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Lessons from a Birth Mother: The Importance of Post- Adoption Support

BY ASHLEY MITCHELL

November is National Adoption Month, a time when our nation commits an entire month to focus attention on the institution of adoption. For many, it's a time of celebrating the good that adoption accomplishes in the lives of children and families – and the millions of children and adults who were adopted, the women and men who relinquish children for adoption, the adopting families (and their extended families), etc. This time of reflection can and should focus on the good of adoption, but we'd be remiss if we didn't also use this time to engage in introspection and consider ways to ensure that adoption realizes its full benefit in the lives of those it directly touches.

To suggest that adoption can do better to promote the interests and needs of children, biological families, and adoptive parents is not an attack on adoption. On the contrary, it's "pro-adoption," from my perspective. Ensuring that adoption works better for all is why I founded Lifetime Healing, LLC, a post-placement care network dedicated to educating adoption professionals on the importance of ensuring lifetime resources and support for women who made the decision to place their child for adoption. I work with adoption professionals to train them to better serve women who have made the very difficult decision to relinquish a child for adoption, not just up until the time of placement but in the many years following the decision, or for as long as



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she needs adoption-related support and counsel. I believe this is an adoption professional's ethical responsibility, and I am pleased that National Council For Adoption (NCFCA) agrees with me on this point.

I want to tell you my personal story; it's one that many women who have relinquished children for adoption will understand. In sharing it with you, I hope to underscore that the adoption process doesn't simply end on adoption day, but for many, that day is just the start of what may be a long road to reconciliation and acceptance. The good news is that there is a process that promotes healing and acceptance.

In 2006 I faced an impossible decision. I was pregnant, on my way to becoming a mother for the very first time. But instead of joy and celebration there was fear and pain. I have shared many times my journey that brought me to an adoption plan, including almost choosing abortion. I have shared about the unfathomable task of picking perfect strangers to raise my son as their own, and I have shared the heartbreaking loss that I experienced after delivery and relinquishment. But I haven't shared a lot about what it took to rebuild my life from near scratch afterward.

I placed my son for adoption almost 12 years ago. We have been deeply blessed these past six years with an amazing open adoption relationship, but it wasn't always like that.

Now, let's hit pause for a second. We could go back and forth on different opinions about ethics in adoption, the loss associated with relinquishing a child, for whom adoption is a choice, and if there is a *perfect* way to do adoption, but this is the bottom line: no matter what, women will face unplanned pregnancies and some women will choose adoption.

Our mission at Lifetime Healing, LLC is to support those in the aftermath of that decision, and if you support adoption, then supporting women who have relinquished their child should be part of your mission, too. The difficult decision of placing a child for adoption, no matter how sound her reasons are, is one that can stick with a person for life. The entire cause of adoption is advanced when we are there to support the women (and men) who make the sacrificial decision to allow someone else the privilege of parenting their child through adoption.

At the time of my delivery, my brother, his wife and their children had taken over the basement of my parents' home where I was living. There was, however, an RV trailer that was empty in the driveway, fully stocked with propane and all the movies I could watch. So, I came home from the hospital, broken and empty-handed, and walked out to my new place of residence.

Here are just a handful of the lessons I've learned.

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Lesson One: This decision affects EVERYONE.

My entire family was broken.

As I spent many nights alone, I tried to process what had just happened to me, to my son, and to my family. Did all this just happen or was it a really bad dream? I would never be the same. I had just become a mother for the first time, and as quickly as he came, he was gone. My very identity was changed forever with one signature to a set of relinquishment papers. Maybe the magnitude of that decision didn't really hit me until I was married and my husband and I had our first child, my first pregnancy after placement. There is undeniable magic about becoming a mother and losing your child; no matter how it happens, it is unnatural.

Lesson Two: It doesn't end with a kiss goodbye and a handoff of the baby.

However we spin it, I am his mother. But so is she. Two parallel truths that everyone – the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the maturing child – will all have to reconcile at some point in their lives.

It is an interesting time after you place a child for adoption. The ambiguous loss that many birth parents experience is a heavy burden. I can't go back, I am not the same person and never will be, but I don't belong in the "mommy club" because I don't physically have my child in my life. I am not actively parenting my child because someone else has that joyful role. Where do I go and where do I fit in?

That time of uncertainty was the greatest struggle of my life. Without support from others who loved me and eventually forcing myself to do some very painful soul-searching for answers, I don't know how I would have made it through – and after all these years I am still sorting through some really hard stuff, even as I go through very wonderful periods of acceptance and reconciliation. (I will talk about it later, but, for me, it's an ongoing process – a process that I'm committed to even if it takes the rest of my life.)

After what I describe as my infamous "Jerry Springer" years (I'll maybe share those with you another time!), I made a decision that threw me into a new season of my life and gave me a new purpose of helping and educating others. In short, I clawed and scratched and fought my way out of the darkness. Coming to grips with my new reality was life changing once I accepted this fact of my life: I was a Birth Mother, but that did not define who I was. I accepted that I might go on to spend the rest of my

life coexisting with grief and healing. I concluded that I could experience and live with both, once I was able to identify what I was feeling.

It is vital to recognize and feel these conflicting roles and all the emotions they embody as often as they show their faces.

Lesson Three: I don't think I will ever be done sorting some of these things out.

I will grieve my decision forever. But I will also heal and grow as a human being as I become better equipped to cope with my grief and better able to reconcile the adoption decision – and so can other birth parents and adult adoptees coming to terms with how adoption changed the course of their lives.

As I started to step into clearer thinking and a more hopeful future, I started to look for others who were like me. It is amazing what isolation during grief can do to a person. It is one of life's cruelest lies: "you are alone and no one will ever understand." I realized that so few birth mothers were sharing about their experiences.

I get it. The pain and misunderstanding from others that comes with a decision like relinquishing a child is crippling. I felt shame and knew that others who had not experienced what I felt wouldn't understand; in fact, they would likely think less of me for what I had done. For this reason, it isn't something that we like to beat our chest about. But seriously, where are the birth mothers? Think about it; there are at least two million children living in adopted homes.¹ There is a biological mother and father for each child, not to mention sets of grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, etc. We are in the many millions – and we have real experiences and a unique qualification that should be heard.

After living so many years in silence I had to speak. I had to share my experiences. I knew that finally coming out and boldly identifying as a birth mother was a way to heal – and help others heal as well. So, like Hemmingway said, "all you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed." And that's what I did. I sat down and started to bleed by telling my story. Every pain, every experience in the most raw and vulnerable ways. I shared things that no one would have ever guessed about me. I shared thoughts and things about myself that no one wanted to know. It was messy and it was real.

In sharing, I discovered things that I didn't even know about myself. I mistakenly believed that burying my pain was the best path. In reality,

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¹ <https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p20-572.pdf>

letting the truth come in your emotions and words is freeing. And, when people start listening and validating you, it sets the stage for true personal growth. Then something else amazing happened that changed my life: I was able to educate and help others. Helping others gives new meaning to your experiences.

Lesson Four: We don't give ourselves enough credit.

Cut yourself some slack. Adoption is the hardest decision a mother can make – there is no right or wrong way to do this – and every one of us brings a unique set of circumstances, strengths, supports, and challenges that change over time.

The more I opened myself up, the more I recognized that I wasn't alone. I have been a part of amazing birth mother communities for over six years. All serving each other, all loving each other, and all having one common understanding: there is a desperate need for post-placement support for women. No matter how solid the reasons they chose adoption, how long ago they placed, no matter where they live, no matter their circumstances, everyone needs validation from someone who actually understands what they have experienced. If a birth mother needs support, then she should be able to get it no matter what her reasons or how many years have passed since she made an adoption plan.

And more importantly, this post-relinquishment care should not be a luxury. Free access to adoption-related support for life should be the standard practice in every adoption.

That is the goal, if not an outright mandate.

So, how do we get to the point and place in time that this is a universally accepted practice for every birth parent – and a service provided by every adoption professional in the United States?

Lesson Five: Many adoption professionals believe that they are providing post-adoption services sufficiently, and while some may be, many others fall far short.

Let's raise the bar, shall we?

At [Lifetime Healing, LLC](#) we are calling on every adoption professional to do better, *much better*, in fact, in the ways that they support all women who relinquished children for adoption. Again, NCFA endorses post-

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adoption support to every birth parent as an essential component of best practice in adoption.^{2,3} I had the great opportunity to launch our curriculum and training nationally at NCFA's National Adoption Conference in Denver in June of 2017, and it was encouraging to see how many adoption professionals supported our efforts.

Since that time, we have had countless conversations with agencies, law groups, and parent resource centers about bringing our curriculum into their agencies and centers and allowing us to train them to better support their clients who made adoption plans. Needless to say, we at Lifetime Healing, LLC are thrilled about moving this important work forward. And we are pleased to see so many others in the field of adoption who are recognizing the importance of prioritizing the rights and needs of birth families.

More importantly, we want to see every birth mother have access to free support any time she needs it, because as we have learned, grief doesn't ask permission to invade your life. It shows up whenever, wherever, and wrecks us. The only thing that brings comfort is knowing that there are good resources available to better equip birth mothers to deal with our feelings of loss and grief.

If you are a relinquishing parent, I offer you this advice. Over the years I have come across some groups that have educated me, pushed me, and inspired me to keep putting one foot in front of the other. I don't refer people casually. I know better than most that finding the right community is key for forward movement. I encourage you to find a group that works for you, and if it doesn't, get out and find the right one. Everyone has a different need, and there is something for everyone, but you may have to look hard to find it.

Lesson Six: Anyone unwilling to educate themselves on the different perspectives and sides of adoption needs to get out of the game.

Every voice in the triad matters, every voice deserves to be validated, and every voice has something to teach you.

I could go on and on from all the things that I have learned through this journey, and I know that there will be many more to come. I would love to connect with each of you, share with you and learn from you.

... grief doesn't ask permission to invade your life. It shows up whenever, wherever, and wrecks us.

² <http://www.adoptioncouncil.org/files/large/62cde34b763d81b>

³ <http://www.adoptioncouncil.org/publications/2017/06/adoption-advocate-no-108>

The pain doesn't stop because we become more educated, but the healing can become more effective. We are all in this together, and *we all matter*.

We at Lifeline Healing are humbled to be moving this work forward, to bring more awareness to the need for lifetime post-placement care, and to better meet the long-term needs of women who have made the decision to relinquish a child for adoption. In doing so, the entire field of adoption is elevated and can better accomplish what it is intended to in the lives of those it touches.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley Mitchell, owner of Lifetime Healing, LLC set out to seek increased care, understanding, and resources for birth mothers. For almost a decade, Ashley has been one of the most consistent and sought after birth mother voices in the nation. Well known for her vulnerability and transparency in adoption, her story has touched the hearts of countless members of the adoption community.

Learn about Lifetime Healing, LLC at www.lifetimehealingadoption.com



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