MUSINGS

Adoption

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I am one of those baby-boomers who "forgot to have children" until my early forties. Once we began trying, I was amazed, then distraught, when pregnancy didn't happen as it had, unplanned, when I was thirty, the very first time the birth control barrier was down. Susan Sarandon, exactly my age, was radiantly pregnant; in fact, it seemed that every movie star of my generation was. *People* magazine was celebrating: "It's never too late!" So I was startled when my doctor sternly put a damper on my enthusiasm. "It's going to be an uphill battle," he warned, writing out a prescription I was sure I didn't need.

We tried, it didn't happen, and I was grief-stricken. Adoption never occurred to me; my fantasies of being a mother were completely entangled with the desires to be pregnant, give birth, and reproduce our flawed but precious family line. So I let it go—or so I thought. Ten years later I was appalled to realize, for the second time, that I had forgotten to have children. This time, however, a paradigm shift had taken place in my psyche: biological connection (besides being beyond possibility) felt utterly superfluous; adoption felt wonderfully right. And, if it was to happen, quite urgent—I was fifty-two.

My husband balked. Edward was seven years older than I and perfectly happy with our lives as they were. A dedicated teacher of college Russian and a brilliant pianist, his lap was already occupied, either with student assignments to grade or with his silent practice keyboard, which came with us everywhere. But I was in terrier mode and wouldn't let go. I gnawed and nipped at his heels, and eventually wore him down, promising that I would be responsible for 90 percent of the childcare, that he could be as uninvolved as our own dads had been. Sure.

Ours is an "open" adoption—a term that is used to cover a continuum of practices ranging from exchange of identifying information before birth to ongoing communication, even regular visits between adoptive and birth families. The bare bones of our version: My husband and I met Cassie's birth mother Amy and her family three months before Cassie was born, and I returned and stayed in Abilene—no trees, many churches, and decidedly (don't believe the song) *not* "the prettiest town you've ever seen"—for three weeks before the birth. When

Hypatia vol. 20, no. 1 (Winter 2005)

I was not reading baby books or making emergency calls to my friends, family, and psychiatrist, I was with the family: Amy, barely fifteen, her mother ViSue (at thirty-six, sixteen years younger than I), teenage siblings Nicole and Kane, ViSue's cowboy boyfriend Brett, and numerous exes, grands, and steps.

During my time in Abilene, I learned that poverty looks different and barbecue tastes different in Texas, rediscovered the pleasures of unrestrained bitching among women, and tried every popular teacher's trick I knew to get silent and sullen Amy to open up to me. It was hard, because she basically hated me (and, I might add, her mother). But counseling and time together altered that. The day we bought matching baby books, then sat on the floor as she told me the story of her brief relationship with Cassie's birth father—producing a picture of a young man so gorgeous that I joked we should forget the baby, I'd just take *him* home—was a breakthrough for both of us.

I was with Amy, her mom and her sister for all but the actual delivery. Edward, having been alerted the night before, flew in and arrived twenty minutes before the birth. Pictures taken during the week that followed, as we remained in Abilene awaiting various legal procedures, show three loopy-looking adults, one surly teen-age boy, and two beaming teen-age sisters holding a tiny infant, all of us squashed together like nesting animals on the hideous but huge—everything in Texas is—couch in our furnished rental unit. In the five years since, there have been photos, videos, and gifts exchanged, many phone calls and four visits. Amy is now married and has an infant son, and Cassie takes every opportunity to proudly inform the neighborhood kids that she has a baby brother in Texas.

Our story is only one of many. For we are living in "adoption nation," as journalist and adoptive father Adam Pertman has named it—six of every ten Americans have either adopted a child, been adopted themselves, placed a child for adoption or had a family member or close friend who is adopted. But despite the Jamie Lee Curtis books and soft-focus PBS specials, it often seems to me that we still regard adoption as a second-best, second-hand alternative. "So you're not Cassie's real mother, then?" This was from the woman doing toddler story time at a local bookstore, and Cassie was by my side when she said it. And how can we still be making children's movies with scenes like that in *The Country Bears,* in which the obviously "different" member of the family—a bear—asks his human parents if he's adopted. "*Of course not!*" his mama reassures him. Heaven forbid.

Admittedly, as an adoptive mom, my antennae are out. "WHAT ABOUT ADOPTION?????" I scrawled furiously in the margins of Sylvia Hewlett's book *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children.* Books like hers (and the even more sensationalizing magazine articles about them) have created a panic among thirty-something professional women over their rapidly disappearing, getting-stale eggs. Hewlett is addressing people who can manage

tens of thousands of dollars for multiple high tech procedures; why isn't adoption even mentioned as a possibility for the egg-depleted professional? I'm even more furious over the new sociobiology (or "evolutionary psychology," as it's now called), with its theories about genetic investments in biological offspring and "natural" preferences for those who carry our DNA. Nonrelated parents, they argue, are more likely to abuse their children because they have no genetic investment in them. I'm somewhat sensitive, as you might understand, to the suggestion that I'm likely to mistreat Cassie just because she can't help me pass my irritable bowel syndrome on to dozens of irritable descendants.

Actually, I've come to believe that there are distinct advantages to children in *not* being related to their parents. Growing up, I was told that I was "just like Aunt Etta" (code for stubborn, impatient, and lazy); I felt as though there was an immutable family script in which I was destined to play a predetermined role. Raising Cassie, in contrast, has been a constant revelation of the folly of both biological determinism *and* the view, popular among many academics, that children are a blank slate ready to be imprinted with "culture." In so many ways, Cassie is "just like Amy," her birth mother; but the contribution of Edward's and my personalities and habits is undeniable. You could create an equaling compelling mythology of "who Cassie is" along birth or adoptive lines. And so, we are constantly cautioned against creating either. She is Cassie. And what that means is a continual discovery.

I have always also known that Cassie was an individual whose attachment to me was not a given but must be won. Some adoptive parents speak passionately about immediately feeling that this child was meant to be theirs. I, however, was caught in the existential and ethical strangeness of the situation. After Cassie's birth, I couldn't fully take in the fact that where there had been no baby, now there was one. She was *mine?* In what sense mine? There, on the bed, was Amy, her birth mother, exhausted and trembling from the delivery, fifteen years old, stalwart but grieving for the little girl she had to give up. And then there was me, fifty-two years old, with all my book-knowledge and a bunch of paperwork in a file. Who was the mother here? *Me?* Not yet. I cooed and cuddled the baby, but she was a stranger to me.

The "other mother" may be unique to adoption. But in fact, all children, whatever their genetic connection with their parents, are separate beings whose individuality must be respected and nurtured and whose love cannot simply be assumed. The difference is that the adoptive parent has a unique potential for consciousness of these facts. We cannot tell ourselves that we were immutably bonded in the womb. We are daily confronted with noses, smiles, abilities, deficiencies that don't "run in the family." We know there is another family out there, in whom they *do* "run." All of this can lead to anxieties about bonding. Concerns about not feeling the way "one is supposed to" about one's infant. Jealousy of others to whom our children are attached, biologically or emotionally.

Discomfort with our children's differences from us. None of these fears are unique to adoptive parents; they often lurk—denied, unexpressed, attended by shame and guilt—in the hearts of biological parents as well. But adoptive parents are forced to face them, and one hopes, work through them.

I believe that "it takes a village" to educate *all* children, biological or adopted, about the richness, complexities, and inequalities of human experience. But adoptive parents, especially of children whose "race" or country of origin is different from their own, have a special responsibility to make it happen. This isn't just about multicultural dolls, books, or history lessons, or abstract respect for "difference." It's about recognizing that one's family is now connected to another community, another historical legacy, another experience of the body in a new and intimate way. Not every adoptive family is equally prepared to embrace this connection, of course. And there is much working against it in our jobs, our neighborhoods, our schools, and our expectations. We worried, for example, about how our multiracial family would be received by "the Black community"; we had been led to believe, from the warnings of colleagues, from the questions on our adoption forms ("Name five African-American leaders who are not athletes or entertainers"), and from what we knew about the history of Black social workers' resistance to transracial adoption, that we would be looked on with suspicion, even hostility, from everyone except close Black friends.

I've found, instead, that academics—both black and white—are much more likely to have problems with transracial adoption than the parents we've gotten to know through Cassie's school and extracurricular activities. In fact, total strangers smile at me—in restaurants, grocery stores, in the park—when they see me with my daughter. It's a moment of recognition unlike any other. Our eyes meet. Often, we laugh. What pleasure is it, exactly, that we are sharing? I believe it is an almost familial delight in my beautiful daughter; in a sense, she is theirs as well as mine. She has her hair in six tiny braids, a style that in my white cluelessness I once regarded as the legacy of racist "pickaninny" iconography but which I now adore for showing off the shape of her lovely head. (Hair is no longer some academic and abstract "site of cultural difference" for me. I used to look at the children in *Gap* ads and think "how adorable!" Now I can't see them without imagining what a tangle their mothers will have to deal with after the photo shoot.) The stranger and I take delight in my daughter, not just as a pretty child—in the way a pretty white child might provide pleasure to look at—but as a Black child, who carries history with her. We acknowledge, wordlessly, that we share a special responsibility, a special privilege, to see that she grows up strong, resilient, and as unharmed as can be managed in this culture.

Adoption revises the traditional nuclear family in another way, too; it levels the biological playing field for male and female parents. As I watched a recent television series on adoption, I'm struck by how freely tears flow when adoptive fathers, both gay and straight, single and married, talk about receiving their

adoptive children. Is it because of the often long struggle with infertility, the other numerous obstacles and disappointments that are so common in the adoption process, the almost religious gratitude many of us feel—particularly those with nontraditional profiles: those of us who are older, single, or gay—as we finally are granted parenthood? Perhaps. But maybe, too, adoptive fathers have not had to suffer the feeling, expressed by many biological fathers, that pregnancy and birth belong to their female partners. Avery Corman writes in *Kramer vs. Kramer,* describing Ted Kramer's thoughts about the birth of his son, "It seemed to have little to do with him—her idea, her baby, her miracle" (Corman 1977, 2).

In contrast, Edward and I entered our late-life parenthood unencumbered by memories or fantasies that either of us had ever been "one" with Cassie, had suffered more bringing her into the world, had had the "natural" advantage of a biological intimacy the other couldn't claim. In fact, at the beginning Edward was readier than I, felt more entitled than I, to make this little stranger his own daughter. I was too dazzled by her, too awed by what was happening, to feel much connection. Edward, on the other hand—someone who as far as I was aware had never held a newborn before—was instantly confident, playful, and competent with her. The moment he took her in his arms I knew, despite all his objections and foot-dragging during the adoption process, he wasn't going to be anything like our fathers, who called for their wives when a diaper needed to be changed and parceled out tidbits of affection and praise to their children as if they were candies that would rot our teeth.

Of course, such an intimate father-child relationship doesn't come automatically with adoption, any more than it comes with genetic connection. What adoption *does* eliminate, however, is the "umbilical mythology" (as I've come to think of it) that a child is more truly its mother's by virtue of the nine months spent in her womb. Looking back on my own abortion, I now find myself recoiling from memories of how totally irrelevant I once believed the man's feelings and wishes to be. *This is my body.* You have no rights here. End of discussion. Yes, I talked to the father, I listened to him, I even occasionally indulged his fantasies of our having the baby. But never for a moment did I ever consider that anything he had to say *really counted.* You can justify my disregard of him in all sorts of reasonable ways. My life would be more disrupted than his by the pregnancy, given the times, which were still barely touched by notions of equal parenting, I would undoubtedly have been the prime caretaker, and so on and so forth. All these are true. But its also true that I regarded myself, by virtue of the nine months I would carry the baby, as more truly its parent than he was.

I still believe—absolutely—that whether to bear a child or not must be the woman's choice. I'm no longer comfortable, however, with the attitude that fathers have no right to expect explanation for that choice or sympathy and respect for their experience of loss. When it comes to reproductive control, as

for many human dilemmas, the necessities of social policy do not necessarily coincide with (what we might call) the ethics of relationship—a point that we don't emphasize enough, I believe, in discussions of abortion. Just social policy, for reasons that I've described elsewhere (Bordo 1993, 71–97) demands that a pregnant woman has the right to decide what shall happen in and to her body, even when a fetus is dependent upon that body for its continued survival. But the ethics of relationship recoil from viewing the fetus as mere "tissue" to be scraped away, or the father as mere obstacle to the exercise of the woman's freedom.

Trying to get pregnant, failing, and then adopting, has been a source of identification for me with those who lack an umbilical connection with a child but still feel very much like parents. This sympathy extends to biological fathers who have been utterly ignored in decisions about abortion and adoption. (It does not extend to those who try to claim their "rights" against the wishes of the mother, or without concern for the best interests of the child.) Last year, as I described my regrets (to my graduate course on the history of second-wave feminism) over how I had treated the biological father during my own abortion decision, I could see some of the women's mouths begin to open in protest—as mine would have too, when I was their age. When I inhabited a fertile female body, I too was oblivious to its privileges, while being sharply aware of the social inequities placed on it. I'm still cognizant of those burdens, but I no longer take the privileges for granted. At the same time, my intense love for my child has made me realize how ultimately irrelevant those privileges are to being a parent. From *Kramer vs Kramer,* again: "In the beginning, when Joanna was first pregnant, the baby did not seem to have a connection to him, and now, the child was linked to his nervous system" (Corman, 1977, p. 171). That's the way I feel, too, about Cassie.

Parenthood doesn't come with anyone's equipment, and it doesn't come with genetic connection. I'm always a bit saddened when I hear adoptive parents gush about "falling in love at first sight" with their adoptive children; in their rush to claim instantaneous attachment I see the biological paradigm—the bond that comes with the territory, doesn't have to be earned—still calling the shots for them about what it means to love. We need to turn that tyranny on its head. For whether or not we are genetically related to them, our children are separate beings whom we must get to know, and learn to love for who they are. Whether they've grown in our wombs, come to us from another country, look just like us or nothing like us, we all have to adopt our children.

Acknowledgments

My gratitude to Kathi Kern, Binnie Klein, Michelle Rivkin-Fish, Ellen Rosenman, Mickey Silverman, and Althea Webb for their help with this piece.

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