

An Adoptive Mother's Reflections on Mothering and Grief

Another Voice from Inside the Adoption Triad

This feminist narrative draws from a series of letters the primary author wrote to her daughter from the day she and her husband were contacted about a pregnant woman named Marissa, through the moments in which she and her daughter met the birthmother for the first time. We consider, from a distance of six years later, the significance of this meeting for complicating the literature and practices that construct the emotional experiences of birthmothers and adoptive mothers as separate experiences. Both adoptive and birth mothers face a deeply-inscribed ideology of motherhood that defines their experiences and choices as lesser, as somehow frayed around the edges, as a poor substitute for the "real" mothering that women who create, carry, birth, and raise their own biologically-produced children in traditional normative arrangements, do. Mothers are too often conceptualized as selfish or nurturing individuals rather than shared actors in collective decision-making and caring that contribute to the development of children. However, as this narrative describes, to talk with the only other person in the world who could fully understand the specific grief, loss, and gain associated with this situation and this child was a profound gift. Two women, two strangers, two mothers found that despite their differences in backgrounds, education, life choices, and socio-economic levels, they shared much more than outsider status to society's mothering scripts; what mattered most was that they also shared, this child.

January 5, 2004

... At 4:45 p.m. the phone rang and it was Joanna [pseudonym] at [our attorney's] office.... Joanna told me about a young woman, Marissa [pseudonym], who was pregnant for the second time and would be unable, for multiple reasons, to raise and parent this child....

These words, written in the first of a series of letters to my daughter, mark the beginning of my second experience in becoming an adoptive mother. At the time, I couldn't have foreseen that this second adoption journey would include a post-birth meeting with my daughter's birthmother that would unexpectedly transform me as a mother; it would also cause me to question literature and practices that construct the emotional experiences of birthmothers and adoptive mothers as separate experiences.

Early prescriptions that viewed adoption as a "one-time legal event" (Rosenberg and Groze 522) included the conviction that the process would progress most smoothly and productively if all parties in the adoption triad severed contact and moved on as quickly as possible (Harris and Whyte 41; Rosenberg and Groze 524). The only people whose voices seemed audible in adoption process were the attorneys and other professionals who handled the legal particulars. More recently, adoption scholarship has begun to offer crucial space for the voices, feelings, and experiences of birthmothers as well as sensitivity to the complex issues they must navigate in adoption. For example, the literature today strongly suggests that providing birthmothers the opportunity to say goodbye while the mother-unit child is still legally and emotionally united matters in terms of how well they deal with the grief of surrendering their babies (Cushman, Kalmuss and Namerow 272; Lee and Twaite 582). As one researcher found, "Those [birthmothers] who had no such opportunities were left with unending emptiness, grabbing at airy fantasies of the children they brought into the world" (Jones 68) and they sometimes carried unresolved grief throughout their lives (Cushman et al. 271; Ge et al. 876; Janus 268; Rosenberg and Groze 524). This is a critical, and still emerging, perspective on adoption that merits sustained attention in both feminist literature and in adoption practices (Ge et al. 529). It foregrounds the significant emotional experiences and potentially lifelong reverberations for mothers who birth their children, and for a variety of complex reasons, make the decision to surrender them.

As scholars work to better represent and explore mothers' experiences in adoption, the voice of another mother, the adoptive mother, typically remains silenced and without an established place. I am twice that mother. In this reflective essay, I process my own experiences to offer an additional voice from the adoption triad with the hope that my story may contribute additional perspective to established views of adoption processes and the assigned roles within it. I write with the deepest of love for my children, a son and two daughters who are ours through a combination of adoption and biology, and out of respect for the birthmothers who made two of their lives, and my mothering of them, possible.

Although feminist theorizing concerning contemporary mothering continues to expand, we still have much to learn about the experiences of adoptive mothers.

Indeed, given the historical erasure of birthmothers' voices, it is a delicate matter to suggest that adoptive mothers should have a voice at all. Accordingly, they remain a central, yet silenced, character in the adoption triad. And yet adoptive mothering is a form of mothering that women undertake, a form that comes with varied challenges and joys, that violates dominant social constructions of mothering, and that contributes to the nurturing of children. Exploring its contours in feminist scholarship can expand understanding of women's varied roles in mothering and the constructions that shape women's lives. I share my experiences with some fear that others might interpret inclusion of adoptive mothers' experiences as disrespectful to birthmothers, or that I am striving to speak for all adoptive mothers—neither of which is my intent. I also write it with continuing concern for my daughter's privacy, for my family's privacy, and for her birthmother's privacy. If it were not so important that we understand and make space for all of the people in the adoption triad, *truly for what is best for the children*, I would not attempt this narrative at all.

Even as I am an advocate for all voices to be heard in adoption and with a co-author to help me frame my experiences in a way that I hope positively contributes to the adoption literature, I write solely from my individual experiences and perspective as an adoptive mother of two same-race newborns who were adopted privately and domestically. It is a situated and partial perspective, my own, the only one I can offer. The second author is a feminist, friend, and colleague whom I asked to co-write this narrative. Although she did not witness my adoption experiences, her perspective and training as a feminist scholar make her critical to the writing process and I, frankly, would not attempt this without her. This narrative draws from a series of letters I wrote to my daughter that begin on the day our lawyer called my husband and me about a pregnant woman named Marissa, who chose us as adoptive parents, and continue through the moments in which my daughter and I met her birthmother for the first time. My co-author and I consider, from a distance of six years later, the significance of this meeting for further enriching feminist critiques of the social constructions of mothering.

Although an undercurrent of my experience was my belief that meeting Marissa would someday be important for my daughter's understanding of her adoption story, in this narrative, I primarily focus on Marissa and me. Despite the ways Marissa and I differed—backgrounds, education, life choices, and socio-economic levels—I believe we found, together, that what mattered far more than our differences was what we shared: this child. I know that, for me, to talk with the only other person in the world who could fully understand the specific grief, loss, and gain associated with *this* situation and *this* child was a profound gift. Through highlighting the details of this experience between two women, two strangers, and two mothers, my co-author and I hope to

carefully and respectfully, yet honestly, navigate tensions inherent in women's adoption experiences and, in doing so, to add to the literature on adoption and the intricacies of mother grief.

Social Construction of Biological Mothering

As Evelyn Nakano Glenn argues, and feminist theorizing of mothering has detailed, “for most of the twentieth century an idealized model of motherhood, derived from the situation of the white, American, middle class, has been projected as universal” (3); like gender, such constructions of mothering “take form not just in the realm of ideas and beliefs, but importantly in social interactions, identities, and social institutions” (4). Through my previous experiences with infertility and adoption, I have come to understand in a palpable, embodied way the powerful constructions of the physical carrying and birthing of a biological child as the “ideal” path to becoming a mother—the right way, the good way, the first choice. Adoption, in contrast, is often viewed as some ineffable and inadequate back up plan. And yet, as many contemporary mothers in diverse family arrangements might echo, I have always believed that love, firm commitment and willingness to sacrifice are the basis of real families, and that bloodlines have little to do with the matter. After all, regardless of any woman's individual abilities or desire to become pregnant and the origin stories of their children, mothering any child *is a choice*.¹

Dominant constructions of mothering ironically cast both adoptive mothers and birthmothers as the “bad guys” in the human drama of grief and pain that surround a birthmother's decision to relinquish a child. Neither is fulfilling her socially scripted role—one is not producing a baby through her body, and the other one is choosing not to mother what her own body has produced. I experienced this bad guy characterization during our first child's adoption when the nursing staff treated me as if I was a thief, lying in wait to steal this precious child from his rightful mother. And, indeed, after witnessing the deep grief my son's birthmother experienced in the hospital room when she relinquished her child, a small part of me was convinced I was, in fact, the bad guy to even have considered collaborating in the creation of such pain for another human being, for another mother.

What I did not realize then was that birthmothers are also constructed as the “bad guy.” As Merry Bloch Jones reports of one birthmother's experience, “the head nurse . . . was hostile and snide. ‘I remember [the nurse] holding the baby and remarking, ‘This is such a beautiful child. How can you give him up?’ I think I asked her, in a post-partum haze, if it would be better if he were ugly, but her comment stung, nonetheless” (64). Neither birthmother nor adoptive

mother, it seems, can escape such painful reductive constructions to get on with the business of mothering, acts of nurturance that Sara Ruddick theorizes as both philosophical and active practice. In this sense, acts of mothering might include not only the physical and emotional labor of pregnancy and childbearing but the loving act of surrendering a child to an adoptive mother, and the subsequent labor the adoptive mother chooses to undertake.

Emotional Traces from my First Adoption Experience

January 6

I, and your dad, have very mixed feelings about [Marissa's decision to not see you or us]. However, this adoption plan ... has been set up so that we don't [even] know her last name.

I felt deeply unsettled when I first learned of Marissa's decision to not meet us and the extent to which we would be cut off from the baby's genetic information. In particular, it contrasted sharply with the lessons we learned through our first adoption, as well as with contemporary adoption practices. In our first adoption, we were matched to a birthmother who was only a few months pregnant and lived four hours away from our home. In contrast to Marissa, this birthmother wanted to include me in all "baby-related events." These events included doctors' appointments, her sudden craving for food that was only available 65 miles away from her small town, a new wardrobe of maternity clothes, and an impulse to cut her long hair—all needs she asked me to fulfill. Initially I was thrilled that she wanted to include me in every nuance. In addition to allowing me to be part of the unfolding pregnancy, the extensive time I invested allowed me to learn critical medical information and family background that might someday be important to my son. However, I soon learned that my involvement did not come with any decision making rights. I spent six months "on call" and on the road, sometimes with only a few hours notice—rapidly canceled professional commitments discarded like litter in my rear view mirror. Spending time at the doctor's office and looking at the in-utero photographs kicked in all of my mothering desires and protective impulses; in every cell of my being, I felt this was my child and, even while I understood that his birthmother controlled the adoption process, I was willing to sacrifice all to bring him home safely.

In this first experience with adoption, I had few models—and little literature—to guide me. I found myself struggling to keep up an ever grateful, ever happy, ever willing adoptive mother façade, and I had many moments of anticipated grief when I believed my son's birthmother would change her mind. By the time the baby was born, I was exhausted and physically ill from

the stress—uncertain that I would ever be the successful one from within the streams of parents hoping, and waiting, to adopt. I felt powerless and taken for granted. However, my emotions of anger, hurt and resentment were lost in a sea of confusion once I witnessed the birthmother's anguish after my son's birth—as she hunched over him, almost making him invisible in her lap, still in a cheap hospital gown, in unrelenting sobs. It is an image, and a recognition of her deep grief and loss that is seared deeply, permanently, into my emotional memories.

It was 16 months after this experience with our son's adoption that we received the call from our attorney's office that began our daughter's adoption, the focus of this narrative. Based on my previous experience, I believed that at least one meeting with Marissa, the baby, my husband and me might launch the critical grieving process for the woman who would make me a mother for the second time. To me, deep grief, as painful as it is, is a *necessary* and *healthy* part of letting go; it is too complicated, too much a part of what it means to be human, for a tidy or quick release. It mattered to me that Marissa would be okay, that her own happiness was not sacrificed in the process of granting me this profound gift. In addition, and more selfishly, I also thought such a meeting might help convey to the birthmother that I was a fit mother to receive this child, to help minimize, somehow, the chance that she would experience second thoughts. On yet another level, I also felt frustrated that I had no say in her choices and feared the implications of having little medical and biological family information for our child.

The complex brew of emotions I experienced were a complicated byproduct of the adoption triad for me, the adoptive mother—negotiating feelings of powerlessness, feelings of empathy for the birthmother, the desire and hope to become a mother, imagining how to provide what my child might need in future, and all the while feeling forced to silence and waiting to be told what to do in hopes that the birthmother would grant me the right to mother this child.

My Benefactor. My Enemy?

Wednesday, January 14

... We wish we had more [information about Marissa] but we're glad she gave us what she did! Unfortunately she also signed paperwork, at her request, to seal the original birth certificate. If she had not, you would have been able to access it at 18.... [Despite our request,] Marissa has also refused to leave a picture of her with us ... We have no wish to violate her privacy but will ... store away any information we can find [through the process] in case you ever want it. We'd like you to have a choice [about what you know].

An important aspect of my experience was my concern for how Marissa's decisions would shape the information available to my daughter. The passage above highlights the balancing act I felt between, on one hand, respecting the birthmother's privacy and her choices, and, on the other, my concerns for the child I would soon have. As Elizabeth Stone captures eloquently,

The particular human chain we're part of is central to our individual identity. Even if we loathe our families, in order to know ourselves, we seem to need to know about them, just as prologue. Not to know is to live with some of the disorientation and anxiety of the amnesiac.

From early meetings with our attorney, I knew that searching for the baby's birthfather was impossible, which meant that Marissa was the child's only available link to her family and genetic heritage.

I wondered if my daughter would later grieve her loss of knowledge about her origins and her agency to discover them, and I feared that she may someday call *me* to account for what we didn't, or couldn't, do. I was poised to mother but was powerless in shaping how this mothering story would begin. As my discomfort grew, I began to characterize Marissa's decision to *not* meet us as a potential threat to my impending family. However, I also knew that to react negatively to her decisions, to utter any concerns, was unacceptable, because social constructions of mothering and my previous experience conveyed to me that my prescribed role in the adoption process was to behave well, to be continuously grateful, and to demonstrate that I was an appropriate mothering figure worthy of the gift I would receive. After all, I was an interloper in the biological mother-child pairing, and with a single sentence, the birthmother could stop the adoption process. To do so was a fundamental right in her agency as a woman. It was also an inevitable aspect of the process that I as an adoptive mother understood and supported, and knew I must learn to bear in this circumstance, or risk undermining the broader principle of women's rights to control their bodies and reproductive decisions with my own hopes and desires. So, behind my façade that all was well, I anticipated and prepared for deep grief, my own, as I awaited the arrival of the baby and unknown outcome. What if in Marissa's own grief she changed her mind?

To Bolt or be Strong? The Invisible Role of Anticipated Grief

Thursday, Jan 15

Dear little one—

... We got the call at 1:13 p.m. and raced down the hall to the nursery. It's a girl!!! You are beautiful and look just like [my sister]. You have reddish-blond hair and

ivory skin, 6 lbs 9oz! ... I did ask about Marissa. The nurse said she is doing well and all went smoothly. She did not choose to see you ... Welcome to our family! We love you so much!

6:56 p.m.

... [Katie, pseudonym,] the social worker stopped by and said Marissa was doing very well ... She has never dealt with a birthmother who didn't want to meet the adoptive parents. She said that Marissa asked for all of the details on you and is thinking about seeing you tomorrow before she leaves, as well as meeting us ... I hope she will see you to have a chance to hold your image in her heart.

Despite my calm tone in this letter to my daughter, just hours after her birth, and my repeated insistence that meeting was in everyone's best interests, the sudden possibility that Marissa would meet us after all evoked an unexpected desire to just take the baby home without "dealing" with Marissa at all. Driven by my own fear of loss, I dreaded a repeat experience of the first adoption, witnessing the birthmother's heart-wrenching and deeply-personal pain and grief. These fears, and the fear that Marissa might change her mind, began to shake my resolve to do the "right thing." But other significant questions muddled these impulses: Wouldn't my daughter want to know later that her birthmother wanted to see her? Wasn't I, as the "lucky one," obligated to help Marissa say goodbye and support her grieving process? Shouldn't I set aside my own feelings, my own fears that the baby would be whisked away, that I would be the one left grieving, to ensure that Marissa was at peace with her decision? And, what if she decided not to go through with the adoption—wasn't that something I should know now, not later? These are complicated emotions and desires that pushed and pulled me in a dizzying array of directions as I awaited word about what Marissa would choose to do. Waiting, I had learned, was a constitutive aspect of the adoptive mother's experience.

The opportunity to flee from the meeting fell away when, the day after my daughter's birth, Marissa asked to see me and the baby. I learned...

... it was to only be the two of us [and her].

Katie ... escorted us to Marissa's room about 12:30 p.m. It was a strange walk down the hall to take, what was now in my heart, "my baby" to voluntarily see the one woman who could take you away with just one sentence. But I knew it was right for you, and for me, for us, to go.

As I read this passage now, six years later, I am struck anew by the absolute absence from this record of my child's first days of the boiling cauldron of emotions that I felt as I walked down that corridor—amazed by my own assertion

that “I knew [the meeting] was right.” Amazed because even today my memories of walking to Marissa’s room are so clear; I can still smell the hospital corridor and feel my hand pushing the baby bassinet, hear the swoosh of the wheels turning ... each swoosh, step, swoosh, step echoing loudly on a hospital floor that seemed to have suddenly fallen absolutely silent ... and, finally, turning the last corner to Marissa’s room. Even as my intellect told me this meeting was vital for my child, and my heart told me it was vital for her birthmother, a voice inside my head said that once Marissa saw the baby, she would not be able to let her go. Once she saw me in the flesh, she would consider me inept or incapable, able to see through my pretenses that I was a good mother despite my “asking” other women to birth my children. Instincts jangled out a message of impending danger that told me to grab the baby and run. The dread heavy in the pit of my stomach contrasted sharply with the confident face I was determined to project to the audience of nurses trying hard not to stare as we walked down the hallway. “*Judge not what you do not understand,*” I thought defensively as I moved by, “*all is well with me.*” The judgments in adoption—both internal and external—sometimes feel relentless.

In addition to my sense that I must contain my own feelings, I suppose that as I wrote about the walk to Marissa’s room, I also anticipated that someday my child may read the words I scribbled three days later. After all, I wrote the letters with the intent of offering her a positive record of her journey, and visible in my writing are traces of an unconscious compliance to dominant constructions of “good” mothering that any mother would want her child to read. Legible in my carefully worded entry are my needs to demonstrate unselfishness and concern for all those involved in this adoption, as well as the protective impulse to avoid imposing my own angst on my daughter at a time when she might expect a more joyful and less complicated description of her origins. This, perhaps, is a quintessential struggle of mothering: the battle between my personal feelings and the responsibility I felt for everyone else all shaped by profound constructions of what mothering is supposed to be. And these varied and conflicting emotional forces that adoptive mothers experience—anticipated grief, carefully moderated hope, the need to appear worthy, the struggle to maintain an acceptable outward façade—are virtually invisible in the literature on mothering and adoption.

Blessed with the Right to Mother

[Sunday, Jan 18, letter continued]

When we arrived [Marissa’s] room was empty. I was standing in the hallway alone with you when I turned and saw her walking toward us down the hallway. I just knew immediately that it was her.... I sat beside her bed, she sat on it with

her legs pulled up and crossed under her, and you stayed in the rolling bassinet to my right. While it was nerve-racking, there was also a sense of peace in the room. I told Marissa I was so glad she had changed her mind about seeing both of us. She smiled and said, yes, she was too. We then talked for about 30 minutes and never did we lack in something to say. It was like sitting down to talk with a long-time girlfriend. We had a bond that few women have—we share a precious baby. We were two mothers. We each had an intimate understanding of what she was giving up and where there was joy in my heart that we would have you, there was [genuine] sorrow for her loss. I think it is safe to say that she, too, felt both joy and loss. As we talked she continuously stole looks at you but wished to keep you “parked” several feet away. She did note that you have her hair and her skin color.

I cannot recreate for you on paper how peaceful this meeting was ... Marissa and I both remained very calm throughout but both struggled with the wayward and occasional tear. Unfortunately I cannot remember word for word what was said but Marissa did talk about making a mistake ... She never referred to you as a mistake, only the decision that came before. In fact it [seemed] clear that it wasn't that she didn't want you near her, she feared your getting too close. My impression was that she feared it would be too difficult to let go. ... She said there are multiple reasons she decided on adoption ... She said she can “barely raise” the child she has already...

[She seemed to be] a woman who knew her own mind and made her own decisions ... I told Marissa that I know she doesn't want any contact after the adoption is complete but that I would send pictures and updates every year to [our attorney's] office ... I told her that if she simply needed to reassure herself that you are safe and happy, she could go into [his] office to see what's there and walk back out taking nothing. She simply nodded, and I suspect she tucked this information in the back of her mind for later, not really knowing how she feels about it now.

Marissa then went on to give me some things to expect from you ... you should be strong-willed with a personality to match your hair colour. She hoped we are ready for that. I assured her this is a perfect fit with our family! She also said your fingernails will grow “strangely.” She said her dad's, [her daughter's] and hers all grow the same and showed me how hers [looked].

She also said that she ... is calmer than she thought she would be and that meeting me had helped tremendously. She said she could look in my eyes and know for certain that this was right. This, my child, felt like the passing of your care and life to me—it is an awesome and precious responsibility. We were just two moms during that moment, both loving you, and [it seemed as if we were] in perfect understanding with each other.

... At one point in our conversation, Marissa said she had done all the “sick at 3:00 a.m. parts” and I said “yes, and I will potty train her,” [and] we laughed together. I told her a little more about our family and she [seemed very] pleased. She wanted you to have parents “who don't wonder where their next meal is coming from” and

lots of extended family. I assured her that you will. It was then time for us to go as you were expected in the nursery. I asked her if she wanted to see you any closer. She hesitated a moment and then said "yes." So I rolled you right next to her bed. She leaned over and lightly stroked your face and hand with her finger as she talked to you, but I didn't feel at all excluded and stayed right there with my hands on the bassinet. She told you that she knew we would take good care of you and love you. She told you to be good for us. She said how beautiful you are. Then she just stroked your face and sat quietly for a moment. Then she looked at me and said "Okay." I moved you to the side to prepare to leave the room. She stood and hugged me and I was overwhelmed with gratitude and respect for her. There was no question [for me] that our new family had her blessing.

As ... I rolled you out, down the hall to the nursery (with every nurse I met checking my face as the whole floor seemed to know where I had been) and then went back to your daddy's arms where I cried a bit and assured him that we were definitely taking you home ... He said okay and we didn't talk much then because ... it had been too precious of a time to expose it to the light too soon.

In the quiet of that room, with just the three of us—Marissa, the baby, and me—I felt a blessing from my child's birthmother that allowed me to relax the emotional façade I had carefully maintained in the hours and days prior, to begin to claim what became my right to mother this beautiful child, and to experience a genuine hope that this meeting would contribute to Marissa's own processes of grieving, letting go, and moving on. This was a transformative moment for me, a marking of the passing of our child from her to me, and, significantly, an interruption of the powerful image of "good" and "bad" mothers that societal institutions dominated by patriarchal values have too long constructed. There were no "good" or "bad" mothers in that hospital room, only two women, each with individual losses and changes to negotiate, and each laboring to identify and fulfill the best interests of one small child.

Reconsidering the Good Mother

March 24

Dear Baby Girl—

Today was the hearing to terminate your birthfather's rights ... all is done now ... I have greeted this news with mixed feelings—relief, joy, and looking toward a sure future as the final legal threat is removed—those were all my initial feelings. ... Guilt too ... as I do realize that while the termination of your birthfather's right is a gift and a huge relief for us, you have lost something and I don't how you will feel about that as you grow older ... I also feel sadness for [Marissa] and for your birthfather because they will never know the pure joy of raising and loving you. Through ...

loss comes one of the greatest gifts of our lives. It seems the emotions of an adoptive mother are never simple ... April 24 is the day we will finalize your adoption and make legal what is already in our hearts. I will be glad to have everything finished and simply be a family looking toward a bright and happy future.

Love you always, Mommy

P.S. I sent a picture of you at your baptism and one of you and [your brother] to [the attorney's office] in case Marissa wants to see you.

As scholars have noted, and diverse women have experienced, the ideology of what constitutes a good mother can assault the psyches and embodied lives of women who mother in ways society at any given historical moment deems nontraditional, deviant, even unnatural. Both adoptive and birth mothers face a deeply-inscribed ideology of motherhood that defines their experiences and choices as lesser, as somehow frayed around the edges, as a poor substitute for the “real” mothering that women who create, carry, birth, and raise their own biologically-produced children in traditional normative arrangements do. Mothers are too often conceptualized as selfish or nurturing *individuals* rather than *shared* actors in collective decision-making and caring that contribute to children’s development. In our case, Marissa and I shared outsider status in relation to society’s mothering scripts, regardless of how differently our scripts read or were experienced; we also shared one of the most powerful bonds two women can share ... we shared this child.

When I approached this fateful meeting with Marissa, fighting to squelch my fears of loss and fulfill my responsibilities to Marissa and the baby, I never could have imagined how transformative this experience would be for me. Out of those brief moments, I felt reassured that Marissa felt some semblance of peace with her decision and, thus, I felt permission to stop worrying about her as we both moved forward. But, more importantly, I gained confidence in myself as a mother. The quiet faith in me that she conveyed through our conversation, her laughter, her choice to meet with me and to see the baby, spoke louder than the clanging of my traditional family’s beliefs of mothering, stronger than the harsh social judgments and suspicion about my long-time intent to adopt, and more pure than my own internal doubts. In this young woman’s spoken trust in me, in the outward peace she displayed with my having this precious gift, she conferred to me a right and a sense of entitlement to be a primary mother (Zamostny, O’Brien, Baden and Wiley, 2003: 661)—to being *this* child’s mother—a notion that previous judgments and my own emotional confusion rendered, at best, precarious.

I do not know whether she recognized any of this at the time. I cannot know truly how she felt then or how she feels now. These stories must come from

women themselves, from birthmothers in their own diverse circumstances, so they can define their experiences in their own ways. However, I know that my sense of being a “good” mother—the right and intended mother for this child—that emerged from my time with Marissa was transforming for me. Imposing traditional constructions on contemporary family structures and mothering arrangements does a disservice to the complexity of mothering in these historical and social circumstances. As a birthmother in Jones’ study stated quite eloquently, “The birthparents have guided them into the world; the adoptive ones guide them through childhood. But we do not own them. We are not in competition for deeds or titles. We are united in love. If we can remember that, we can be resources to each other, for the children’s sakes” (283). In other words, we are neither each other’s enemy nor the bad guys; such constructions perpetuate the demonization of diverse women and mothers and undermine the visions of mothering we choose to construct and enact through our own personal and contextual circumstances. For Marissa and me, we are both contributors to a process of mothering that, only to a limited degree, is about us.

Just as Jones discovered during her study of birthmothers, meeting Marissa led me to accept that, “sometimes, there are no easy solutions for complicated problems, no convenient bad guys to soak up the blame” (xv). My child will, I suspect, feel fluctuating pain and loss as she grows old enough to fully process her adoption story. Like any child who was adopted, she may wonder what her life might have been like had her birthmother made different choices during our meeting six years ago. As I have, she must process various implications of having limited information about her genetic heritage. But I will be there beside her, more freed from my own guilt and pain than I could have been without meeting Marissa, and, therefore, better able to help her navigate the complexities of her rich and unique adoption story, with its two mothers, than I otherwise might have been. Because when Marissa quietly slipped out of the hospital that next day, she carried her own grief with her—and also took a part of mine.

Postscript

Months after the first draft of this [2009] narrative, my children began asking for information about their origins. Both developmentally, because they are close in age, and because one question always seems to be seized by the others, all three asked birth-related questions at the same time. In response, I devised “hospital day.” On that day I loaded up a bag for each child—a bag that included a scrapbook, a family tree inclusive (where appropriate) of both biological and adoptive ties, pictures and information about each birth family

and, as I closed each bag, what felt like the whole of my heart. Perhaps I should have been resentful that my husband simply kissed me goodbye and went on to work that day, but I wasn't. Mothering is unique to mothers, and I knew I was more strongly suited for this part of the journey. On this day, and for our family, I would walk down whatever path my children needed me to with as much love and grace as I could manage.

At our second stop of "hospital day," we walked through the doors of the building where Marissa gave birth. This, I told the wide eyes of my child with her little hand clasped in mine, was her birthplace. I could still see Marissa standing in the hallway—the hallway that I could only describe to my child because the nurses would not let us onto the secured floor no matter how I explained the reasons. So I took my child to the hospital's chapel and there I told her as much as I know about her first mother, Marissa. And I answered every question I could and was careful not to devise answers I don't have—even in an effort to stave off what I feared would create pain or confusion. Today on a shelf in her room stands three carved wooden figures chosen from the hospital gift shop on that day—one is called "Blessings" and is a young child, arms spread and palms toward the sky. The second is called "Cherish," a woman with arms lovingly wrapped around her obviously pregnant middle. The third is called "Love," and if you lift up this female figure, the bottom reads, "in honour of mom." My daughter's story is interwoven with mother love and mother grief—both Marissa's and mine. This is part of what makes my precious daughter who she is.

This narrative is written from my own partial and subjective experiences as an adoptive mother and with the deepest of love for my daughter, the deepest of respect for her birthmother, and for those who will share diverse mothering paths. May you be just as blessed as we are.

¹Emily Jeremiah reminds readers that the idea of mothering as a "choice" is a recent, western idea. We use the term because it best embodies resistance to reproductive and biological determinism that affects all women and that is particularly important in conceptualizing the adoptive triad. However, we recognize that what is constructed as individual "choice" is in fact historical and contextual and that social, economic, and corporeal circumstances shape any woman's capacity to mother—or not to mother (26).

References

Cushman, Linda F., Debra Kalmuss, and Pearla B. Namerow. 1993. "Placing an Infant for Adoption: The Experiences of Young Birthmothers." *Social*

- Work* 38 (3): 264-272.
- Ge, Xiaojia, Misaki N. Natsuaki, David M. Martin, Leslie D. Leve, Jenae M. Neiderhiser, Daniel S. Shaw, Georgette Villareal, Laura Scaramella, John B. Reid, and David Reiss. 2008. "Bridging the Divide: Openness in Adoption and Postadoption Psychosocial Adjustment Among Birth and Adoptive Parents." *Journal of Family Psychology* 22 (3): 529-540.
- Harris, F. and N. Whyte. "Support for Birthmothers in a Group Setting." *Adoption & Fostering* 23 (4) (1999): 41-48.
- Janus, Nancy G. 1997. "Adoption Counseling as a Professional Specialty Area for Counselors." *Journal of Counseling and Development* 75 (4): 266-274.
- Jeremiah, Emily. "Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond: Maternity in Recent Feminist Thought." *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 8 (1) (2006): 21-33.
- Jones, Merry Bloch. 1993. *Birthmothers: Women who Have Relinquished Babies for Adoption Tell Their Stories*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.
- Lee, Judith S. and James A. Twaite. 1997. "Open Adoption and Adoptive Mothers: Attitudes toward Birthmothers, Adopted Children, and Parenting." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 67 (4): 576-584.
- Nakano Glenn, Evelyn. 1994. "Social Constructions of Mothering: A Thematic Overview." *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency*. Eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Change and Linda Rennie Forcey. New York: Routledge Press: 1-29.
- Rosenberg, Karen F. and Victor Groze. 1997. "The Impact of Secrecy and Denial in Adoption: Practice and Treatment issues." *Families in Society* 78 (5): 522-529.
- Ruddick, Sara. "Maternal Thinking," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 342-367.
- Stone, Elizabeth. Retrieved 5-2-10 from http://www.fordham.edu/academics/programs_at_fordham_/english/faculty/english_faculty/elizabeth_stone_28585.asp
- Zamoszny, Kathy P., Karen M. O'Brien, Amanda L. Baden, and Mary O'Leary Wiley. 2003. "The Practice of Adoption: History, Trends, and Social Context." *The Counseling Psychologist* 31 (6): 651-678.