



Published in "Celebrate Life"
American Life League
November-December 2000

A Publication of **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**
www.RachelsVineyard.org

Nothing to Hide – Open Adoption

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When Amanda was confronted with an unplanned pregnancy at 17, she knew she was not ready to be a parent. She had ambitious plans to move to New York, attend college, and pursue a degree in the performing arts. A baby would not fit into these goals. As we discussed her options, Amanda said that she would rather have an abortion than be forced to suffer the pain of giving up her baby to a complete stranger.

Carol and Jeff had been relentlessly struggling to conceive. After spending more than \$100,000 in fertility treatments, the couple finally resigned themselves to adoption. To Carol and Jeff, the thought of adoption filled them with hopes for building a family, but also created a nervous apprehension. Carol said: "I could never go through the agony of loving a child and then having to give the baby back because the birth mother changed her mind."

Reaction to adoption

Many attitudes toward adoption are frequently tinged with negativity, ambivalence and conflicting reservations. So how does adoption get such a reputation?

From the birth mother's perspective, adoption has gotten a bad name because it was a very traumatic experience. In the past, babies were whisked away from the mother at the moment of birth. She was rarely permitted to hold her infant, and sometimes not even allowed to see the child. Furthermore, decisions regarding the placement of her baby were handled secretly, by a third party. This is referred to as "closed adoption." Most women would have characterized their closed adoption as an experience over which they had little power, felt intense grief and trauma, and encountered enormous pressure to relinquish their babies. The mother received little or no information regarding the adoptive families. Prior to the 1970s, counseling before and after an adoption was

practically nonexistent. This tension and stress undoubtedly had an effect on the developing child as well.

John Sonne, M.D., a psychoanalyst and family therapist who has worked with adoptees, asserts that adoptees can experience an insecure sense of identity as a result of their closed adoption experience. He claims that if they remain unaware of the origin of this insecurity, it can have far reaching traumatic effects on their lives and relationships. Dr. Sonne has challenged laws that make it difficult for adoptees to obtain information on their birth families.

Changing attitudes

The adoption process has undergone a dramatic evolution in the past 30 years. There has been a marked shift toward more open adoptions, which are fundamentally based on communication, choices, information and trust. Although adoption practices have changed, we still rarely hear the positive side of adoption. There seems to be a collective media effort to emphasize the anguish of adoptions that have failed and little focus on the thousands of adoption success stories. Such attitudes affect our society deeply and they also affect those who have been adopted.

In our diversified counseling services to unwed mothers, post abortion ministry, and as a licensed children and youth agency providing adoption services, we have seen several trends that have had an undeniable impact on adoption practices. Many couples have postponed childbearing in favor of careers and education. We have witnessed a steady rise in the number of couples who face infertility. One researcher reports that infertility affects seven million women in the United States. Consequently, the number of couples and individuals seeking to adopt children is significant. On the other hand, birth control, legalized abortion and societal acceptance of single motherhood have contributed to an abrupt decrease in the number of healthy infants available for adoption. At the same time, there is an effort to find permanent homes for a multitude of adoptable children with histories of abuse, neglect, attachment disorder and maltreatment.

There are numerous challenges for each group with broad implications for adoptive parents, birth parents, those who have been adopted, as well as those awaiting adoption. It seems that with all parties, adoption education and supportive counseling is crucial to an adoption experience that benefits all involved.

A new philosophy of adoption

The term "open adoption" refers to the sharing of information between the adoptive and biological parents before and after the placement of an adopted child. This openness may continue throughout the life of the child. With open adoption, there is an opportunity for conversation where information is exchanged and rapport develops. During the interviews, the birth parents can assess the adoptive couples relationship, compatibility, values and parenting philosophies. Likewise, the adopting couple gets to know the birth parents and their situation. This feedback and exchange of communication is very helpful to assist the birth mother in feeling secure about her decision. That experience will be conveyed to the adopted child as he grows-so that the child knows that his life was precious to the mother who gave him birth.

Amanda, who had been considering abortion before learning about adoption, requested quarterly updates on her baby, with pictures and a summary of her son's health and developmental milestones, and yearly updates after the first year. She did not want ongoing visitation with her child as she felt this would be best for her. Amanda describes her experience:

"When I receive letters and pictures from Jason's adoptive parents, I can see that he is happy. Although it is still painful at times, I am at peace knowing he is loved and cared for. This is a responsibility I was unable to take on at that time. On Mother's Day his family always sends me flowers, and cards, acknowledging my role in Jason's life and the gift he is to them...It feels good to know that I have made such a difference in their lives, as they always express their gratitude for my sacrifice. I am also thankful that they have given Jason what I could not."

From working with birth mothers like Amanda, who were initially repulsed by the idea of adoption, it becomes very clear that the pregnant woman's needs and fears must be recognized and addressed. Adoption must be presented as an attractive option over which she has numerous choices and continued support before and after the adoption takes place.

At the other end of the open continuum, the birth mother may meet the adoptive parents, and have ongoing contact throughout the child's life. Susan, for example, found a couple willing to have continued visitation between birth mother and child at agreed upon yearly visits. This would be considered a feature of a very open arrangement. Susan began developing a relationship with the adoptive parents during her pregnancy. They were present at the birth and bonding began during the first joyous moments of life. This trusting relationship, together with readily available ongoing counseling, has led to all parties desirous for ongoing scheduled contact and a sense of the birth mother and her family as "extended-family."

The security a birth mother feels with ongoing contact gives her the knowledge that her child is being loved and cared for.

Addressing the birth mother's grief

Our work in post abortion ministry with Rachel's Vineyard has taught us valuable lessons about the need to grieve when trying to heal from the relinquishment of a child. One of the beautiful rituals we have established for those relinquishing children to adoption has been a dedication ceremony. Its foremost goal is to bring support to the mother who has made a plan of adoption and it provides a public platform for her to grieve her loss.

The dedication ceremony invites a gathering of the birth mother's family and friends to her church. They lay the baby on an altar to dedicate the child's life to God, who is the author of that child's life. The child, in reality, belongs to God alone. Following this recognition, family and friends are invited to get up and formally share their affirmation and support of the birth mother's choice. They commend her for her courage, her determination and her selfless gift. They also use it as an opportunity to express their own grief concerning the loss that this is to their family. They extend prayers and love for the baby and his new family. Everyone joins the birth mother in grief, thereby providing a much needed network of support and encouragement. Then she recites a prayer of blessing over her child. This gives her the opportunity to publicly proclaim her love for the child and experience personal healing for herself.

Once everyone has shared, the child is "entrusted" to the adoptive parents. This is an emotional ceremony, but very helpful in formalizing a lifetime covenant between families. Such openness can be very helpful on many levels. The testimonies, photographs and poems read by participants can be saved in a book for the adopted child.

Benefits to the older adoptee

Open adoption is not just for newborns. Families who adopt older children are provided with information concerning the birth family that they would not have received in traditional confidential adoptions. This is especially important if there has been a history of abuse or neglect. The adoptive parents need to know the specifics about the situation so that they can help with any behavioral or emotional problems that might arise because of that mistreatment.

Since an older child has memories concerning his past family, the adopting family must understand that child cannot be expected to forget

everything that has happened to him before the adoption. Children should be given permission to acknowledge and grieve their painful histories, separations and mistreatment.

Some adopting families decide that it is in the child's best interest to maintain contact with those who have been significant in the child's life, such as birth parents, siblings, grandparents and foster parents. One adoptive mother shares:

"I made a scrapbook for my daughter documenting all the places where she had lived before we adopted her at age five. I got pictures of the different foster mothers and foster brothers and sisters. We went on an adventure to trace all those who had touched her life. We feel so thankful that our little treasure made her way into our hearts and that others took care of her until we found her. Our daughter, now age 12, feels very special. We have even gone back to visit two of the homes where she was greeted with love and enthusiasm. It created a positive connection to the past that she can be proud of- instead of the feeling that she was 'unwanted'."

Benefits to all adoptees

There are some very clear benefits for the adopted child to have access to information on the medical and personal background of his family of origin. This is true even in cases of previously closed adoption where every effort should be made to obtain non-identifying information on the adopted child's birth parents. To deny this information to adopted people is to separate them from an integral part of their identity.

Open adoption precludes adoptees' needs to search for their biological parents during adolescence. A lack of information about heritage has been linked to problems for both individual adjustment and adoptive family problems. If children have access to their birth parents, they can obtain answers to questions about their identity and their biological roots as those questions arise. If biological parents are known and available, they may not be idealized or vilified by the child, but seen as real people who are part of the child's past and present. When adoptive parents avoid dealing with their children's history, they are denying those children a part of their identity. Dr. Sonne explains that "The need to search does not imply any deficiency in the love and care adoptive parents may have provided the adoptee over the years ... and should not be seen as rejection or act of malice on their part."

Open adoptions that positively acknowledge a child's history and genealogy are one way to ensure a more complete identity formation.

An appeal to the pro-life community

Dr. Sonne comments, "The importance of adoptees having access to furthering the goals of the pro-life community cannot be overemphasized." He criticizes the intense opposition that some pro-life groups have had toward legislative efforts to provide open access.

This resistance has been based on the unfounded fears that the passage of such laws would increase abortion and decrease adoption. Dr. Sonne points to many studies that document countries with open access actually have lower rates of abortion than those with sealed records. We feel that while there needs to be a respect for the legal arrangements at the time of adoption, we need to educate families and birth parents about the benefits to the adopted child of access to at least non-identifying information, such as medical history. Many birth parents whose adoptions were closed welcome the opportunity to reconnect with their children when they are ready to search. Once again professional counseling is extremely important for all parties during this process.

Open adoption is a new experience, and research, while pointing to many benefits with openness, is still coming in on what is best in the long run for the adopted child. Each adoption arrangement will have its own unique circumstances, type of contact desired and many other issues that the parties will need to discern. Attorneys and social workers must help birth and adoptive parents identify their beliefs and expectations concerning contact and devise an agreeable plan, respecting the adoptive parents' rights as the functioning and legal parents.

Adoption remains one of the most viable ways to provide family and community for the thousands of children who, for one reason or another, cannot be raised in their birth family. It is also a wonderful way to provide childless couples an opportunity to cherish and raise children. Despite the myth that there is a shortage of children, the fact is, many children languish in the foster care system for years, never knowing the stability and permanency of commitment and love. Adoption is not a problem, or a trauma, or a land mine of explosive outcomes. Adoption is a resolution – it's called "family".

Clearly, there is a tremendous need to focus more attention on public education and personal outreach from positive experiences.

Kevin and Theresa Burke are the founders of ALL division Rachel's Vineyard Ministries, an outreach and program for healing after abortion.

A Birth Mother's Blessing

I, your birth mother, bless you with tenderness and call upon God to watch over you, my (daughter/son), all the days of your life.

You (name) are the flower of my love for God. I trust in the plan and purpose He holds for your life and my own. I thank Him for entrusting me with the gift of your precious life, and now I entrust your life to (names of adopting parents).

Tonight, (name), as I dedicate you to God, I rejoice in your membership to Him, our Lord and Savior, and in the Family of God.

I announce to all who are present, that you, my (daughter/son), have a holy purpose in life, and that you are a royal child of God.

*For all eternity
From before the dawning light of creation
God has known your name
And has held you as precious.*

We rejoice, tonight, that this dream of God has become flesh and blood. I thank God for the gift of your health and your perfect little form.

I sincerely ask all those present for their prayerful support so that you may be encouraged to become all that God has destined for your life.

I pray that you will always have an awareness of how deeply I love you and treasure your existence. I pray that (names of adopting parents) may be loving parents to you. I pray that they will be good examples by showing the way to live as a family united in God.

My (daughter/son), I bless you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. With you I send my heartfelt love and prayers, a mother's

*blessings...direct from my soul. May the Lord's peace follow you all the days of
 your life.*



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