel Lange, LCSW

Adoption is an intriguing subject area for a variety of reasons. People in the United States adopt more children than any other country in the world. The fee for adoption has escalated from \$20,000 to up to \$50,000. The average age range for birth moms making adoption plans is 19 to 23 years old and may already have one or two children. Approximately 2% of our population is adopted.

Until recent years, adoption was veiled in secrecy and the traditional practice of closed adoption was not questioned. However, due to increased pressure by adult adoptees, birth parents and adoption advocates, the practice of openness is being embraced by agencies as standard practice. Open adoption includes the mutual exchange of full identities prior to finalization of adoption and the right to continuing contact of all parties involved. Openness and honesty lead to a healthier and psychologically sounder adoption practice.

Having worked extensively in adoption, it is my conviction that open adoption needs to be the prevailing practice in all independent and agency facilitated adoptions. Children do much better when they have information about their biological parents and some contact with them. It becomes less threatening for the adoptive parents, and openness promotes respect for the adoptee's dual heritage including both the birth parents and the adoptive parents.

Adoptive persons, even in early childhood, have a need to understand why the adoption took place and whom they resemble. They struggle with issues of identity, rejection, grief and abandonment. They seek answers to their questions and their curiosity is normal. Unless you are adopted, you take for granted your biological history and the sense of personal security this provides.

A fundamental component of open adoption is that the choices and control are in the hands of the adoptive parents and birth parents, not social workers or other intermediaries. In letting go of control, adoption professionals have a more important role to play, which includes education, counseling and support. It is a healthier experience when the birth parents and adoptive parents are in direct contact with each other because it is their adoption.

All parties benefit in open adoption. For the child, open adoption provides answers to questions on an ongoing basis. It allows birth parents to work through their feelings of grief more quickly. Adoptive parents are supported and encouraged by the birth parents in their new role as parents. The frequency and nature of their communication may vary during different times and steps in their lives, depending on needs and the quality of the established relationship. The goal of openness is to minimize loss and maintain connections.

Adoption in any form has its' share of pain and fear. There is the temptation to understate or even deny the losses of adoption. However, an honest form of adoption recognizes that it is better for the pain to be acknowledged and the losses grieved. There is recognition that loss is inevitably accompanied by opportunities for redefinition and growth. Open adoption does not do away with the necessity of grief and loss work for the birth parents. Adoptive families are able to see and feel the grief of the birth family. Sensitivity and appreciation of this is essential in bringing the adoption triad together: the adoptee, birth parents and adoptive parents.

Moses was the first adoptee in history. We now have a Baby Moses Law, which has been enacted in 42 states, including Wisconsin. This legislation allows parents to leave their baby at a hospital, fire station, medical clinic, or similar designated location without fear of prosecution. While this does save the lives of babies, it also prevents these abandoned children from learning their identity. As they become adults, many will experience additional loss and grieving because they can never know what most of us take for granted, knowledge of our biological heritage. Laws need to change in which there is respect for both giving life and giving identity. Giving identity gives people their human dignity.

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